



Establishing a multicultural learning environment based on active knowledge exchange and mutual trust between teachers and students

Artëm Ingmar Benediktsson¹

University of Iceland

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Abstract

Cultural and linguistic composition of the population of Iceland is constantly expanding. This brings new opportunities as well as challenges to the educational institutions that need to adapt to the new reality. Culturally responsive teaching and assessment methods have become increasingly important to motivate all students and provide them with equal opportunities. The research project, “*It is not only the Teacher who is Talking; It is an Exchange*”, was the first extensive qualitative study conducted in Icelandic universities to investigate immigrant students’ experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods. Forty-one first-generation immigrants participated in the study. The findings provided a deep insight into immigrant students’ experiences of being university students. The study brought to the forefront challenges that the participants experienced during the educational process, including language related issues, shortage of appropriate educational support and lack of clear policies regarding special assistance during examination periods. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of establishing a multicultural learning environment where every student has equal access and opportunity for personal development.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, higher education, immigrants, multicultural education; qualitative research

Introduction

This paper derives from my doctoral dissertation, entitled “*It is not only the Teacher who is Talking; It is an Exchange*” *Immigrant Students’ Experiences of Learning Environments and Teaching Methods used in Icelandic Universities*.

The study was a part of the larger project, entitled *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland (2016-2018)*. It was the first extensive qualitative study on immigrants’ experiences of university education in Iceland. The project was funded by the Icelandic Research Fund (Rannís). The motivation for conducting the research was increasingly growing diversity in students’ cultural and linguistical backgrounds in Icelandic universities, which reflected constantly growing diversity in the population of Iceland. When the project started in 2016, the percentage of first-generation

¹ Corresponding author: artem@hi.is

immigrants was 8.9% of the total population of the country (Statistics Iceland, 2016). According to the latest data from Statistics Iceland (2020), first-generation immigrants made up 15.2% of the population. When it comes to the student population in Icelandic Universities, the percentage of students with a foreign background, including immigrants, increased by more than sixfold since 1997 and according to Statistics Iceland (2018), it was 19% of all newly registered students on all educational levels.

The main research questions were:

- What are immigrant students' experiences of the learning environments, teaching and assessment methods used in Icelandic universities?
- What are immigrant students' perspectives on communication with teachers during the educational process?
- What are immigrant students' perspectives on educational support offered by student counsellors, international offices, teachers and other University staff members?

In addition to the aforementioned research questions, there was a range of supporting questions that aimed to gain a deeper insight into students' experiences, such as questions addressing language related issues and experiences of learning Icelandic as a second language and using it in the educational process. Five academic papers derived from the study and were included in the final version of the dissertation (Benediktsson, 2020).

The goal of this paper is to shortly present the objectives of the study, originality, theoretical and methodological frameworks, as well as to highlight its main findings. The paper provides a rationale for the importance of establishing a multicultural learning environment based on the main principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that are active knowledge exchange, power-sharing and viewing every student's culture, language(s) and previous experiences as advantages.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the study was threefold and made up of constructivist theory, multicultural education theory, and second-language teaching and learning theories². The constructivist theory places students in the centre of the educational process and focuses on encouraging students to think critically and construct their own knowledge based on the various learning materials, previous experiences, and communication with peers and teachers (e.g. Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Wright, 2011).

Multicultural education theory is largely based on the main principles of constructivism and promotes learner-centred teaching methods, formative and sustainable assessment, active involvement and the importance of critical thinking. However, multicultural education theory's central point is its focus on cultivating equal opportunities, access and relevant support for all students, regardless of language, ability, cultural background, socioeconomic or any other status (Banks, 2016; Parekh, 2006). Multicultural education theory emphasises the importance of applying culturally responsive teaching and assessment methods that motivate students to

² A comprehensive overview of second-language teaching and learning theories that were applied in this project can be found in a paper *Icelandic as a second language: University students' experiences* (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020).

