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Teaching new citizens: challenges and opportunities

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There seems to be general agreement that learning the language is a key factor in how well new citizens fare in their adopted country (for example, Mesch, 2003). Teachers play a key role as students develop their second language (Jacobsen, 1999). As we have established elsewhere (Adalbjarnardóttir and Runarsdóttir, 2003), until recently very few immigrants came to Iceland, and these were mostly from neighbouring countries. In the last decade the number of immigrants has increased rapidly and we are facing a completely new state of affairs concerning migrants and their reasons for coming here.

At this moment, when the teaching of Icelandic as a second language (ISL) is in its infancy, we believe it is vital to understand how teachers in this key position are being prepared for this and how they see their role. At present we are engaged in a research project, Teacher Education Addressing Multiculturalism in Europe (TEAM), studying the aims and practices of teachers working with students from other countries (see the symposium papers elsewhere in this volume). This project is the first of its kind in Iceland; we hope it will provide important data to inform decisions on how best to educate and support teachers of immigrants.

Research on teacher thinking, and on teaching immigrants

For several years we have been researching teachers' thinking. We have gained insights into teachers' pedagogical vision and classroom practice in primary school (Adalbjarnardóttir, 1999) and the first year of upper-secondary school (Runarsdóttir and Adalbjarnardóttir, 2003), as well as into teachers' subjective theories at upper-secondary school and their impact on teachers' work (Ingvarsdóttir, 2003; 2004). One of our major findings is that teachers are governed by their pedagogical vision and subjective theories as they work with students.

This background has showed us how important it is for the development of multicultural education to understand the thinking of teachers who work with immigrants. For this purpose we have been collecting quantitative and qualitative data from both school leaders and classroom teachers. In this paper we focus on teachers who are teaching Icelandic as a Second Language.

There is plentiful literature on the multicultural school, and strategies to apply in culturally diverse classrooms (e.g. Banks, 2004; Nieto, 1999). However, research on how teachers see their role in this context seems to be scarce, particularly research on native teachers who are teaching immigrants, as in our case. In an attempt to map teachers' thinking related to teaching immigrants at different levels, researchers have mostly focused on student teachers and novice teachers (Artiles and McClafferty, 1998; Expósito and Favela, 2003; Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff and Pearson, 2001). Some have explored the impact of a multicultural education course on teachers' knowledge, beliefs and interactive thinking about teaching culturally diverse learners (Artiles and McClafferty, 1998); this has revealed the importance of teachers being reflective. Expósito and Favela (2003) found that only the highly reflective teachers in their study were able to truly value and meet effectively the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse pupils. Neuharth-

Pritchett and colleagues (2001) explored US pre-service students' definitions of multicultural education, the sources of information they used to construct their definitions and their thoughts on how to implement such education. Of those students, 45% demonstrated a moderate understanding and 39% minimal understanding of multicultural education; only 16% demonstrated a strong understanding. In our study we focus on somewhat similar factors, looking at teachers' aims, their perceived role in the multicultural school, and how they feel they are prepared for this challenging task.

The study

In August 2004 a three-day in-service course was held in Reykjavik for mostly experienced teachers who had recently taken on the role of teaching ISL in primary, secondary and adult education. The main aim was to develop the teachers' skills in teaching ISL, a skill only recently in demand, and thus one for which teachers have not been specifically trained. Most of those teaching Icelandic to immigrants have been trained as teachers of the mother tongue, that is as subject teachers. For similar reasons, in-service courses for this group of teachers have not been offered until recently. For all these reasons, this course provided a rare opportunity to meet many of the teachers at once. We decided to give the participants a questionnaire to explore their thinking on multicultural teaching before the course began, to avoid influencing their answers.

The sample consisted of 32 teachers from all over the country. The participants were 27 females and five males at various educational levels; 21 at the compulsory level (one male), five at the upper-secondary level (four males) and six (all females) in adult education. Six of the teachers had one or both parents of foreign origin; four teach in compulsory schools, and one each in the other two levels. Of this group, 26 had teacher certification: 15 with a BEd degree (classroom teachers), ten had the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) (i.e. subject teachers) and one was trained in special education. The remaining six had university degrees in various subjects but no pedagogical training.

The questionnaire consisted of eleven closed questions and four open-ended questions. Apart from background questions, the emphasis was on teacher motivation for multicultural teaching and the multicultural school. Our analysis focused on their educational background: we were interested in understanding its effect in order to get some indication of what kind of training would be most appropriate. Therefore we asked the participants how they felt they were prepared for this new task and how they felt schools should embrace the task of working with pupils of foreign origin. Additionally, their answers to the open questions allowed us analyse their aims, their sense of preparedness, and what they saw as the major challenges.

Our small sample made comparisons across groups difficult (e.g. no gender differences were computed, because we only had five males), but we emphasise that this small number represents a relatively large proportion of the teachers currently teaching ISL (our estimate is 70% to 80%).

