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The University of Iceland's Ritver: Exploring the Influence of American Academics through a Global Englishes Perspective

In the fall of 2010, the School of Education at the University of Iceland opened the first writing center in Iceland. Under the leadership of Baldur Sigurðsson, the writing center, known as the Ritver (which translates “a place to write”), was developed based on a US model of peer tutoring. Since the 1980s, Sigurðsson had followed the development of writing centers in the US with interest. In 2009, he visited the University of Maryland's writing center to learn about their writing center program firsthand. About the same time, the University of Iceland faced the need to provide more support for student writing because School of Education students now needed to pursue their master's degrees in order meet the demands of their field. Thus, Sigurðsson presented a writing center as the answer.

When the Ritver opened on the School of Education campus in 2010, Sigurðsson was the only tutor, but he worked to provide peer feedback for students completing their master's theses and to develop relationships with faculty. He hoped that when additional funding became available they would be able to expand their services. Funding became available in 2012, and the first group of peer tutors was hired. With more tutors available, the Ritver was able to expand their services to providing tutoring for all types of student writing as well as developing both in-class and stand-alone workshops on a variety of topics related to student writing. At the beginning of 2014, a second writing center opened at the university's main campus within the School of Humanities, providing more opportunities for students to get help with their writing. In addition, Sigurðsson hopes to develop more support for writing instruction through a WAC or WID program in the coming years.

Through the series of interviews that I conducted with Dr. Sigurðsson and tutors Jóhanna and Sigrún, I had the opportunity to learn about the Ritver's first few years of operation. From the training tutors go through to the students and writing they see, I was surprised by just how similar the work we are doing is. While reading over the training syllabus, reviewing the Ritver's website, and talking with Sigurðsson and the tutors, I tried to see what is uniquely Icelandic about this writing center, but I have struggled to identify how the culture of Iceland shapes the work of the writing center.

It is this surprising similarity between the Ritver and US writing centers that I intend to use in order to explore how the study of Global Englishes can be used to understand not only the spread of English but also the spread of American academic programs. To do so, I will first provide a few examples of the influence of the English language and American academics on the work of scholars and programs in several countries around the world. From there, we will discuss Global Englishes as a lens for understanding these influences. We will then examine the Ritver at the University of

Iceland to see how some of these influences are playing out both in the programs of the university and in the development of the Ritver. Finally, I will examine these influences at the Ritver through the Global Englishes lens, noting what we can learn from sites like the Ritver and pointing out areas for further investigation.

Growing Influence: English and American Academia

The spread of English around the globe has been a source of interest and concern for linguists for the past few decades. With the growth of international communication through new forms of technology, the spread of English moved beyond Great Britain and her former colonies to become an international language. The United States became the primary driving force behind this spread after the First and Second World War as the economic benefits for speaking English increased (Crystal 74; Phillipson 152-165).

Within the academy, the prevalence of English has provided the opportunity to reach a much broader audience and has threatened the academic viability of other languages. The issue of publication has been investigated in several studies, particularly in relation to the pressure to publish one's work in English and the benefits and challenges of being a multilingual scholar. Désirée Motta-Roth describes this pressure within the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM) in Brazil. She states that despite the fact that "Brazil has an established tradition of publication in Portuguese and of translation of international material into Portuguese, UFSM departments tend to encourage reading of material in English or other languages..., as a way to keep updated with international research" (106). However, she also notes that the choice of languages varies department to department. In the department of Applied Linguistics, where publishing in English is often essential to advancement, "publishing in Portuguese is sometimes an affirmative action" (107). One scholar noted that "it's a one-way street. Almost no foreign research makes an effort to know what is being done in Brazil (...), while we are supposed to know what's going on in foreign countries (like US or UK)" (107). Because of their insistence on making their work accessible to their local community, they remain unknown in the international academic community.

Another option for scholars is to publish in multiple languages, a choice made by several scholars who took part in a study by Mary Jane Curry and Theresa Lillis. In their work with sixteen scholars from Slovakia, Hungary, and Spain where English is a foreign language, they examined the different communities that each scholar wrote for (national or international; academic or applied; L1, English, or other languages). A total of seven different communities were identified, each with a unique combination of the three identifying factors (Curry and Lillis 671-774). Curry and Lillis then evaluated the incentives and rewards of publishing within each of these communities. Finally, through three specific cases, they examined how scholars choose to negotiate these demands in order to maintain their position within the field. They found that "[s]cholars who are working outside of English-dominant contexts seem to be under increasing pressure to publish in the medium of English, and such pressure is sustained through rewards systems that directly and indirectly place a high premium on English-medium publications" (680). The scholars in this study, however, also shared a desire to publish in their native language or another national language despite the fact that these types of publications are not as highly valued within rewards systems.

