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Intercultural communication A challenge to Icelandic education

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Abstract

The paper deals with a radical transformation in Iceland's relationship with the rest of the world during the 20th century, shifting the island from centuries of extreme isolation to a new age of contact and communication. Apparently, multicultural characteristics of Icelandic society in the wake of increasing immigration have tended to provoke negative attitudes towards foreigners.

This new situation has posed a challenge to the education system in Iceland which will have to adapt to altered circumstances. There are indications that including intercultural communication courses in teacher education may be an important step towards strengthening the role of intercultural communication in schools, especially in tandem with language teaching.

Against a background of globalisation and the rapid advance of Icelandic companies into foreign markets, the world of commerce has been quick to understand the need for intercultural communication training. In marked contrast to the general education sector, business departments at universities appear to be responding to this need as evidenced by a proliferation of culture-related courses at academic level. The twofold character of culture-related training should be particularly noted, i.e. culture specific instruction to help adjust to a particular society and intercultural communication focusing on the awareness and understanding of cultural differences in general.

JEL classification: I20, I21, I23

Keywords: Intercultural communication, immigration, attitudes, education

Introduction

This paper focuses on changes in the composition of Icelandic society in recent years through immigration and increasing multiculturalism and the response of the education system whose services are needed to help the population adapt to altered circumstances. At the outset of the 21st century it would appear that Icelanders urgently need to be informed and educated about the cultures and customs of other nations whose citizens have settled here and are trying to learn our language and adapt to our way of life. The adaptation, however, has to be mutual as will be illustrated in more detail in this paper in connection with coverage of recent surveys by IMG Gallup and others where attitudes to immigrants in Icelandic society are analysed and discussed.

For centuries, Iceland was probably Europe's most homogeneous community. But times have changed and this geographically isolated mid-Atlantic island is now developing an increasingly diverse population through a sharp increase in immigration occasioned by globalisation and increased mobility between European countries as a result of enhanced cross-border employment rights of European citizens within the EU and European Economic Area (EEA). Another development, which is peculiar to Iceland, but also ties in with the deregulation of business brought to Iceland through EEA legislation, is the inroad Icelandic companies are making into foreign markets, with a special focus on Britain, Iceland's nearest European neighbour. It is as if the sudden freedom from restriction engendered by more open and liberal legislation has released pent-up energy that bursts out in a sudden flurry of activity among Icelandic businessmen; they appear to be anxious to make up for time lost due to barriers of restriction and regulation.

Thus it is not only the immigration of people that has put a strain on Icelandic culture and created a need for the study of intercultural communication to help people of different backgrounds to communicate and establish successful relationships.

Globalisation and the "Europeanisation" of Iceland have thrust Icelandic businesses on to the international stage where they have to perform in competition with powerful and sophisticated rivals. To Icelandic companies, therefore, intercultural training has become an issue of immediate concern. It is the central objective of this paper to demonstrate the need for the Icelandic education system, at all levels, to respond to the challenge of preparing Icelandic society for the century of globalisation, immigration, and business expansion in foreign markets. Finally, a special chapter will be devoted to outlining how universities and

certain organisations are constructing courses and modules in intercultural studies and thus preparing to tackle the complex requirements of a multicultural society.

A Brief Historical Perspective

Viking mobility

Iceland was first settled in the late 9th century, mainly by Norwegians of mixed blood with a certain Celtic element from the British Isles. The Vikings were seafarers par excellence and travelled far and wide in their well-designed ships which could even brave the wild waves of the North Atlantic on journeys all the way to Iceland and Greenland. During the first centuries of settlement, the Viking ships provided a well-established link between the remote island of which the Romans were faintly aware and named “ultima Thule” and the Scandinavian peninsula as well as the British Isles.

As time went by, however, this link was gradually eroded. This was occasioned by the erosion of the country itself which gradually lost its slow-growing sub-arctic woodlands due to the pressing need for timber for building and firewood. New replacement growth was hampered by the pressure of grazing by the livestock upon which the settlers depended for their survival. The outcome was timber shortage, especially of the larger trunks that would be needed for the building of an ocean going ship.

“Navigare necesse est”

During the six centuries between 1100 and 1700 there are only five recorded examples of ships owned by Icelanders (Bjornsson, 2005). Most of the ships that came to Iceland were owned by Norwegians, and later, Danes, when Iceland became a colony of Denmark.

As may be gathered from the above, Iceland’s position out in the mid-Atlantic would have been an isolated one in those times and trade and contact with other nations of a limited character. The main occupation was subsistence farming with little to export and the import of only bare necessities. The chief goods exported from Iceland in the late Middle Ages were woollen cloth, skins, fish oil and stockfish. The main imports were corn, timber, iron, cloth, twine and fishing gear (Bjornsson, 1983).

It was not only goods, however, that were difficult to transport to and from Iceland. News was also hard to come by and a whole winter would pass without the Icelanders knowing anything about events in other countries. It has been said that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” (Hartley, 1958, p. 7) and the conditions of

mediaeval Iceland would certainly produce culture shock of the severest kind in the TV and Internet-weaned generation of present day Icelanders.

Is the King Alive? News of Three Danish Royalties

During the Middle Ages and well into the 20th century Iceland was a Danish colony and shared a king with Denmark. As already established, mediaeval Iceland had no ships of its own and depended on Denmark for regular communications across the ocean. It was not considered advisable, however, to brave the Atlantic winter storms in the vessels of those times and the first ships of the year usually arrived in May or June and left again in late August or early September, which corresponds roughly to the migrating pattern of the arctic tern, one of the most common summer dwellers in Iceland.

Naturally, the people of Iceland cared for their king and a long winter without news was likely to bring anxiety with regard to his well-being. Thus, when the earliest “spring ship” from Denmark arrived in harbour in April or early May, the first question to be asked of the crew was most likely “Is the king alive”, or as they would have put it in Danish “Lever kongen?”

