

Part 3

Education Policy, Reforms & School Leadership

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Thinking ‘Outside of the Box’ in Modern Education Systems: Working across Cultural and Language Boundaries with Student Teachers in Lithuania

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges of working with non-native speakers of English, on areas pertinent to the successful education of trainee teachers of young children in Lithuania. The challenges faced were numerous, as the two week programme was not specifically related to the young child’s education, covering subjects such as quality assurance of programmes, induction processes for new teachers, the characteristics of teacher educators and mentors and the skills required by teachers in the twenty first century. The conclusions reached were the following; subject matter more directly related to young children’s education, though this would not have stretched the students in the way desired by the researcher; and translation of the material used into Lithuanian, originally suggested by the researcher would have without doubt aided the comprehension and learning of the students, many of whose standard of English was often not sufficient for the tasks set. Struggling with the language of instruction definitely affected content learning. However, students despite the difficulties made very successful efforts to embrace the end of programme’s challenge, involving group work and group presentations of a new curriculum for training pre-school teachers and pre-primary teachers.

Keywords: learning and teaching, teaching in English with non-native speakers, Lithuania, group work, peer assessment

Introduction

The writer, a native English language speaker, was asked to work for two weeks with Lithuanian college students who were completing a three year degree to become teachers in pre-school and pre-primary. Funding was sought and provided by the Lithuanian government and a programme was devised in consultation with the college senior staff and agreed. The daily teaching sessions were in English and followed by consultation time for the students, individually or in groups. All the reading material, power point presentations and the final task instructions with assessment criteria, were given to the students weeks in advance to allow preparation time.

Working in English has become popular with many universities in Europe, as they perceive it to be a way of attracting international students. Labia (2011; 2014) has raised concerns that this threatens native languages. Students she believes face cultural differences that are both wide and deep, which affect their ability to respond. She asserts that it is not just a question of language, but understanding the behaviours of students from different cultures. Ideas such as universities expecting a critical response by students to reading matter and course content, which is not however favoured in some parts of the world, where repetition of knowledge given in lectures is preferred, or admitting to not understanding, seen in some cultures as shameful can be problematic. It is essential to ensure students interact with material presented and in this author's case this was true, but highly challenging, due to the restricted English of many of the students. Belhiah and Elhami (2014) in their research in the Gulf profess that students fail to learn content when taught in a foreign language, as they struggle with understanding. Labia (2011) also believes that the wide vocabulary of a native speaker can add to the difficulties for students, not native speakers and used to accented English used by non-natives. In addition, she points to the problem of the poor English language skills of many professors in European universities, complained about by many students, with universities reluctant to impose English tests on their staff. However, the drive for internationalisation is continuing to grow and 'become an end in itself' (Leutwyler, Popov & Wolhuter, 2017, p. 66).

The researcher has for years, worked for the quality agency for higher education in Lithuania (SKVC), leading teams of international experts assessing the quality of education programmes in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Quality therefore, was high on the agenda for this programme. Henard and Roseveare reporting to OECD (2012), suggest teaching quality in modern HEIs is influenced by a wide variety of issues, foremost being the internationalisation of higher education and changes in pedagogy, such as technology and pressures of global competition. They assert that transmission models are no longer valid as a sole aid to learning and that there is need for a variety of pedagogical approaches. In addition, a report to the European Commission (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013, p. 12) suggests the need to 'comprehensively professionalise its teaching cohort as teachers' (rather than as researchers), a somewhat damning indictment of the standards of teaching in HEIs across Europe.

Economist Intelligence Unit (2017) presented research into schools, curricular and teacher training, whose focus was to ascertain how countries were preparing future workers with the skills required namely, interpersonal skills, problem-solving and critical thinking and being able to survive and understand an automated, digital world. The report concludes that countries are not doing enough to change students' experiences of teaching and learning, to prepare them to cope in such a world. Governments' efforts in producing globally aware citizens are poor and there is a lack of team working on projects that require cooperation. Knowledge needs application to real life concerns, not merely being acquired and tested and learning has to constantly change. In addition, education for the future needs to be linked to a harmonious tolerant society, where diversity is accepted and equality is the norm. Skills required the report asserts are, inter-disciplinarity, creativity, entrepreneurial ability and to be analytical and leadership oriented. To achieve these objectives

students will require a high standard of literacy and understanding of science, technology, engineering and maths, plus the ability to be resilient and cope with stress.

