

Linguistic proficiency as cultural capital in school environments

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Abstract

The main concern of this paper is the extent to which students' expectations of first language studies reflect the idea that linguistic proficiency produces social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2008 and earlier work). The participants consisted of 14 focus groups of students in secondary schools in Iceland. Most of the students believe it is desirable to acquire fluency in reading and formal writing. In their view, however, the amount of time devoted to traditional school grammar is actually a detriment to that goal. Furthermore, the students think that success in Icelandic as a school subject depends to some extent on reading habits and language instruction at home. These views support the idea that schools tend to reward their students for knowledge and skills that are not necessarily highlighted in the classroom but which can be viewed as advantageous due to systematic cultural reproduction within families and social networks.

Keywords

cultural value, grammar teaching, Icelandic, linguistic capital, linguistic literacy

Umiejętności językowe jako kapitał kulturowy w środowisku szkolnym

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie w jakim zakresie oczekiwania uczniów w stosunku do uczenia się języka pierwszego odzwieczają przekonanie, że umiejętności językowe produkują kapitał społeczny i kulturowy (Bourdieu 2008 i wcześniejsze prace). Uczestnikami badania było 14 grup fokusowych skupiających uczniów szkół średnich z Islandii. Większość uczniów uważa, że dobrze jest osiągnąć płynność w czytaniu i posługiwaniu się formalnym językiem pisany. Ich zdaniem jednak czas poświęcany na uczenie się tradycyjnej gramatyki szkolnej stanowi przeszkodę w osiągnięciu celu. Co więcej, uczniowie są przekonani, że sukces w uczeniu się języka islandzkiego jako przedmiotu szkolnego w pewnym stopniu zależy od zwyczajów czytelniczych i języka używanego w domu. Te przekonania potwierdzają pogląd, że szkoła nagradza uczniów za wiedzę, która niekoniecznie jest wyeksponowana w klasie, ale która może być uważana za korzystną wskutek systematycznej reprodukcji kulturowej w rodzinach i sieciach społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe

język islandzki, kapitał językowy, nauczanie gramatyki, umiejętności językowe, wartość kulturowa

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how theories of language as social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977, 2008) as well as theories of linguistic proficiency as a cultural process (Gee 2004) can be utilized to understand Icelandic as a school subject and the language of learning and teaching. The purpose is to identify students' motivations and expectations towards learning Icelandic at school in a world where global English predominates, particularly with respect to the idea that learning the appropriate language gives them social and cultural value (Bourdieu

2008). We might assume, to varying degrees, that the results are also relevant for other languages and cultures.

Icelandic is a North Germanic language with a long literary tradition which, until the present time, has been relatively monolingual. However, it is a common belief that the language is less secure than in the past due to the impact of globalization and global English (see Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson 2010). The status of Icelandic in the educational system is quite strong in the sense that Icelandic is the language of learning and teaching in compulsory schools as well as in most educational programs at higher levels (*Íslenska til alls* 2009). Nevertheless, there are indications that the popularity of Icelandic as a school subject is decreasing (Sigþórsson et al. 2014: 173). Furthermore, it seems to be increasingly common for children with Icelandic as their first language to use English in their internal communication (see discussions in Jónsson and Angantýsson, forthcoming, and Sigurjónsdóttir and Rögnvaldsson, forthcoming). Thus far, young people's attitudes towards Icelandic as a school subject has been a neglected field of study and the same holds true for research on linguistic proficiency as cultural and social capital in Icelandic school environments.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a sketch of the theoretical background, research questions, data collection and methodology used. In section 3, I briefly introduce the research project that the data is derived from: *Icelandic as a school subject and language of learning and teaching*. Section 4 reports on the main patterns and themes in the students' discourse. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Background and methodology

There has been a long standing debate in the literature on the alleged most promising approaches to children's literacy (see discussions in Song 2015, Gee 2001, 2004, and Schultz 2001). For instance, traditionists focus on basic skills and direct in-

struction (Carnine 1996), while advocates of Whole Language (Goodman 1986, 1998) emphasize meaning-making and argue that learning to read is a natural process, similar to native language acquisition where no direct instruction is needed. From the perspective of generative linguistics (Chomsky 2006, 2007), the ability to acquire one's native oral language is so natural because acquiring a first language is a biological instinct like learning to walk. On the other hand, learning to read is too recent a process in human evolution to have become wired into our genetic structure. However, this does not necessarily mean that direct reading instruction is inevitable because arguably there is a third major learning process in human development, in addition to the two already mentioned (natural and instructed), namely cultural learning process (see discussions in Gee 2004).