King Frederik VII - The Shipping News

On 4th April 1864 the answer to this question was negative, since Frederik VII had died on 15 November 1863, or about 5 months before the news was brought to Iceland (Gudmundsson, 1956).

King Christian IX – Message by Marconi

But this was the 19th century, the final stage in mediaeval modes of communication. The next 100 years changed everything. When King Christian IX died on 29 January 1906, the Icelanders were informed the following day by means of “Marconi’s Wireless Telegraph System”. This was new technology in Iceland, the first Marconi telegram having been received in Reykjavík on 26 June 1905 (Gudmundsson, 1950; Stephensen, 1996).

King Frederick VIII – In Touch by Telephone

When King Frederik VIII died suddenly in May 1912, a telephone connection had been established between Iceland and the continent through a submarine cable (29 September

1906) and the Icelanders learnt of their king's death the same day (Gudmundsson, 1950; Stephensen, 1996).

Thus the mode of announcing the deaths of three Danish kings in the late 19th and early 20th century, may be seen to constitute a kind of royal metaphor of progress, symbolising how technology effectively ended Iceland's centuries of isolation.

The Advent of Modernity

The table below (Table 1), presenting flight information as shown on computer screens in the passenger hall at Keflavik Airport on a day in March 2005, provides a striking contrast with the preceding paragraphs. The five-month delay in passing the news of a royal death from Denmark to Iceland in 1864 seems worlds away from the busy international airport where jets from various cities in Europe and America are landing at something like 20 minute intervals. Yet this is still Iceland, approximately five generations and about a century and a half after the death of His Royal Highness Frederick VII of Denmark. The past is indeed a foreign country!

Table 1. International arrivals at Keflavik airport.

| | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| X9602 Edinburgh | 22:45 |
| AEU156 London Stansted | 22:50 |
| I325 Oslo | 23:10 |
| FI453 London Heathrow | 23:45 |
| QS103 Varadero Cuba\Gander | 06:00 |
| FI632 Boston | 06:40 |
| FI642 Baltimore | 06:50 |

What is in a name?

For decades, the law in Iceland stated that to become an Icelandic citizen you had to renounce your "foreign" name and adopt an Icelandic one. Thus a dual purpose was achieved:

Firstly, the Icelandic language was saved from the risk of introducing foreign words which did not fit well into its grammatical system and might spoil the pure character of the language which had only recently been saved from the humiliation of becoming seriously corrupted by Danish, the tongue of Iceland's earlier colonial masters.

Secondly, by adopting an Icelandic name, a person was also becoming an accepted member of the community, blending in without effort, instead of announcing foreign origin on every occasion of introduction. The rigid demands of “enforced assimilation” became increasingly unpopular, however, and eventually the law loosened its grip, requiring only the adoption of an Icelandic name as a “middle name”, thereby abandoning the requirement that new citizens should give up a personal name that had become a near-indispensable aspect of their identity.

The final release from the controversial clause came after Iceland joined the European Economic Area and now had to adapt itself to European legislation. In January 1997, a new Act of Parliament on personal names stated that in the event a person who has a foreign name becomes an Icelandic citizen, that person is entitled to keeping his/her name unchanged. (Lagasafn, 2005)

Table 2 below represents the beginning of the listing for the letter “J” on page 930 of the 2004 issue of the Icelandic Telephone Directory, indicating phone users in a village in the West Fiords of Iceland. While by no means typical of every page in the said book, the passage vividly illustrates the combined effect of unhindered communication between Iceland and abroad as well as the freedom of allowing people to use their own names without interference from the law. When you look at the list, which contains only two original Icelandic personal names, the transformation from the homogeneous community of old to the multicultural society of the 21st century leaps to the eye.

Table 2. Names beginning with the letter “J” in the municipality of Flateyri in the West Fiords.

| |
|----------------------------|
| Jacek Andrzej Kozlowski |
| Jakob Einar Jakobsson |
| Janine Elizabeth Long |
| Jaroslav Tomaszewski |
| Jaspís ehf |
| Jenilyn Inoc Ponce |
| Jennifer Susan Long |
| Jensína Ebba Jónsdóttir |
| Jovan Rey Malagar Calderon |
| Joy Calderon |

Source: The Icelandic Telephone Directory 2004, p. 930

Recent developments in Icelandic law with regard to personal names indicate an increasingly broad-minded attitude of the lawmaker, combined with the effect of Iceland joining the European Economic Area on 12 January 1993. But does the general population of Iceland react in a similarly tolerant manner to the transformation of Icelandic society indicated above? This will be the focus of attention in the next section.

Attitudes to Immigrants

Prejudice and generation groupings

Naturally such dramatic changes as outlined above attract the attention of researchers. At the turn of the century, in October and November 2000, two Icelandic researchers, Sigríður María Tómasdóttir and Haukur Agnarsson, undertook a study of attitudes to immigrants among the Icelandic population (Tomasdottir and Agnarsson, 2000). They divided their sample into three age groups 16-25, 34-43 and 52-61 to test the possible correlation between age and perception of immigrants. The respondents to this attitudinal study were presented with 33 questions probing their perceptions; for example how socially close to immigrants they felt comfortable (neighbour-workmate-spouse of your child) and how they saw the role and impact of immigrants in the Icelandic community.

The outcome of the research brought an unpleasant surprise as it indicated the highest level of prejudice against immigrants among the youngest age group, i.e. those aged 16-25.

To give one graphic example of response ratios, we could focus on the way immigrants are perceived in relation to Icelandic culture.

Figure 1 displays the age-correlated distribution of agreement/strong agreement to the question “Do you agree or disagree with the statement that Icelandic culture is threatened” (by the impact of immigration).

