

Responses

Reassessing English Studies in Turkey

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We were interested to read Don Randall's analysis of the present state of English studies in Turkey (see *ARIEL* 46.1–2), particularly his comments on language acquisition and how it dictates the ways in which learners and educators alike perceive the subject as a body of knowledge rather than a field of study. We appreciated his use of Thomas Babington Macaulay and Gayatri Spivak as tools for analysis that enabled him to make important arguments about colonialism and its legacy, even though Macaulay penned his “Minute on Indian Education” in 1835. In this response, we make some further points on the subject so that readers might better understand the complexities involved in teaching and learning foreign literatures in a non-English speaking country with no first-hand experience of colonialism.

While it is certainly true that English language education in Turkey has its shortcomings (with large classes taught by overworked educators), we doubt whether translation occupies as significant a place in the learning agenda as Randall suggests (51). In an extensive report published by the British Council in November 2013, the authors foregrounded the major program of reform instituted by the Turkish government. Foreign language instruction in the Turkish school system begins in the second grade and continues throughout primary and secondary schooling, which altogether covers a period of twelve years (TEPAV 2). Although eighty percent of educators currently employed in the state sector possess sufficient professional qualifications, their learners lack the capacity to communicate and function effectively. The problem is pedagogic: classroom practice centers on learners answering questions orally (to which there is normally only one “right” answer), while much of their classroom time is spent completing written answers in textbooks or taking grammar tests (TEPAV 16). Although classrooms could readily be reshaped to accommodate communicative language teaching,

many educators feel reluctant to do so because of a lack of confidence in their own speaking abilities (TEPAV 16). Official textbooks and curricula also fail to take into account the pluralistic needs of learners, leading to learners' disengagement with the subject; nor do educators have much say in the way English should be taught, as they are monitored by government-appointed inspectors demanding that the curriculum be implemented to the letter with little room for maneuver (TEPAV 17).

The deficiencies of this “one size fits all” system are extensive. While class hours devoted to English increase as learners move up through the school system, their self-confidence in their language ability decreases because they believe that practical abilities are considered less important than completing a series of predetermined tasks in order to pass examinations. Among vocational or technical school learners this sense of disillusionment increases because they regard themselves as academically inferior to their secondary school counterparts who are all on academic tracks. The TEPAV researchers discovered that this lack of confidence among all learners leads to a fear of making mistakes and being considered failures by their educators (18). Many younger educators share this fear, especially when they are subject to evaluation by inspectors, the majority of whom do not speak English. There is a need to reform in-service educator training based on teaching and learning English as a medium of communication rather than a set of grammatical processes (TEPAV 19).

In this kind of educational context, it is hardly surprising that language learning is dominated by notions of equivalence—in other words, the need to find the “exact” way of translating source material into target languages. This process is what Randall terms “translation”: language is not perceived as a living organism but a series of structures that need to be learned parrot-fashion so as to render Turkish effectively into English. Such constraints exert a profound influence over the way foreign literatures are studied in all tertiary institutions—not only at Randall's university, Bilkent, but throughout the Republic of Turkey in the private and state sectors. With learners finding it difficult to communicate in the foreign language, it is unrealistic for educators “to activate English skills in the critical study of literature” (Randall

50). The principal objective of any literature course should be to increase self-confidence—to make learners aware that their point of view on a text matters. This can be achieved through traditional discussions as well as more kinesthetic activities such as role-plays (in which learners can employ the native as well as the foreign language if they wish) and other group activities. Educators should reassess their roles: along with helping learners understand the texts assigned, they should view themselves as coaches rather than pedagogues, offering encouragement and constructive feedback both inside and outside the classroom. James P. Wolf’s article on new pedagogies shows how social media—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—provide valuable tools for initiating educator-learner interactions; often learners find the anonymity offered by these outlets particularly congenial compared to face-to-face interactions. One may argue, as Randall does, that literature specialists “are not expected . . . [nor] really enabled to teach English language skills in an applied manner” (56). Nonetheless we propose a transdisciplinary pedagogic model designed to encourage learners to take charge of their own education through discussion, communication, and feedback in both Turkish and English. While the information-loaded lecture can certainly prove effective in literature education, we also believe that learners should discover things for themselves through group-based activity and self-assessment in language and literature classrooms. These strategies help them to develop an idiosyncratic perspective on the texts included in a syllabus, and this perspective in turn serves as a basis for the “critical study” of literature. The effectiveness of learner-centered role-plays has been documented by David Espey, who witnessed a performance of *Death of a Salesman* in Erzurum in Eastern Turkey in 1998 and, more recently, by Mine Ataş, based on her secondary school experiences in Kozan, southern Turkey.