Unlike the general and almost unexceptional ability to acquire one's native language, children's success in learning to read varies based on the kind of social and cultural environment they come from. This also applies to academic and formal language styles. Progress in this field is a cultural learning process and children's progress within the reading process varies when they first start school (Gee 2004). According to Bourdieu (1977, 2008), the linguistic habitus of those who inherit linguistic capital corresponds with demands made on the formal and public market. This correspondance is the foundation of the eloquence and confidence they possess and through which they gain symbolic power – because they speak that way. Those who have not received this inheritance and are in some way aware of that fact usually have to make an effort to adjust their language use in formal circumstances and will often appear nervous and insecure as a result. Importantly, Gee's and Bourdieu's theories entail that some students are on home ground in their school's language environment and are constantly rewarded for what they bring from home (or elsewhere), while others are on foreign ground in this environment and experience a feeling of inferiority because they neither

have the appropriate manner nor know how to play this particular game in school.

Based on these theoretical ideas, I proposed the following research questions:

- (1) a. To what extent do students' expectations of Icelandic studies reflect the idea that good writing skills and use of acknowledged and appropriate language produce social and cultural capital?
- b. How does the school respond to these students' expectations?
- c. What kind of discursive themes and patterns can be detected in the students' discourse?

Before we consider the possible answers to these questions, I will comment briefly on the materials and methods used in this part of the research project.

The qualitative approach used here falls within critical theory in which social organization that privileges some at the expense of others is exposed and deconstructed (see discussions in Bogdan & Biklen 2007). The data consists of 14 approximately 30-minute-long semi-structured group interviews with students in lower and upper secondary school (two girls and two boys picked at random in each case). Interview templates were used and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The discursive themes and patterns in the students' responses were then analysed.

The students' answers to the following questions from the interview template form the focus of my discussion:

- (2) a. Does your family read a lot? (each person replies)
- b. Are you used to comments on your language, e.g. corrections? (each person replies)
- c. If you were to explain the concept of grammar, what comes to your mind?
- d. How important do you think having good grammar is?
- e. What does it mean to have good grammar?
- f. How well do you think you know grammar?

- g. Do you feel you can apply your knowledge of grammar to analyse your own language use and to adjust it to any circumstances or correct it?
- h. Does language use matter in your group of friends? In school? Do your friends correct you when you speak? What about your teachers?

The main emphasis in this part of the interview template was on the students' cultural and linguistic environment, as well as attitudes towards grammar and its usefulness or uselessness.

The above mentioned interview questions were designed on the basis of Gee's (2004, 2005, 2008) and Bourdieu's (1977, 2008) theories. My search for discursive themes was also theoretically driven (see discussions in Grenfell and James 1998: 122–151) and the focus point regarding linguistic proficiency was the contrast between school learning and cultural learning from elsewhere (Bourdieu 1977).

3. Icelandic as a school subject and language of learning and teaching – a research project

The research project *Icelandic as a school subject and language of learning and teaching 2013-2016* was a cooperative project between the School of Education and School of Humanities at the University of Iceland and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Akureyri. Several graduate students were involved in the research together with scholars from the Faroe Islands, Norway, and Sweden, who were connected to the project at the preparation stage. Crucially, the project also involved cooperation with the 15 schools that participated. The project management consisted of seven researchers from the two Icelandic universities mentioned above (for an overview of the project, see Jónsson and Angantýsson, forthcoming).

The overall goals of the project were (i) to identify the status of the Icelandic language, both as a school subject and as

a language of teaching and learning by looking at policy making, curriculum, teaching methods and the attitudes of students, teachers and administrators, and (ii) to use the results as a foundation for experimental developments within schools and teacher education that will be supported by the research team. The project was split into five connected parts or research strands, a division which is familiar from the national curriculum in Iceland:

- (3) a. Speaking and listening
- b. Reading
- c. Literature
- d. Writing and spelling
- e. Grammar

For each strand there were defined specific goals, in addition to the general objectives given above. I will come back to the secondary goals of the grammar part.

The data came from nine lower secondary schools and five upper secondary schools and derived from field studies, interviews and analysis of pre-existing data. We also conducted preliminary tests of our research tools in one lower secondary school and one upper secondary school. The interviews varied in length according to participant category: individual supervisory and Icelandic subject teachers (50–60 min.), groups of subject teachers (30–40 min., groups of students (30–40 min.) and administrators (30–40 min.). The field notes included a general description of the classroom, i.e., the organization of tables, texts and pictures on the walls, availability of technical equipment, etc. Then there was a detailed and carefully timed narrative where the activities of the teacher and students were described in separate columns. Finally, there was a description of the lesson “in a nutshell”, including content, teaching methods and the knowledge and skills emphasized in each lesson.