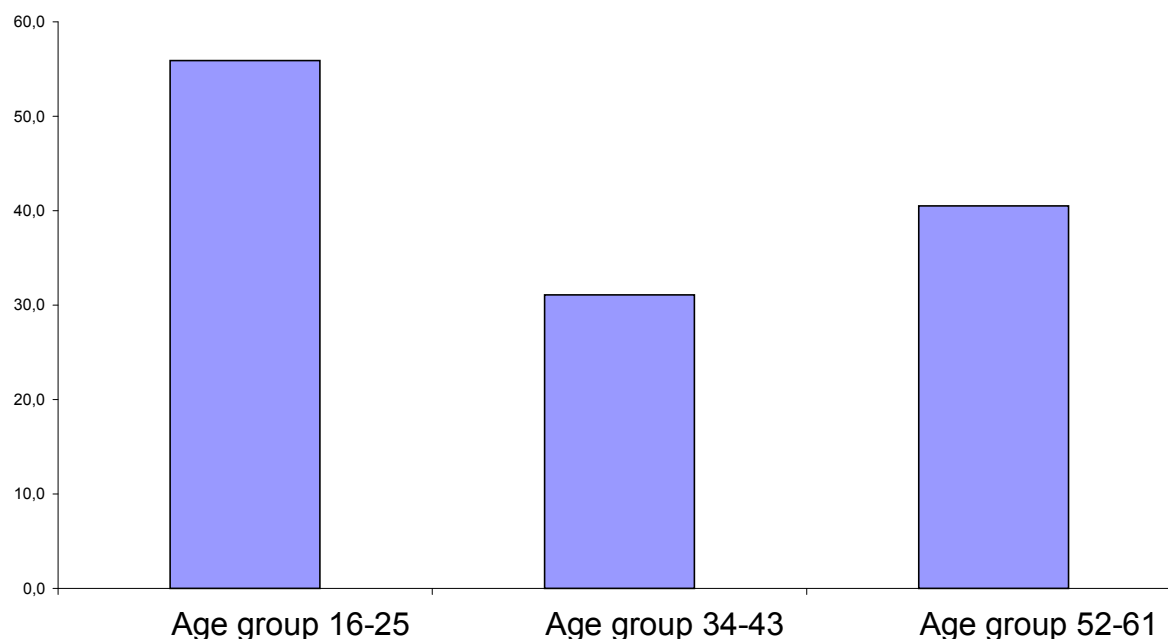


Figure 1. Icelandic culture threatened: agree/strongly agree.

Source: Tomasdottir and Agnarsson, 2000

A total of 55.9% of the youngest age group felt there was a threat to Icelandic culture as compared to 31.1% and 40.5% for the remaining two groups. In a section entitled “whose prejudice?” the researchers state the following (Tomasdottir and Agnarsson, 2000 p.17):

The research indicates that 77% of respondents regard Icelanders as prejudiced. At the same time, 89% of respondents see themselves as having little or no prejudice with regard to immigrants. Thus a large majority of the respondents feel that they belong to the small minority of Icelanders who are prejudiced only to a small degree or not at all. At the same time, the answers of many people who are “without prejudice” indicate that there are too many immigrants, that they have negative impact or that they should be kept at a suitable distance from the respondents. So whose prejudice is it? That of the small group of “unprejudiced” people, or the prejudice of the majority. (Author’s translation)

The researchers conclude that with a view to the rapid increase in immigration to Iceland in recent years, a multicultural society is in the process of formation. A steep rise in immigration can cause problems as seen by examples from other European countries. It is necessary, therefore, to take appropriate measures, e.g. by preventing the formation of separate ethnic minority groups and the congregation of immigrants in low income brackets.

The way forward is to encourage integration and help immigrants to become active participants in a multicultural Icelandic society. Finally, Sigríður María Tómasdóttir and Haukur Agnarsson emphasise the point that the attitudes of Icelanders must also be changed; both parties have to make an effort to ensure success.

Two Gallup surveys compared

IMG Gallup in Iceland carried out two surveys at an interval of five years; in 1999 and 2004 with the aim of revealing attitudes to immigrants among the Icelandic population (IMG Gallup, 2004). A comparison of those two surveys revealed an unmistakable trend towards reduced tolerance of immigrants (see Figure 2). This pattern may well indicate that the authors of the previous survey (Tomasdottir and Agnarsson, 2000) are right in their suggestion that too rapid a rise in immigration carries an inherent risk. It has also been suggested (Petursdottir, 2004) that negative attitudes showing up in the latter Gallup survey may represent an echo from September 11, an event that bolstered world-wide suspicion and xenophobia.