While the studies above have problematized and even questioned the influence of English on international academic communities, other scholars have championed the spread of academic fields related to the teaching of English. Liz Hamp-Lyons states that "...US writing assessment researchers need to engage...with other national or regional writing assessment initiatives, to

provide cutting-edge advice and learn from their international colleagues” (356). Throughout her article, she notes the problems of writing assessment programs around the world and calls on her US colleagues to provide the answers to these problems. Her desire to see US scholars share their knowledge, while potentially valuable, seems to promote exporting our models to cultural contexts where they may not fit.

One example of such an exportation in a writing center context is the Writing Hub at the University of Sydney in Australia. The Writing Hub which houses both the writing center and writing program at the University of Sydney draws almost exclusively on rhetoric as the basis for their writing program despite the fact that Australian composition studies heavily emphasizes genre theory. Director Susan Thomas attributes this focus to her training in the US. Bridget Wagner who is studying the Writing Hub notes that it has been difficult to determine what is Australian about this writing program. Instead, Wagner notes that the program seems to be a transplant of a US writing program which may or may not be meeting the goals and needs of the culture surrounding it.

As more people strive for the opportunity to learn English, the spread of American academic models related to the teaching of language is likely to follow, and it is evident from the studies noted above that both are influencing international academic communities. Scholars and students are having to choose (or perhaps have no choice in) the ways they will interact with and use English. This then leads us to consider how Global Englishes might help us understand how these programs can meet the needs of their local cultural context.

Global Englishes as a Lens

The field of Global Englishes studies the ways that English is adapted for local uses around the world. Braj B. Kachru introduced a model of three concentric circles to understand the influence of English. The Inner Circle is made up of countries like the US and UK which are “norm-providing” in that they often define the acceptable use of English in other countries. The Outer (second) Circle includes countries where English holds an official position and is considered a second language. These countries are “norm-developing,” meaning that they are establishing their own norms of acceptable use. Finally, the Expanding (third) Circle includes countries where English holds no official position but is often studied as a foreign language. These countries are “norm-dependent” because they rely on Inner Circle norms for usage (Jenkins 18-20).

Scholars in Global Englishes hope to shift these norms away from Inner Circle countries and to empower varieties of English. Because of English’s international status, alteration to the language within local cultural contexts is inevitable. Thus, scholars who promote a Global Englishes perspective encourage local adaptations of the language in order to serve the purposes of the speaker’s culture. A. Suresh Canagarajah connects the study of World Englishes to composition studies and calls for composition studies to move toward a multilingual model of writing, providing several examples of what this might look like in practice. He presents strategies such as code-meshing that validate varieties of English in the classroom.

The concept of adaptability that Global English promotes is particularly intriguing in relation to educational program models. A model that is exported to another cultural context but never adapted to the needs of that context may fail to meet those needs. Just as Canagarajah demonstrates how the teaching of writing should be adapted to serve the local context (specifically the linguistic context) of the culture, so writing centers should be adapted to serve new contexts as well.

Case in Point: The University of Iceland's Ritver

In the previous sections, I have attempted to demonstrate the influence of the English language and American academic programs on scholars and academic studies around the world. In addition, I have introduced the concept of Global Englishes as a possible lens for understanding these influences and a model for adapting academic programs. The Ritver at the University of Iceland serves as a specific case of these growing influences that we can use to more closely examine these issues through a Global Englishes perspective.

The national context of the university demonstrates the influence of English. Almost all Icelanders speak Icelandic, English, and Danish or another Nordic language. In fact, according to the Compulsory School Act, "Pupils in the first semester of 10th grade shall undergo national examinations in Icelandic, mathematics and English" (Ministry of Education 16). This expectation of proficiency is carried into the university as well. At the University of Iceland, the primary language of instruction is Icelandic, but according to the admission criteria, international students "whose native language is not English, may need to proof [sic] their English proficiency by submitting TOEFL or IELTS scores" ("Admission Requirements"). In addition, students within the School of Education must be prepared to read and write about academic articles in English. In the tutor training course taught by Dr. Sigurðsson, for example, students read multiple English texts and online resources primarily written in the US.