In addition to the preliminary tests in one lower secondary school and one upper secondary school, the research group collected data in nine lower secondary schools and five upper

secondary schools, including 50 interviews with students, teachers and administrators, and field study data from 165 classes. In this paper, the discussion is restricted to the student interviews.

The main objectives of the grammar part of the overall research project are shown in (4):

- (4) a. To look at the curriculum of grammar used in the school as well as other resources used by teachers and students.
- b. To investigate the kind of knowledge, skills, and understanding emphasized.
- c. To identify teachers' attitudes, specifically in upper secondary schools, towards the language and their role in teaching grammar.
- d. To analyse students' attitudes towards learning grammar.

In the following discussion I am mainly concerned with the last goal and to a certain extent the second goal.

4. Patterns and themes

In this section, I present some discourse themes found in the interview data. Based on (i) the theoretical background discussed in section 2, (ii) previous research on grammar teaching in Iceland (e.g. Sigurgeirsson 1993, Sigþórsson 2008, Óladóttir 2011, Sverrisdóttir 2014), and (iii) extensive informal discussions in *Skíma* which is the journal of Icelandic subject teachers, established in 1977 (see an overview in Angantýsson 2014), I expected certain recurring themes in the students' discourse, including scepticism towards formal grammar teaching.

Let us start with the students' general ideas about grammar (translations of the transcribed interviews are given – italics is used to emphasize recurring themes):

- (5) R: If we talk about grammar for a moment, what comes to your mind when I say grammar?

- I: Just *learning about your language*.
I: *Declension* and that kind of stuff.
I: There's a *book* called Grammar.
I: *Málrækt* [Language cultivation].
I: No, that's Grammar, the yellow *book*.
...
R: Does anything else come to mind?
I: Are you talking about the *Spelling Dictionary*?
R: But does anything else come to mind, he said learning about language, you said declension, can you think of anything else?
I: *Riddles, crosswords*.

As shown in (5), most students think of (boring) books rather than specific topics when the grammar concept is mentioned. This is consistent with previous research indicating that lessons in Icelandic as a school subject tend to centre around the use of textbooks and workbooks (Sigurgeirsson 1993, Sigþórs-son 2008). Other suggestions include declensions, spelling and crosswords. Interestingly, grandmothers also play a role in this discussion:

- (6) I1: *Grammar books and my grandmothers*.
...
R: *How do you feel about these books?*
I4: *Boring*.
I3: Yes.
I1: They are *pretty uninteresting* but using grammar is good.
I3: And *books like Skerpa* and then you're just like hhh.
I2: *Oh my god!*
R: (laughs) You mentioned your *grandmother*, *why do you think of her in terms of grammar?*
I1: *Because she corrects grammar*.

Here there is a clear reference to the notion of prescriptive grammar: Corrections (in this case on the behalf of grandmothers) within the purview of grammar. This links to Óladóttir's (2011) research which shows that a prescriptive approach

is predominant in grammar books for lower secondary schools in Iceland.

The interview data reveals that some students are corrected at home while others are not; some students are corrected by their friends, some of the students correct their friends, and some teachers correct language use while others do not. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (2008) theory of variable linguistic habitus. Here are some further comments on correct and incorrect language:

- (7) I1: *My dad doesn't say anything, doesn't make any comments...*
I2: *My dad always says something when my grammar is wrong.*
I3: Use of English words in sentences ...
I4: There are like three girls that are always correcting you and you're just like whatever.

In fact, the emphasis on *right* and *wrong* in connection with the notion of grammar is dominant in the students' discourse.

Another theme, also quite central in the interviews, is the contrast between usefulness and uselessness (for an overview and discussions, see Angantýsson 2014). According to the students, the most useful aspects of Icelandic as a school subject are the following:

- (8) Writing
Reading
Reading comprehension
Speed reading techniques
Composition
Spelling
Correct grammar

As far as school grammar in the narrow and prescriptive sense is concerned, the most important issue seems to be the correct and appropriate use of language. When the students were

asked about the least useful topics in Icelandic as a school subject, they came up with answers like those in (9):

(9) *Declension.*

Word classes... and verbs and just everything.