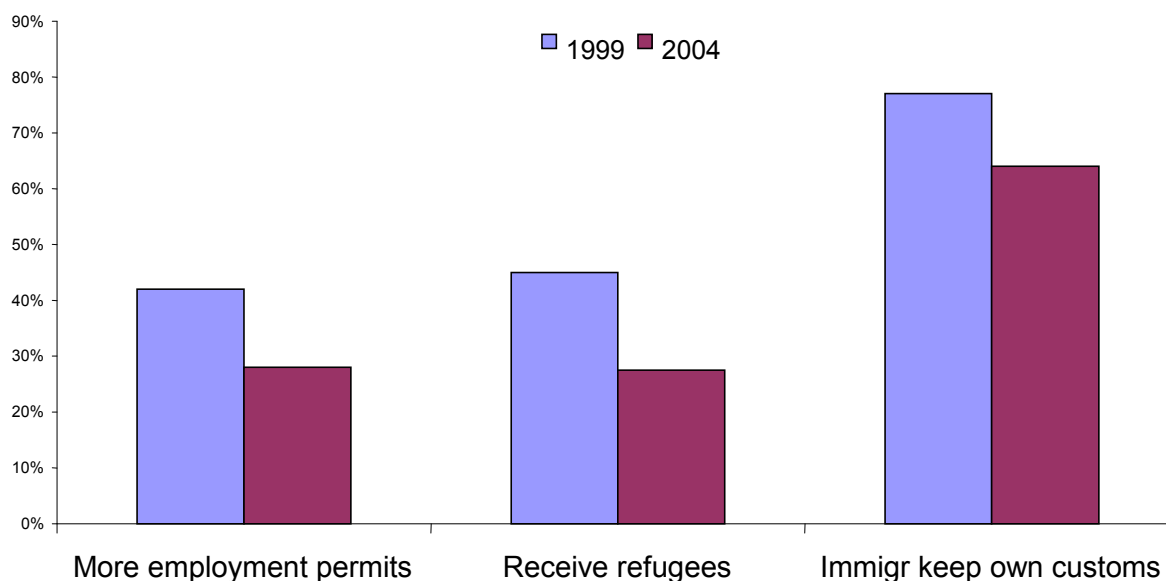


Figure 2. Developing attitudes to foreigners.

Source: IMG Gallup, 2004.

Whatever the contributing causes may be, the results of the research referred to above constitute a danger signal, warning us that Iceland, which up to now has been for the most

part free of racial strife, may be heading for troubled times in this respect. This situation should be faced, therefore, and suitable action taken.

The role of education

In this connection, it seems appropriate to look towards the education system for tackling the issue, especially with regard to the negative attitudes attributed to young people in one of the surveys above. The early years of life are the years of formation where basic values and perceptions are shaped. Schools, especially at primary level, and parents must work together to engender a mindset of tolerance in the younger generation by promoting instruction relating to different cultures and customs, demonstrating how people of unlike backgrounds and origins can adjust to one another and live together in harmony.

The renowned Dutch expert in intercultural studies and comparisons of different cultural mores, Geert Hofstede (1994), points out the hazards of the narrow-minded and suspicious attitude of regarding what is different as dangerous, which is a characteristic of the xenophobic perspective. A more tolerant mentality would see what is different as curious and interesting, even exciting, and worth studying and learning from.

Regarding people of different backgrounds as non-threatening, but interesting, because of their different values and customs, is an attitude that our education system should inculcate in the young from an early age.

In one way or other, our educational institutions lie at the root of both the good and the bad. Education influences mental processes as well as how problems are solved. I'm not referring to the content of education – because that can be changed at will – but the structure of our educational process and how it moulds our thought processes. Our educational institutions, having taken the bureaucratic road and attained such gargantuan size, have become set in concrete. They are unchangeable (Hall, 1989).

As the citation above suggests, education systems are notoriously resistant to change. This might be regarded as a paradox, since education is often purported to be the vehicle of innovation and originality. Education, however, is also representative of the Establishment which tends to favour stability and caution when facing new and untried ideas. Only when an innovation has been thoroughly tested out in the community is it seen as advisable to allow it to be presented to the younger generation as a worthy example to follow. This is of course a sensible strategy, a kind of quality control which helps to ensure that only ideas that work will be passed on to the younger generation. The downside of such a situation is that as a

result of this time-consuming quality control, education systems may hold back development. This is the cost of caution, so to speak. Many would maintain, however, that it is better to err on the side of caution and that is exactly what education systems often do.

The above considerations may be seen as particularly relevant to the state of intercultural education in school systems today. In spite of the unifying effect of the EU, with European borders fading away, the rapid advance of globalisation and international mobility, school systems have not generally developed learning syllabi in intercultural understanding and communication skills. Intercultural courses, however, could very well be combined with language study; the marriage of language and culture, so to speak. The culture content of foreign language learning in schools has traditionally been culture-specific; e.g. in French lessons you learn about France; the culture content of English lessons has related mainly to the UK and the US etc.

It should be noted, however, in defence of traditional education systems that, with the exception of Robert Lado's seminal work, *Linguistics Across Cultures*, which appeared in 1957, intercultural studies and systematic culture comparisons are a relatively recent area of academic study. With regard to publications in this field, Gubrium and Holstein (2001, p. 335), having made a review of the relevant literature, state that:

Close to 40 percent of all cross-cultural studies published to date were published in the 1980s; 75 percent were published in the 1970s and 1980s combined. The trend will undoubtedly continue in the new millennium, propelled by the globalization of capital and business and by huge leaps in cross cultural communication and negotiations.

It is reasonable to assume that growth in this discipline has gone hand in hand with a rapidly changing world, so very different from the not-so-distant era when it was a common experience to be born, brought up and, in fact, lead your entire life within the confines of the same valley or village community.

With a view to the multicultural character of the present world there is every reason to introduce general culture comparisons and the development of intercultural skills into language learning curricula. In recent years, there has been impressive progress in language instruction with the advent of the communicative approach, or communicative language teaching (CLT). Intercultural communication, however, has been left out of the picture to a large extent. This is to be regretted, because teaching culture is teaching people to communicate and should be closely associated with the latest developments in CLT. A basic

approach to culture training could, for example, introduce concepts of the following kind into language lessons: culture shock (the strain involved in moving from one culture to another); the dangers of negative stereotyping; comparison of some basic values of different cultures. Concepts of this type are important in helping people to develop an *awareness* of different cultures, leading to an *understanding* which can help a person to find the *skills* to function with more confidence and competence in a foreign culture.

There are indications, however, that, in contrast to general education systems, the business world has embraced intercultural training. Many companies emphasise the need for such skills to be encouraged and developed among their staff, especially those involved in sales and marketing. The motives are clearly pragmatic; it is easier to sell your products to people in other parts of the world if you understand their mentality; their attitudes, customs and value systems.

Training the teachers – an Austrian study

In 2000-2003 a study project focusing on intercultural communication was conducted under the auspices of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria. The project was entitled *Incorporating intercultural communicative competence in pre- and in-service language teacher training*. The participants in this study, which was co-ordinated by Ildiko Lázár, from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, came from Estonia, Hungary, Iceland and Poland (Council of Europe, 2001).