Analyzing how foreign literature curricula have been constructed at the tertiary level, Randall quotes Spivak (“literary studies became disciplinized concurrently with colonialism” [qtd. in Randall 50]) and invokes Macaulay to show how literary studies functions as an instrument of “a systematized and strategic cultural imperialism” (Randall 56). He believes that the study of English in Turkey corresponds quite closely

to Macaulay's outlines (56). An article by one of the co-authors of this piece, "Reconstructing Englishness" (Raw), offers a different interpretation that concentrates on local initiatives rather than foreign intervention. He draws on English and Turkish language sources to document how the first departments were conceived as philology departments with curricula based on the University of Oxford model. This policy was conceived as a significant contribution to the westernization program initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk following the creation of the Republic in 1923. Yet the wholesale importation of the Oxford model (which could be considered colonialist) was tempered by the determination among academics to develop their own approaches to literary study. The novelist and activist Halide Edip Adıvar writes that "[the] slavish imitation of a model" is un-literary in focus: "This point needs special attention from late-comers to this civilization" (*Türkiye'de Şark* 11).¹ Although she does not elaborate on the term "late-comers," we believe that she refers to those who had perhaps forgotten the spirit of nationalism and creativity that inspired the Republic's origins. Adıvar did not advocate a single Turcocentric approach to foreign literature study; she encouraged younger professors to publish their findings in both languages—English and Turkish. A Shakespeare seminar organized at İstanbul University led to the production of new Turkish translations while Adıvar's own two-volume history of English literature, drawing on the insights of previous Turkish literary critics rather than their foreign counterparts, became a standard textbook for undergraduates in İstanbul and Ankara. In the 1940s the Turkish Ministry of Education instituted a practice of sending suitable candidates to complete their higher degrees in Britain and the United States, and this custom continues to this day under the aegis of the Council for Higher Education (YÖK). Among the first beneficiaries were Berna Moran (1921–93), who subsequently taught at İstanbul University and Atatürk University in Erzurum, and the poet and academic Cevat Çapan (b. 1933), who has worked at several institutions in İstanbul. This strategy might be considered colonialist were it not for the fact that it was sponsored by the Turkish government with the aim of continuing Atatürk's westernization policies.

In the first two or three decades of its existence since the creation of the Republic, English studies was less preoccupied with colonialism and more with what Akbar Ahmed terms “Muslim modernism,” in which the leaders of non-European states reworked Western-inspired modes of criticism and translation in the best interests of their local institutions (30). That construction of modernism survives to this day, as Emel Doğramacı observes: “Students of English Literature are much more understanding . . . and open to new ideas,” both from the West and elsewhere. Ideally they should be inspired by such ideas to formulate their own Turcocentric approaches to literary study, based on an awareness that “the [Turkish] state . . . [and] nationality, is of the first importance [to their future careers]” (Doğramacı). Ever since the 1940s, lecturers have been imported, mostly from the United Kingdom and the US, to consult with local staff and thereby develop effective pedagogical and academic strategies. The project seems to have been successful on the whole: in 1945 the British visitor A. R. Humphreys from the University of Leicester marveled at the way Turkish learners adapted their experiences of foreign literary texts to their “fine language—well-turned phrases and their own musical tongue” (201).

Academic standards seem to have declined since then: Randall ends his article with the suggestion that the best way to improve the quality of academic practice in Turkish universities is to follow Bilkent’s example and employ “Anglophone-world Ph.D.s as a basic requirement . . . in their humanities faculties” (65). Turkish scholars who have resided in the Anglophone world will help to instigate “the more socially transformative values” characteristic of an English literary education (Randall 67). Yet this form of higher education has been employed in state and private institutions over the past seven decades. Moran produced widely-acclaimed works of critical theory in Turkish based on local as well as English sources (1983, 1990, 1994), while foreign academics such as John Freely, a physicist, traveler, and historian, have taught on and off at Boğaziçi University in İstanbul since 1960.