use their background, languages and experience in the educational process (Gay, 2018; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Quaye & Harper, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The teachers are expected to demonstrate cultural caring, value every student's opinion and create an atmosphere of trust and knowledge exchange in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). Furthermore, power-sharing and relevant support are regarded as essential elements in the educational process (Banks, 2009, 2016; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Creating a learning environment based on the principles of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching is not an easy task for teachers, who have been criticised for being one-dimensional and overtly focused on integrating multicultural content in course syllabi while ignoring other dimensions of multicultural education (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is not enough to include literature and research from various cultures and conduct a superficial journey across cultures. Students must feel empowered to challenge prejudices and think critically about policies and practices that can potentially have impact on their education and life outside educational institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Parekh, 2006). Multicultural education is a movement and collaborative process that requires a complete school reform that can be implemented through a thorough analysis of the existing policies, teaching and assessment methods, and eliminating inequalities and institutional prejudices (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Methodology

The project was a qualitative research study with first-generation immigrants, who at the time of the study were pursuing full-time undergraduate studies (i.e., they were not exchange students) at one of the three target universities: The University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri or Reykjavík University. A special focus was put on applying research techniques that are regarded as culturally responsive and viewing the data collection process as a knowledge exchange between the researcher and the participants (Nodelman, 2013). The data were collected via focus groups and individual interviews. Forty-one students participated in the study. They originated from twenty-three different countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America. The participants studied different subjects, such as biomedical science, geology, languages, law, pedagogy etc.

The analysis of the data was conducted simultaneously with the data collection process and carried out using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2008). The data were coded and categorised in a special analytical software, Atlas.ti. Later in the process, the categories were assembled in five themes that developed into five academic papers. A detailed overview of the analytical process is presented in the doctoral dissertation (Benediktsson, 2020).

Main findings and discussion

The findings from this study provide a valuable insight into immigrant students reactions to and reflections on learning and assessment methods in the Icelandic universities, as well as their experiences of the learning environments. When reflecting on their overall experience of the educational process in Iceland, the majority of the participants were positive and expressed

satisfaction with the learning environments and teaching methods. They highlighted that the universities had modern facilities, including computer rooms, fully equipped laboratories and libraries that provided access to both online and offline learning materials.

Several participants emphasised that they valued the atmosphere of trust and equality between students and teachers that prevails in the universities. The majority of teachers were easily accessible and demonstrated genuine concern for students' learning outcomes. On the other hand, some participants raised the question of the balance between sincere caring and misguided empathy that showed in addressing immigrant students as if they were children and questioning their level of understanding learning materials based on preconceptions about their knowledge of the Icelandic language. According to the dimensions of multicultural education described by Banks (2009), an empowering school culture where every student's opinion is valued is important for contributing to the students' sense of belonging in the university environment. Teachers are encouraged to enter in a direct dialogue with their students and motivate them by focusing on the advantages that their background can give, rather than discussing how it can hinder the learning process (Gay, 2018; Parekh, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). However, creating an empowering learning environment is a multi-level process that requires a change in the mindset of every university staff member, including teachers, student counsellors, administrators, policy makers etc. (Banks, 2009; Quaye & Harper, 2007). Even one weak link can have a negative impact on the establishment of a truly empowering learning environment.