The aim of the study was to look at the role of intercultural communication in English teaching in primary and secondary schools in the countries concerned, and, especially how this related to the educational backgrounds of the participating teachers. The research combined a quantitative (a total of 393 questionnaires) and a qualitative aspect (20 in-depth interviews) with regard to intercultural teaching in the classroom. Among items focusing on intercultural communication were:

- culture shock
- negative stereotyping
- non-verbal expression of gratitude
- personal space
- appropriate ways of complaining and criticising
- rituals of greeting and leave-taking
- appropriate conversation topics

The questionnaire results indicated that less than 20% of the respondents always dealt with the culture-related subjects of differences in appropriate conversation topics, non-verbal communication and personal space in their teaching. In other words, more than 80% of the students were not learning much from their English teachers about those important issues. Instead, they would have to learn from their own personal experience, which might well take on an unpleasant, embarrassing form. It is also of particular interest to note that well below 20% of the respondents reported that they always dealt with the elementary issue of culture shock in their teaching – a topic which involves fundamental survival strategies of intercultural communication – or the dangers of negative stereotyping, to take two examples.

It is of particular interest, however, that a strong positive correlation was found between teachers having stayed abroad and, even more so, having attended intercultural training courses, and the willingness to include cultural elements in their teaching. Even short workshops or training courses appeared to make a significant difference. Thus 40-50% of teachers who had received intercultural training included some or all of the above topics in their English teaching. A prolonged stay abroad (1-2 years) yielded positive responses from 30-40% of teachers with such experience.

Figure 3 below indicates differences in positive response rates to the items above depending on whether the teacher in question had received ICT (intercultural training) or not.

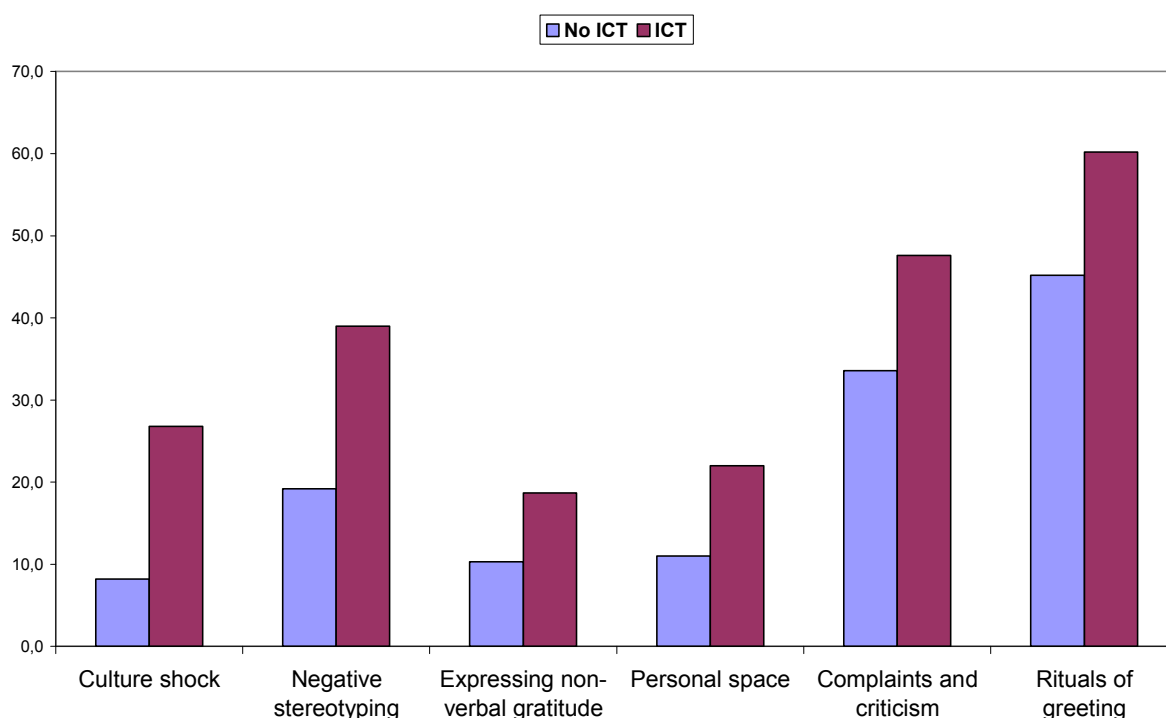


Figure 3. Teaching of cultural elements correlated to ICT training.

Source: Council of Europe, 2001

The effect of ICT training appears to come through very clearly with higher positive response rates from trained teachers with regard to every item. The relatively low columns, however, even for trained teachers, referring to the fundamental issues of culture shock and negative stereotyping might well give cause for concern as they appear to indicate that attention needs also to be directed to the content of intercultural courses.

The apparent impact of training on teachers' attitudes to intercultural communication and their willingness to introduce such elements into their courses has been clearly noted. In this regard, it was also found in the in-depth interviews that teachers who had no ICT training were more likely to justify the lack of aspects of intercultural communication in their teaching with comments like the following:

- This is not in the textbook
- There is insufficient time
- It does not feature in the examination
- It is sociology, not language teaching

The Graz study is hardly comprehensive enough to produce conclusive results with regard to the impact of teacher training. The indication is there, however, and a fairly strong one at that. The subject certainly merits further study. The surveys outlined here suggest that urgent issues are appearing in Icelandic society to which the general education system should be paying attention. The best way to begin would appear to be through improved teacher education in this field. It is of course outside the scope of this paper, but this result within a limited field of study directs our attention to the importance of teacher education in general and the beginnings of a debate on the improved and extended training of teachers in Iceland, perhaps with the introduction of a Master's degree as a required professional qualification along the lines of the Finnish model of teacher education.