In light of Adıvar’s optimistic comments in the mid-1940s, we might justifiably inquire about the subsequent events in English studies in Turkey that prompted Randall to write such a polemical piece. Why

do institutions find it difficult to “transform the purpose and meaning of English studies from a position outside the English-speaking world” (Randall 67)? We have partly addressed this issue: learners’ and educators’ text-based educational strategies lead them to regard literary study as comprising a body of knowledge to be learned and reproduced in examinations. Yet we also argue that most literary educators—both non-Turkish as well as Turkish—are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural difference. Randall quotes Spivak’s definition of literature as “an excellent vehicle of ideological transformation” (Randall 58), but we have to reconsider “ideological transformation” in an educational context in which learners are brought up with Kemalist beliefs in westernization and individual transformation and continue to take courses in Atatürk’s thought in their undergraduate curricula. We need to think more clearly about the relationship between individual transformation and the emphasis on pluralism—which should be the purpose of a literary education—and how it relates to Kemalism. How can learners relate their processes of self-discovery to what they have learned about the Republic and its history? Such questions are beyond the scope of this piece, but the fact that they continually preoccupy those involved in the teaching of English in the Republic suggests that “ideological transformation” has to be approached from a geography-specific perspective.

Randall’s former department chair Talât Saït Halman emphasized the importance of rethinking concepts in local terms in 1999: “We should stop applying western theory uncritically to Turkish culture and literature. That is a terrible pitfall. It is an easy approach, not a valid approach. We should rely on our own critics and scholars with their background in Western culture and languages who should now deal with Turkish realities instead of living in an ivory tower” (11). Certain initiatives designed to implement Halman’s recommendations were subsequently put in place. Founded in 1999 by a diverse group of academics from Bilkent, Hacettepe, Ankara, and Boğaziçi Universities (one private and three state institutions), the Culture Research Association (*Kültür Araştırmaları Derneği*) disseminates local and cross-cultural research in Turkish and English through conferences

and a newsletter, which released its forty-sixth issue in January 2016 (“Derneğimizden Haberler”).

Nonetheless, universities in Turkey require more proactive approaches to studying English literature. We need to set aside the stigma associated with language teaching and learning, compared to the higher purpose of an “aesthetic education” in literature (Randall 67). The language teaching profession is still attractive to a large proportion of university learners: not only does it provide secure employment (in the state and private sectors), but as the British Council researchers point out, many newly qualified educators relish the challenge of nurturing “the youth and dynamism observed across the nation of Turkey” (TEPAV 20). Literature instructors can help potential educators cultivate communicative pedagogic abilities by focusing on speaking skills through group-based activities rather than relying on lectures followed by mechanical question-and-answer sessions. Educators need to learn how to step back and listen to their learners and thereby develop their inter- and cross-cultural competence as a basis for creating a more effective learning environment.

Such objectives might be difficult to accomplish in predominantly top-down learning cultures, with curricula solidly committed to knowledge acquisition and testing through examinations. To call for radical change might be unrealistic, but we should nonetheless be prepared to grasp the pedagogical nettle and ask difficult questions: Why learn foreign literatures, and what is their future in higher education? Several answers exist, some of which have already been addressed in this article: to obtain a secure job, to keep (or better still, rework) the Kemalist flame of westernization and innovation alive, or to develop the whole person. We believe that other answers can be discovered through negotiation involving everyone engaged in English studies—not only foreign literature educators or foreign-trained Turkish scholars but also locally-trained educators and learners in state and private institutions. Social, national, curricular, and institutional differences should be cast aside so that language and literature specialists alike may work together to find effective answers to the questions frequently expressed by university administrators. How can foreign specialists contribute positively to the

development of both areas of English study? And what kinds of careers can graduates of both subjects pursue, apart from teaching and/or working in academia?

Randall has raised some important questions in his article that have fueled oral and written debates in Turkish institutions, both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. We do not agree with his conclusions, but his comments draw attention to the future of language and literature teaching and learning, not only in Turkey but in other non-Anglophone countries as well. English studies has a future in both the private and state sectors and in newly established as well as more venerable institutions, but that future requires perpetual reassessment in order to formulate more democratic and culture-specific constructions of learning.

Notes

1 Our translation of the Turkish text.

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