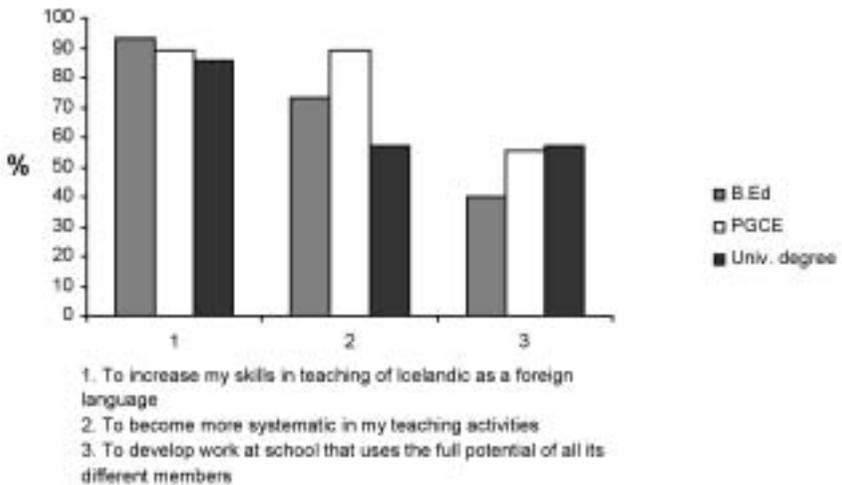
Gaining skills, using skills

In this paper we present some of our findings, focusing on two areas we found particularly interesting: teachers' preparation and motivation, and how they see their role as teachers of immigrants.

Preparation

When asked to state why they came to the course the teachers had seven options to choose from and were asked to indicate the most important three; 31 gave valid answers. From these seven possible responses, three were selected most often. Over half (56%) put ‘To increase my skills in teaching a foreign language’ as their first reason, and 28 (90%) chose it as one of the three. For 23 teachers (74%) ‘To become more systematic in my teaching activities’ was in the top three, and 13% put it in first place. Fifteen (48%) indicated, ‘To develop a school that uses the full potential of all its different members,’ with 16% choosing it as first priority. Figure 1 shows these responses and the teachers’ educational background.

Figure 1: Motivation for multicultural teaching: why did you decide to attend this seminar?



A high proportion of teachers from all three groups find it important to increase their skills in teaching Icelandic as a foreign language, but they differ in their emphasis on teaching more systematically. This emphasis is not surprising given the course’s aim: to promote skills in teaching ISL. It may also underline their insecurity in this new role but does not necessarily indicate that they see themselves primarily as subject teachers. Further we noticed an interesting difference in the third option – to develop a school that uses the full potential of all its members. It was favoured slightly more by the PGCE teachers and those holding another university degree than by those with a BEd. At this point it is difficult to explain this indication without exploring it in a further study.

The teachers who focused on their skills in teaching ISL reported poor access to suitable curriculum material and few opportunities for teacher training. A female teacher in adult education reflected: ‘I was in no way prepared, it was just a matter of ‘sink or swim’. I had access to other teachers in adult education and one in particular who had some teaching material. But the material was basic, no curriculum and no training’.

Teachers experienced in teaching foreign languages were the most positive about their preparation, along with those who had lived and worked abroad. One said ‘My experience as a teacher of German was more useful than my experience of teaching Icelandic’.

Teachers’ role

The questionnaire asked teachers to prioritise three tasks when their school takes in an immigrant student, from nine possible suggestions. Again, they emphasised three in particular. The majority (20, or 63%) wanted the school to focus on ‘promoting the pupil’s self-confidence in expressing himself/herself’; 19% stated this as first priority. Nearly half (14 or 44%) felt it was important ‘to find a place for the pupil in the immigrant department or provide him/her with special teaching in the class,’ with 41% putting it in first place, and 12 (38%) chose ‘the training of his/her skills in the Icelandic language’, 9% in first place.

Figure 2: Important tasks in schools with incoming immigrant pupils

In your opinion, which tasks should be prioritised in schools as immigrant pupils attend the school?