In addition to the above, it should be emphasised that the need for educational change and innovation is further enhanced by globalisation and the improved opportunities for individual mobility brought about by Iceland's EEA membership. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Icelandic business expansion abroad has resulted in multifarious business contacts with other cultures and communities; changes which are highly relevant to the curricula of university business departments.

In the next part, therefore, we shall direct our attention to the status of intercultural studies at university level in Iceland, focusing both on teacher training at the Iceland University of Education and business-related university departments where growing interest has been noted in this academic discipline.

The importance of intercultural studies to business faculties has already been indicated. As shown by the Graz study outlined above, teacher education is crucial to the successful introduction of intercultural training in the general education system. Thus the introduction of studies in this field to a teacher education institution like Iceland University of Education is of high importance. This is where the teachers are given the opportunity to gain intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills which can be incorporated into their teaching at primary and secondary level. The inclusion of intercultural communication in the general educational system is urgently needed in the light of the fact that one of Europe's most homogeneous communities is, at the beginning of the 21st century, rapidly incorporating citizens from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The advance of Icelandic companies into international markets is also highly relevant here. Icelandic education has to adapt to these developments and the adaptation will have to be implemented by the teaching profession.

Intercultural education at tertiary level

The following chapter is based on a report compiled for the Leonardo project *A Cross Cultural Curriculum for European Regions and their Students* (CEReS). The project, which was formally launched in London at the end of 2004, focuses on the foreign operations of chosen companies in the participating countries; Bulgaria, England, Iceland, Poland and Sweden. An important preparatory phase of the project consists of gathering information with regard to intercultural study programmes on offer at university level in each partner country.

Listed below are the main courses and modules, currently existing or in preparation, at Icelandic universities. Furthermore, there is coverage of some training opportunities provided by the Trade Council of Iceland and non-governmental operators, such as intercultural centres. The information was gathered by means of telephone interviews and email exchanges with heads of departments, principals and lecturers, the study of university prospectuses and the scanning of web pages during the period of February to May 2005. The author's personal experience of teaching courses in Business English and Intercultural Communication at the University of Akureyri is also relevant in this respect:

The University of Akureyri

European and International Studies

For some years now, the University of Akureyri has offered courses in *European Studies* and *International Business*. Some aspects of these courses have involved cultural characteristics and culture comparisons, esp. with regard to international communication in the area of business transactions.

Business English “with an Intercultural Flavour”

Since 1997 the first year undergraduate course in Business English (6 ECTS) has contained an element of intercultural communication, using Hofstede's (1994) *Cultures and Organisations* as a basic text, for the twofold purpose of training first-year undergraduates in the reading of an extensive academic text and providing an insight into some fundamental theories regarding intercultural communication.

Intercultural Studies

This course (6 ECTS) was begun in 1999 in the Faculty of Business Administration as an optional sequel to the first year course on the basics of intercultural studies. The focus is on intercultural communication in business settings, e.g. in relation to marketing and advertising.

Bifröst School of Business

Undergraduate studies:

In undergraduate study programmes at Bifröst, two courses are in preparation that relate to intercultural studies and cross-cultural communication skills:

The two Faculties of Law and Business Administration are jointly preparing a course entitled *Negotiation Across Cultures* (4 ECTS) and is due to begin in the autumn semester of 2005. This course will be taught in English. This new course is of particular interest, since negotiating sessions are particularly at risk regarding problems of misunderstanding and misattribution.

In 2006 a new Faculty of Social Science and Economics is due to be launched. One of the courses featuring in this faculty is going to be *The Developing World – Different Cultures*, i.e. involving comparative culture studies with a focus on certain areas.

Postgraduate study towards a Master's degree:

As part of a new Master's programme which began in 2003 Bifröst offers the curriculum option of European Studies which contains two courses with a cultural focus of 5 ECTS each. These are a) *The Nations of Northern Europe*; b) *The Mediterranean Nations*. These courses may be regarded as a blend of country-specific cultural study and general culture comparison since they involve a number of European national cultures.

The Master's programme also offers the course: *Contemporary Analysis – Different Cultures* which, as the name indicates, involves cross-cultural comparison and descriptions of cultural characteristics.

The University of Iceland

A Master's Degree in International Relations

This programme begins in autumn 2005 under the auspices of the Department of Political Science. As indicated in the university prospectus, this new degree is intended to meet the growing need for specialised knowledge in international relations – a specialisation which until now has only been obtainable by study abroad.

The programme offers five different specialisations, one of which is *Intercultural Studies*. Two courses are on offer in this field:

Cultural Diversity (6 ECTS, beginning autumn 2006). This course studies the part played by culture, religion in particular, in the modern world, paying special attention to North and South America, Africa and Asia.

The Integration of Politics and Religion (6 ECTS, beginning autumn 2006).

The course deals with the integration of politics and religion with special regard to Islam in the Middle East. Special study will be made of the social structure of the Middle Eastern communities.

Other specialised fields within this Master's Programme which may be of relevance to the topic of intercultural communication are *European Studies* and *Small States: vulnerability, status and influence*.

The **undergraduate programme** of the Department of Business Administration offers a course entitled *Culture and Markets*. This is a culture-specific course and the description in the university prospectus indicates a focus on culture in a narrow sense – what is sometimes called culture with a capital C. The course deals with aspects of cultural life in Iceland, such as book publishing, music and theatre and relates these to the market. The role of culture in tourism is discussed as well as the marketing of culture in general.

Iceland University of Education

The Iceland University of Education has responded to recent developments in Icelandic society by offering two types of education relating to intercultural communication with a special emphasis on the educational setting of the primary school and its pupils. These courses, which were first on offer in 2002 are taught by distance at postgraduate level offering graduation with a diploma (Dip.Ed.) after two semesters.

A: Teaching children of immigrant families

The first type could be described as inward-looking, that is, focusing on Icelandic language and society and methods of providing immigrants with language training and helping them to adapt to Icelandic community and culture. These studies aim at preparing teachers to conduct courses on Icelandic as a second language and Icelandic culture with immigrants as a target group.