My dad doesn't know these things (about subjects, objects...) but sometimes he has to Translate between Icelandic and English.

No need to make things more complicated.

Word classes.

I don't really see why we really have to know all the word classes.

The rules of grammar like, you know, like declension and all that shit.

Traditionally, word classes and declension of nouns and verbs have been in the foreground in Icelandic grammar teaching and it has been argued that Icelandic as a school subject suffers from an overemphasis on such formal aspects (see Blöndal 2001). These results further support the view that students in secondary schools do not find these activities particularly purposeful:

(10) R: *What about the concepts you learn in grammar, like the ones you mentioned, word classes and such – do you feel like you can use these concepts to describe the language, how someone speaks – or to analyse text or something like that? Do these concepts help in that regard?*

I1: *I don't know, I like, I don't know...*

I2: *uuuh I don't really know...*

I3: *I don't really think so.*

I1: *No.*

I3: *I could talk and read without knowing these things, I think.*

I2: *yeah...*

Regarding students' expectations, most of them believe it is desirable to acquire fluency in reading and formal writing as well as correct grammar:

- (11) I3: I think spelling and you know *I'd like to learn more and do more essays and stuff cause I know we're going to be doing that more in the future.*

In their view, however, too much time is devoted to traditional school grammar, at the cost of this goal:

- (12) I2: *Word classes.*
 I4: Yeah I don't really understand why we really have to know all the *word classes*.
 I1: Exactly.
 R: No, yeah and *is there quite a lot of time devoted to that maybe?*
 I4: *Yeah kind of ...*
 I2: Yes.
 I3: *We're pretty much only doing that now of course, you know.*

Furthermore, the students think that success in Icelandic as a school subject depends to some extent on reading habits and language instruction at home (cf. the idea of formal language acquisition as a cultural learning process):

- (13) R: *But what do you think you know, just if you think about like the classic concepts of grammar that you mentioned earlier.*
 I3: I am really good at concepts and stuff but when it comes to spelling I'm just like eeeee.
 I3: Is really bad at spelling.
 R: What about you boys?
 I1: *Well I really understand a lot what I'm learning, it doesn't take me a long time to understand when I'm learning.*
 I2: *He is pretty much the master mind in the class.*
 I3: Yeah, he's a really convenient teammate in like quizzes and ...
 R: Yes I understand, I see.
 I1: *Just because I read ...*
 R: Yes, but *do you feel like it matters how you speak at school?*
 I: Yes .

- I: Yes.
- I: Mmm, yes.
- I: Yes, you can't hurt anybody's feelings with words.
- R: Mmm but what about, *does it matter if you speak correctly* or something like that?
- I: *Yes then you get a better grade in Icelandic*, if you speak correctly.

These views support the idea that schools tend to reward their students for knowledge and skills that are not necessarily highlighted in the classroom but which can rather be viewed as advantageous due to systematic cultural reproduction within families and social networks (Bourdieu 1977). A relevant question here (unfortunately not asked in the interviews) is whether or not the students would actually appreciate more direct instruction of standard language use (see discussions in Song 2015, Delpit 2001 and Schultz 1996, 2001).

The opposing concepts in the students' discourse can be summarized as follows:

- (14) Right and wrong speech.
 Useful and useless.
 Expectations and reality.
 School learning and cultural learning from elsewhere.

Generally, the adolescents who took part in the research think it is important to acquire the legitimate and most prestigious genres of the language and avoid stigmatized variants. In their view, however, too much time is devoted to traditional school grammar, at the expense of this goal.

5. Final remarks and conclusion

The research reported in this paper investigated students' motivations and expectations towards learning Icelandic at school, with respect to the idea that learning the appropriate language gives them social and cultural value (Bourdieu,

2008). The data derived from 14 interviews conducted in nine lower secondary schools and five upper secondary schools in Iceland from 2013 to 2015. The participants consisted of 14 focus groups of students (ages 12, 15 and 18). The research shows that most interviewees have a clear idea about what they want out of Icelandic studies which is most often to become proficient in reading, writing, and the proper use of the language. In their view, however, the amount of time devoted to traditional school grammar is actually a detriment to that goal. Some students receive guidance on their grammar at home and others do not, while those that do not feel it is not a priority in Icelandic classes. Students did, however, believe that those who read a lot and have received guidance on their grammar outside of school benefit by getting better grades in Icelandic. The data indicates that the school rewards students specifically for knowledge they bring from home or elsewhere and punishes those who have not received this head start (cf. Bourdieu 1977, 2008).

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