When it comes to the participants' experiences of teaching methods, they differed depending on the field of studies. Several patterns were identified while analysing the participants answers. Those who studied at the School of Education at the University of Iceland described teaching methods and practices that had a clear focus on active knowledge exchange, discussions and various assessment methods, including low-stakes assignments. These methods can be considered learner-centred and culturally responsive to some extent based on the criteria described by Brooks and Brooks (1993) and Gay (2018) respectively. The participants who studied the subjects from the branch of science concerned with engineering, medicine and nature predominantly described teaching methods that were lecture-based and required less active participation in the learning process. Furthermore, they emphasised that the assessment was largely built upon high-stakes examinations that can be unfair towards immigrant students. While a lecture-based approach can be beneficial in some cases and might suit some students' needs, its primary goal is still to educate students rather than to promote knowledge exchange and critical thinking (Grant & Hill, 2006; Struyven et al., 2010). According to the interviews, group work was frequently applied by the teachers who often assumed that this method was well-known and did not require any form of introduction. In reality, several participants revealed that group work was a new form of learning for them, and they lacked a proper introduction to its objectives and benefits. Previous research in the field strongly suggests that proper introduction of the group work as a teaching method as well as the assessment criteria is crucially important to prevent negative attitudes and improve learning outcomes (e.g., Forehand et al., 2016; Popov et al., 2012).

The participants' experiences of the available support services varied. The majority of them were poorly informed of the available educational support sources and hence rarely used them despite the need of extra support. The participants mostly sought support that could reduce the

inequalities associated with language-related issues during the examination periods. The available support varied greatly between different universities and even between different departments within the same university. The University of Akureyri and several departments at the University of Iceland offered extended examination durations to the students who had Icelandic as a second language. The participants valued this type of support the most as they often spent a considerable amount of time translating the questions for themselves and formulating the answers. Other support services, such as translation of examination questions, allowing students to use dictionaries and/or allowing them to answer questions in English were loosely regulated at the time of the study and required rounds of negotiations with teachers, student counsellors and department offices. Theory and previous studies highlight the importance of clear guidelines and appropriate support that aims to eliminate inequalities between students (Banks, 2016; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). While providing multifaceted support, it is important to keep in mind that it does not imply lowering the requirements or academic expectations for immigrant students because such practices might contribute to marginalisation of minority students, including immigrants (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Lowering the requirements or reducing workload were not considered by the participants of the presented study. However, they wished for improvements in the support services and standardisation of the policies regarding language support and special assistance during the examination periods.

Despite all the challenges that the participants experienced during the learning process, the majority of them appreciated the opportunity to be able to pursue higher education in Iceland. They were optimistic that university staff members, including teachers, would take into consideration the described issues and take steps towards establishing a multicultural learning environment based on active knowledge exchange, trust and equality.

Conclusion and impact

The research project formally ended in 2018 and the dissertation based on the collected data was published in May 2020. However, the project triggered a considerable discussion within the Icelandic universities. Teachers, administrators, student counsellors and other staff members took time to reflect on the findings and took steps towards improving existing services, offering better support and implementing teaching and assessment designed with equity in mind. There is more awareness amongst teachers of culturally responsive teaching and assessment. Moreover, there is an ongoing discussion at the University of Iceland about the possibility of offering an extended examination duration for students who have Icelandic as a second language in all departments and becoming a standard form of support.

The International Division at the University of Iceland has become more open to supporting immigrant students and offering them services such as mentor programmes. The University of Iceland's Centre for Writing provides assistance with written projects to all students, regardless of language abilities, origin or any other status. The centre hosts regular meetings and group support sessions for students with culturally diverse backgrounds in order to help them to improve their writing skills in Icelandic.

The School of Education at the University of Iceland recently set up a working group that includes teachers and administrators from different departments. The goal of the group is to

discuss the ways of improving support services and the teaching methods suitable for diverse students. Starting from the last year, the School of Education offers a course, ‘Dialogue about the Profession’, that is specifically designed for immigrant students and focuses on practicing the academic Icelandic language via discussions with teachers and sharing knowledge on relevant subjects, including the national curricula, multicultural education, cultural sensitivity etc.

Working on this research project has been a unique and empowering experience, both for me as a researcher and the participants, who appreciated the opportunity of being able to share their experiences and opinions. Everything suggests that the participants’ voices are being heard and the universities undertaking adjustments in order to respond to the changes in student populations. An extensive overview of the findings can be found in my doctoral dissertation and the academic papers that derived from this project.

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