Characteristic of this approach is a course named *The School and Multicultural Society* (10ECTS).

B: General intercultural communication

The second kind of approach is externally-oriented; i.e. it deals with general cultural differences with the aim of broadening the students' perspective. There is special emphasis on intercultural aspects of education and related concepts, theories and research. The programme includes a course on religion in a multicultural society.

Reykjavik University

In autumn 2004, the School of Business at Reykjavik University launched an undergraduate programme of business-related language study. The programme was created in response to the growing need for international business skills involving specialisation in one or more foreign languages and an understanding of foreign cultures.

The programme consists of the equivalent of 150 credits in business studies and 30 ECTS in either English or Spanish. The language courses are spread over the three-year study period, with about half of them taking place abroad. At the end of the study period, the students should have obtained either the Spanish *diploma superior/básico* or *Certificate of Advanced English/Proficiency in English*.

In addition to the business and language elements, all students enrolled in the programme are required to take a course in international relations and intercultural communication skills. For, as stated in the university syllabus:

It is not sufficient for the students to have acquired a business vocabulary in a foreign language. They must also have developed an overall perspective of the culture of the society with which they are conducting business transactions. A person who is unfamiliar with a foreign culture is not likely to be successful in establishing a business relationship within that culture.

Thus it is not enough to speak good Spanish if you are unaware that:

In Spain it is impolite to take off your shoes when you enter another person's house.

It is not appropriate to say "I and my girlfriend". Instead one must refer to oneself last and say "My girlfriend and I" or else you will appear excessively self-centred. (Author's translation from the prospectus of the University of Reykjavik)

Hólar University College

Hólar is a small, recently established university college in the north of Iceland. Areas of emphasis are tourism and agricultural studies.

The Tourism Faculty already offers, or is preparing to offer, a total of six courses which include aspects relating to different cultures and customs. Two of these focus on the culinary arts and their manifestations in different cultures, a field is obviously of considerable practical value, for example when preparing international meetings and conferences.

Culture-related courses on offer at Hólar University College are as follows:

A: General cultural differences

Service and Quality (begins autumn 2005)

The ethics and psychology of service with regard to consumer behaviour; varying needs that relate to different cultures, handicaps, age or family patterns. An emphasis on the need for services to adapt to different customs and cultures.

B: Specific cultural differences (focus on culinary arts and catering)

Catering and restaurants (first year)

Here the culture related aspect deals with the reception of visitors from different countries and of varying cultural backgrounds. The students are trained in the importance of recognising cultural variation (*awareness*) to study culture-related differences pertaining to food customs and composition (*knowledge*) and to be able to put this knowledge to practical use when receiving tourists from other countries (*skills*).

Culinary arts and culture (Second year)

The main part of the course deals with cultural influences, e.g. with respect to religion and customs, with a focus on the culinary habits of nations and communities and how this impacts upon the operations of tourist services.

Intercultural workshop (in preparation)

From 2006 a regular workshop course for third year students on intercultural communication is envisaged.

C: Culture-specific studies focusing on Iceland

Tourism and Icelandic culture

The Tourism Faculty offers two additional culture-related courses. These, however, are more inward-looking, emphasising the relevance to tourism of Icelandic contemporary culture and cultural heritage. Here the focus is on the organisation and management of festivals and events, as well as folk art and souvenirs, including a discussion on the traditions of Icelandic material heritage in the context of souvenir production.

A seminar on culture and tourism focuses on the dynamic between cultures, such as the relationship of Icelandic culture to other cultures as manifested through immigration, emigration and tourism as well as cultural exchange in commerce, arts and sciences.

Iceland Trade Council (ITC)

As a result of studies conducted in co-operation with InterAct International, the Trade Council of Iceland is able to offer companies advice and assistance with regard to cross-cultural communication. Thus the *PROTOCOL I* and *PROTOCOL II* projects focused on the training of intercultural consultants, with specialist contributions from the British Chambers of Commerce, for the benefit of Icelandic companies involved in trade abroad. This training programme has subsequently been expanded in the *EURIKA* project which includes several European countries, with a special emphasis on Eastern Europe. A recent co-operative venture between Iceland Trade Council and InterAct International, the *INTERCOMM* project has resulted in the production of a CD containing material relating to intercultural communication training which companies can use on their own to assist and prepare employees involved in international business operations or preparing for a stay abroad.

Those recent projects in the area of intercultural communication have significantly strengthened the supportive and advisory role of Iceland Trade Council which can be seen as a highly serendipitous development coming at a time when the “exodus” of Icelandic companies to foreign market has reached such a level as to attract repeated international attention, cf. a recent article on the subject in the Economist (Feb. 17, 2005).

IMG Consulting

IMG is a consulting company which offers a wide variety of courses relating to business management, human relations in the workplace, marketing, salesmanship, decision-making etc. The company offers one course in intercultural communication training: *Cultural Difference in Business Operations*. This course is tailor-made for individual companies and specific markets.

According to the company’s website (IMG, 2005) this course is in response to a perceived sharp increase in demand for intercultural training among Icelandic companies in the light of expanding operations abroad. Forward-looking companies find that the tiny Icelandic market of approx. 300,000 people is quickly saturated and expansion opportunities lie in other countries. Hence the “exodus” referred to above.

As for the chief aims of the training, the company states that the training is “intended to save the employee, and therefore the company, from making expensive mistakes with regard to relations with people from other countries.”

The course begins with a needs analysis within the company in question and the training is in the form of lectures, reading materials, videos, case-studies, role-play and simulations, music, literature etc. This course, organised by a private consulting company indicates a growing need for intercultural training materials, not only for use by schools and universities, but also for private companies that are willing to respond to the needs of a rapidly growing market.