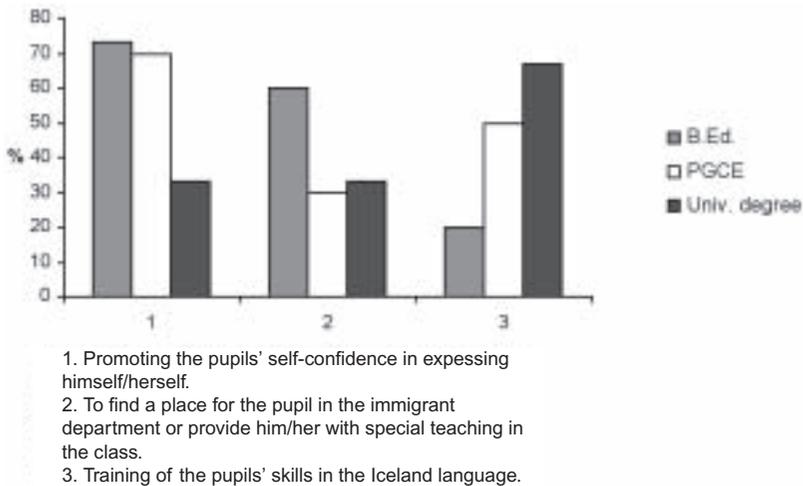


Figure 2 shows the teachers’ reactions, according to their educational background. Three findings are interesting. First, by emphasising pupils’ self-confidence in expressing themselves, these teachers seem to see verbal skills as critical in educating immigrant pupils. When compared to the emphasis on a subject (e.g. Icelandic) that we found in their motivation to attend the course, we see that they still see language as important: they believe pupils need a good command of the language to be able to express themselves. Second, that the BEds focus on placing pupils in an immigrant department is understandable, given that such departments exist only in the compulsory schools (Adalbjarnardottir *et al.*, 2003) where the majority of BEds teach. Third, we see teachers’ emphasis on skills training again, and focusing on the language, but from a different viewpoint. Here we find some difference related to teachers’ educational background, as

20% of the BEd teachers (classroom teachers) focus on the pupils' skills in the Icelandic language compared to a significantly larger proportion of the two other groups. Again this difference may possibly indicate their different backgrounds, with the BEd teachers holding a more holistic view of their pupils.

The teachers' vision was also revealed in their answers to an open question about their aims in multicultural teaching: 'What are your aims in your work with 'new' Icelanders?' As we mapped the answers to this question we soon noticed three strong patterns in their answers:

- to promote skills in the Icelandic language (14 teachers).
- to focus on the individual child; its well-being, culture and skills in the Icelandic language (12 teachers).
- intercultural education; to develop a culture in which everyone learns and everyone gains (four teachers).

The teachers in the first group emphasise language skills; one said, 'To give the pupils the opportunity for general education and make it possible to have a good life in Iceland'. The other answers also reflected their focus on pupils being able to speak and understand the new language as a key to living and studying in the new country. Some also mentioned special teaching skills like simplifying grammar and training pupils' learning strategies as an important aim.

The second group focused more on the pupils as individuals with both emotional and educational needs. One said 'To create a safe and secure environment in which the pupil feels good and makes use of the skills and knowledge he/she already has as a base for learning Icelandic'. Others found it important to give the pupils insights into Icelandic society, and others focused on mutual trust and supportive communication.

The third group of teachers – and also the smallest, only four – took a different tone. This group referred to all pupils and the importance of everyone learning from one another and contributing equally to the projects at hand. We conclude with a quote from one of them:

To get to know them, learn to value them, to build a bridge between compulsory school and the upper-secondary school, to be a part of developing an Icelandic school community that puts diversity into positive use in its development. And to help 'new' pupils to build up positive self-esteem and knowledge and make them aware of their competence.

Thinking ahead

The participants in our study were teachers in compulsory, upper-secondary and adult education who are teaching Icelandic as a foreign language without any training in multicultural teaching.

We found that these teachers focus quite strongly on the subject, in this case ISL. However, we found some indications that they are already reflecting on their role in creating a multicultural society and see doing this as part of their role. Although a few expressed interest in working towards a multicultural society, they are not all ready, as yet, to incorporate that interest into their aims. This finding corresponds to the pattern found by Neuharth-Pritchett and colleagues (2001). Few of our teachers demonstrate 'strong

understanding of multicultural education' and can envisage how they will incorporate it into their classroom practices.

We did not find that different educational backgrounds had a clear impact on their thinking about multicultural issues, but again we emphasise that this was a course for teachers faced with the task of teaching Icelandic, so they are naturally focused on mastering skills in language teaching. Their thinking at this stage is focused on skills-getting for skills-using.

This questionnaire has helped us identify areas that need to be investigated further and more deeply. Our findings indicate that these teachers see the learning of the new language as an all-important first step so the new pupils can be integrated into society. The teachers' answers show that not enough care has been taken to prepare teachers for this new complex role. This lack of preparation may be one reason these teachers see language teaching as a specific skill separate from cultural issues. Given some of the answers, we question the tendency to leave the teaching of ISL mostly to teachers of the mother tongue.

The main conclusion we draw, however, is that teachers, regardless of their background, need better preparation and more support. We suggest that teacher education institutes in Iceland provide special courses for prospective teachers who want to specialise in multicultural education where foreign language teaching skills are interwoven with multicultural issues. Experienced teachers like those in our study need opportunities to retrain for this new role. This, in our view, would best be done through continuing in-service courses, followed up by local support.

Language and culture are intertwined and those learning a foreign language need to open their cultural shells and grow out of the shell of their own language and culture (Kaikkonen, 2001). In the context of multicultural teaching the concept of 'learner' applies equally to teachers and their students and all partners must open those cultural shells. Only through reaching this understanding can teaching new citizens offer opportunities as well as challenges.

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