Years of experience of assessing standards of teacher education programmes in Lithuania made the researcher realise that much of the above future thinking would be a challenge to staff and students, as change does not come easily, despite Soviet control of processes being for students, old history. Hilton (2014) pointed out the need for change in the learning cultures of Lithuania and Latvia from a focus on teaching, to one of learning and a need to embrace change. Cerych (2002) had asserted that advisors in countries shaking off communist regimes need a working knowledge of the language, but Hilton (2009a) from wide experience rejected this idea, providing good translation and a willingness of all to cooperate were firmly in place. This author believes that the outsider can often perceive more than the insider in such situations. Hilton (2009b) asserts that the move towards a more western approach to learning, for example group work, peer assessment, critical questioning of theories, has proved a challenge as teachers in HEIs in these countries have been used to a more didactic approach to teaching. Ryan (2011) discusses the need to change teaching approaches when working with international students, such as giving clear introductions and repeating key points, offering pre-reading, all of which was done in this exercise. She also discusses how cultural and language challenges can be confusing, as behaviours of staff and students in the classroom differ and language, which is informal or subject specific, may cause problems for non-native speakers. In addition staff student relationships can be a source of concern, if different to the locally accepted behaviours, as can new forms of assessment.

Research

The respondents

These were thirty nine students from years one to three of a programme for training pre-school and pre-primary teachers. It was decided to include year one students, despite their experience of the programme having been merely of one month's duration as their English was, in the opinion of staff, better than that of the older groups. All students had received material for the planned teaching, including a day to day session breakdown, pre-reading, power point presentations for each of eight days and instructions about the presentation task set for days eight to ten, the criteria for assessment and a peer assessment sheet. Many students brought their laptops and had the advantage of reading the material as it was presented in the lecture/seminars. Students were assured that there were no 'right answers' to the final task, but a chance for them to think what they felt should be included/not included in their programme, bearing in mind the information given to them in the lecture/seminars. Each day students were given questions to discuss in groups and feedback their answers to the whole group. In addition, consultation times were set to allow students to meet the researcher in groups or individually. The final presentations of their ideas for a new programme for pre-school and pre-primary education were delivered to the researcher and to some of the staff team in English. Each group received feedback from all the other groups after presenting.

Initially students had completed a pre-programme questionnaire asking about their feelings about what they were to undertake. During the two weeks the researcher made daily notes of student responses to the questions set, the challenges of teaching and learning in English and when and if students came to consult the tutor in the times set aside. A small volunteer group were involved in a group interview after the first session. In addition the researcher had constant discussions with the staff team, particularly about student reaction to the programme and their ability to understand and speak in English. After the programme was concluded staff asked students to complete questionnaires and the researcher analysed their responses to questions about their experiences.

Initial questionnaire results

Thirty nine students, all female, completed the initial questionnaire, sixteen in year one, twelve in year two and eleven in year three. There had been considerable drop out from the programme in recent years. Staff thought that some students were not suited to being teachers, but applied as they wanted a degree. They had all passed the government's motivation test which most staff agree is a total waste of time. Most were between eighteen and twenty one, only one student being over thirty and two twenty two to twenty five. They had all found the pre-reading difficult, most admitted to dipping in and out and some to reading nothing at all. Most said they would have read more if it had been translated into Lithuanian.

Group interview

The initial interview took place with nine students three from each year. The main concern expressed by the group was their ability to undertake a programme in English. They were worried that the tutor would judge them harshly. There were tentatively looking forward to the experience, but afraid they would not understand as it would be a new experience, maybe difficult but worth it. They were looking forward to something new despite the difficulty, but worried that the work might impinge on the demands of other modules that counted towards their grades. They were hoping to, as a result of the programme, improve their ability to speak in and understand English and learn more about teaching. The idea of there being no right answers was difficult for them, not something ever experienced before. They all concurred with the view that foreign teachers are different to Lithuanians, in that they are more personal and relaxed. Asked about the pedagogical approaches they expected, one said she had 'no expectations' and another it was 'better to wait and see'. Others however, said 'group work as foreign teachers use it a great deal'.