Intercultural centres

Intercultural centres are operated in three areas in Iceland: Reykjavík in the south, Akureyri in the North and Ísafjörður in the West.

The small towns and villages in the West Fiords of Iceland have seen rapidly growing immigrant populations as fish processing plants in those areas have increasingly sought employees from abroad because young local people have tended to move away to the capital area in search of more varied employment opportunities. Thus we have the familiar story of immigrants playing an important role

by filling vital jobs no longer wanted by the native population.

When accessing the website of the *Multicultural and Information Centre* in Ísafjörður, the main town of the West Fiords, its international character leaps to the eye when noting the languages in which information is offered apart from Icelandic, i.e. *Croatian, English, Polish, Serbian and Thai*.

All three multicultural information centres provide services for immigrants and publish information in a number of languages. The Reykjavik centre, operated by the Icelandic Red Cross, offers an impressive selection of 12 languages: *Albanian, Arabic, English, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croat, Spanish, Thai, and Vietnamese*. The services provided by those centres include courses, both intended for immigrants and Icelanders; e.g. on Icelandic language and culture, culture-specific information on individual countries and sessions of intercultural training.

In addition to the *Intercultural Information Centres*, there are nine *Centres of Continuing Education* around the country which offer courses in Icelandic as a second language as the need arises.

Growing intercultural needs

It is of particular interest to note the rapid growth in courses at university level that have appeared in the past 2-3 years and are in preparation for this year and the next. Most likely, the chief reasons for the energetic expansion in this area of training and education, apart from the general effect of globalisation and “Europeanisation”, relate to the influx of people from abroad and the vigorous outflow of business activities from Iceland.

It is of interest to note that the Reykjavik University prospectus (2005) cites conclusions from two international conferences held in 2003 on language studies at university level (Aarhus, Denmark and Lund, Sweden) to the effect that “the future of university language learning is brightest where it is combined with other areas of expertise, for example law or business studies” (Reykjavik University, 2005).

The above statement is particularly noteworthy in the light of recent articles in the education section of the Guardian newspaper dealing with the state of foreign language study in the British education system which, according to the newspaper, is worrying, due to lack of interest and dwindling student numbers (The Guardian, 2002). The paper points out that being a monolingual English speaker is hardly sufficient when operating in a global environment, and suggests that at present the most marketable type of degree may well be expertise in a foreign language combined with specialisation in another academic discipline. Graduates with this kind of “sandwich” degree are highly employable in the current professional environment.

Influx of people from abroad

Immigration to Iceland has increased to a significant extent in recent years, reflecting the strong trend from homogeneity to diversity in the population. A table from Statistics Iceland shows a total of 2,416 foreign nationals from 97 countries moving their domicile to Iceland during the year 2004. This figure represents 0.8 percent of the total population of Iceland of approx. 300,000 and also provides a clear indication of the diverse origin of immigrants to Iceland. The four countries that contributed the highest number of immigrants in 2004 were Portugal (520), Poland (233), Italy (164) and Denmark (324). On 31 December 2003, 10,180 foreign nationals had their domicile in Iceland, or 3.5% of the total population (Statistics Iceland 2004).

Diversity brings new perspectives and opportunities and also the challenge of adapting to new ideas, customs and values. This adaptation is twofold; the newcomers must be helped to adapt to Icelandic language and culture (culture-specific courses focusing on our language and community) and the resident population also has to face the challenge of developing broad-minded attitudes and acceptance of new ideas, values and customs that at first may seem alien and even threatening to our established way of life.

Outflow of business activities

A market of 300,000 people is quickly saturated and thus places severe restrictions on growth opportunities in business. With the recent deregulation of the financial sector, Icelandic companies have found new opportunities for expanding their activities abroad. This has led to a significant involvement in international business operations of several Icelandic companies, to a large extent in the form of mergers, takeovers, buying of stock in foreign companies and joint ventures with businesses abroad. Numerous examples of this exodus spring to mind readily; e.g. the largest Icelandic banks; Össur, a company that specialises in bionic technology; Actavis pharmaceuticals enterprise; Marel producer of high-tech food processing equipment and Avion Group which has been rapidly expanding in aviation and the general transport sector.

The trends outlined above draw attention to the need for intercultural competence with regard to company management and staff. A growing understanding of this need is now reflected in new courses and programmes in preparation within the business departments of Icelandic universities. The recent development of intercultural counselling services for companies under the auspices of the Iceland Trade Council is also a case in point.

Conclusions

It has been illustrated in this paper that rapid changes have occurred in Iceland resulting from globalisation and increased mobility as border and employment restrictions have faded away in Europe and various other parts of the world.

Recent surveys have indicated strains in Icelandic society as a result of these developments and it is suggested that the general education system needs to adjust to the new situation of the 21st century with an increased emphasis on intercultural education and training. Unlike the general education system, companies and academic business departments have already reacted to altered circumstances by the presentation and preparation of courses in intercultural communication training. The results of research under the auspices of the Council of Europe indicate that improved teacher education is the key to the introduction of intercultural communication in the general school system and the University of Teacher Education appears to be responding to this need.

Finally, it should be noted with regard to the intercultural education and training opportunities described in this paper that there are basically two distinct models on offer: Firstly, we speak of culture-specific training which focuses on the immigrant population and their need to assimilate to their adopted country; to learn its language in order to be able to function as full-fledged citizens and take advantage of all available opportunities. This training helps THEM to adjust to US. The second type of training would target the native population. It is intercultural in character and provides information relating to a broad spectrum of cultural differences, promoting an awareness of other ways of living and tolerance of what is different. This is the form of education that helps US to adapt to THEM. Both forms of intercultural education should go hand in hand for optimum results. With regard to the current situation in Iceland, social debate has appeared to focus more on the need for the first kind of culture training. There is a growing awareness, however, that the second form of education is also urgently required, as evidenced by the new and emerging university programmes described in this paper.

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