Staff concerns

Again the main concern was the ability of students to understand English and also the challenge of the subject content chosen, which was outside the students' experience. There was a definite over-estimation of the students' ability to read and speak in English though first years had a better grasp than their older colleagues.

End of programme questionnaire

Fewer students, twenty three, completed this as it was done after the researcher had left. The majority of students again mentioned the difficulty with English, but

most said that had found the sessions very or quite interesting, though two thought them a waste of time (this correlated with not reading the material provided and problems with understanding English). Most had really enjoyed the final project group work and were pleased with their efforts. Several found the material challenging and two irrelevant to their proposed career, but the majority considered the sessions interesting, even though covering material so new to them, which two described as ‘very scary’. Many considered the final sessions the best as ‘we had got used to the teacher’ and it was ‘fun to work together to think about changes needed to our programme’. Several liked that everyone had been made to speak in the final session. First years found the session about practice least useful as they had not yet been into schools even to observe. One third year refused to choose one session as best and one as least useful, saying they were all of great interest and made her think about her career. This student had a fairly good command of English, having lived in Ireland for some time. Several of the respondents said that the group work had been interesting but difficult, as ‘different people had different ideas’ and this was a challenge for the final project. However, it was good for them, as it made them ‘work together and above all ‘think’.

Visits to practice places

Two visits were made to kindergartens, taking children up to age six. Discussions with staff there underlined their concerns about their lack of responsibility in assessment of practice and students spending too much time observing rather than doing. They wanted to be more involved and wished college staff would visit the placements and see the students working, something not in place at the present time as assessment is by student report.

Conclusion

Initially communication was a real problem, the students shy and finding the need to listen to and speak in English very challenging. At first some students helped by translating material and on occasions a member of staff did the same, but getting the students to really discuss and question the tutor, admit to a lack of understanding was very difficult. It appears that they were ready for group work as ‘foreign teachers always do it’. However, it was apparent that my relaxed style of walking around the groups, insisting that they attempted to talk to me was not considered ‘normal’. Additionally, the set tasks were seen as a real challenge, as students were required to question the efficacy of the programme they were following, ‘we have never done anything like this before’. Many years of experience in talking to students in the country, whilst undertaking subject quality reviews, proved invaluable to the researcher, who has a good level of understanding of the local cultures. Persistence was rewarded and by the time students were under pressure to prepare their final presentation they were much more vocal, finding it easier to ask ‘what does this mean’ or ‘I don’t understand this’ so much more progress was made. A great deal of effort was put into the final work and the results were a revelation to the staff, who were delighted by the quality of the ideas presented. Students really had thought and discussed amongst their groups and as a result had presented a series of challenges to staff about their programme, its modules, the place of practice, how they were assessed and the role of the college

staff and teachers in schools as teacher educators. Student comments seriously questioned the way practice was assessed, a highly paper based approach, as students wanted to be judged by what they did with the children, not by what they wrote. The Dean in charge of the programme admitted that the students had raised serious questions for the staff to answer and that all the power point slides produced by students would be collected and used for staff discussion and development. The staff were it appears, astonished how much the students, despite their difficulties with English, had taken from the input into the programme. So, despite the language problem, the 'thinking outside the box' approach demanded by the final project helped students demonstrate that they were thinking, using material and ideas given to them during the programme and producing work which astonished the staff who taught them. If as a result, moves are made by staff to question and alter teaching and assessment methods as has been promised, then the whole project can be seen as a success and the quality of the programme the students follow should be enhanced. In addition, as one student said 'we have really been made to work hard at our English and I am glad we were', whilst the Head of Department admitted that more had to be done to increase the use of English in the three year programme to help students build on what they had learned in school. Therefore the experiment may have successful outcomes in the future.

Whatever the concerns about teaching in English to non-English speakers considered by previous researchers, to some extent this experiment was a success. However, if the content had been essential for passing assessments on the normal programme, some students would have been seriously affected. The 'thinking outside the box' approach was for most students and certainly for the staff who observed the results a real success, taking students into territory not normally considered in their programme and giving them a voice which so far had not been heard, as to what they wanted to learn and how it should be taught and assessed.

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