The influence of American education can also be seen in the requirement that students within the School of Education use the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide for citing sources. This requirement has been one of the major concerns that students bring to the tutors at the Ritver, leading the tutors to develop an online APA resource in Icelandic. According to Sigurðsson, the website, created in 2013 by tutor Sigrún, now receives 1000 hits per week and has been a great resource for students and faculty alike.

The influence of American academics is evident at the level of the writing center as well. As mentioned before, the Ritver is modeled after US writing centers in many ways. The peer tutoring model commonly seen in the US which encourages a non-directive approach to tutoring and draws on a process model of writing has seemed to transfer easily to the context of the University of Iceland. And while tutors at the Ritver initially struggle to help students understand the goals and purpose of this form of tutoring, their struggles are not unfamiliar to peer writing tutors in the US. Indeed, as I interviewed tutors Sigrún and Jóhanna, I could easily relate to their frustrations with how the writing center is misunderstood by both students and teachers. I also understood the excitement of working with a student who "gets it" and embraces the work that the peer writing tutor does.

In an effort to get beyond these surface similarities, I asked Sigurðsson, Jóhanna, and Sigrún about their perception of institutional and faculty support. According to Sigurðsson, the institution greatly supports the work of the Ritver, demonstrated for example by the allowance of the tutor training course to continue despite low enrollment. He also pointed out that partnerships with several faculty members had resulted in special projects and in-class workshops to facilitate student writing and learning. Yet he also noted (along with Sigrún) that in general it seemed that writing was not highly valued by faculty. Sigrún felt that grades were often inflated when students could be asked for higher quality work, and Sigurðsson noted that faculty could be more "ambitious" with the assignments they gave to students but that many were not trained in writing and felt unqualified. Many instructors also don't see the purpose of sending students to the Ritver with smaller course assignments despite the fact that peer tutoring typically strengthens not only the written product

but also the student's learning. In some ways, this perhaps demonstrates a lack of emphasis on revision among instructors, but more information would be needed to make such a claim.

In many ways, this situation resembles the position of composition at the beginning of the WAC movement. Institutional support was not uncommon at the beginning of WAC programs in many US schools, and faculty push-back or uncertainty were also common problems (Russell 23-34). We have also seen this situation in several of the institutional profiles featured in Christopher Thaiss's *Writing Program Worldwide* and in the sites studied in this course. Sigurðsson hopes that he will be able to pursue a WAC program in the coming years in order to improve writing instruction at the university.

In continuing my study of the Ritver, I also interviewed Sigurðsson, Jóhanna, and Sigrún about the training course for tutors. Sigurðsson provided a syllabus of the course and discussed the three module structure: preparatory, vocational training, and research and reflection. The three modules corresponded to my training experience as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan-Flint's Marian E. Wright Writing Center and as a graduate at DePaul's University Center for Writing-based Learning. In some cases, I had even read the same texts. One text unique to the course was a selection of essays in which writers discussed the experience of writing. This text, written in Icelandic, was used to demonstrate the variety of ways in which writers approach the act of writing.

The development and growth of the program at the Ritver in many ways mirrors the development and growth of programs in the US, and the influence of US writing studies is clear because Sigurðsson has chosen this model for the Ritver. In the next section, we will further explore the implications of these influences and discuss the benefits and challenges that they present to both the Ritver and other programs like it.

Discussion

The influence of the English language and American writing studies within the Ritver is obvious on the surface, but this influence also raises several questions. Does the use of English in classes impose certain values or hinder the academic prestige of students' native languages or the national language? Does exporting US writing studies to other cultures cause problems for the receiving culture? And finally, how can a Global Englishes perspective help us better understand these influences?

The problems and concerns associated with the spread of English are in some ways being combated by the choices of the Icelandic Ministry of Education. The fact that their language is preserved as the primary language of instruction emphasizes its importance, and by also requiring English, they empower their students to be multilingual in a world that more and more requires cross-cultural communication. In addition, students write in Icelandic, meaning that they are contributing to their national academic community. This may mean that they face the same problem as the aforementioned linguists of Brazil in that their work may be relatively unknown by international communities, but within the School of Education, it makes their research accessible to those who are most invested in it.

In answer to our second question, Sigurðsson felt that the model of the writing center was easily imported into their context. Instead of being detrimental to the culture, it has revealed areas where writing studies can grow in Iceland and provide more support to students. While this perspective may change as the program continues to grow, it seems that no negative effects or cultural challenges have been noticed by Sigurðsson, the tutors, or the students they work with.

As the program grows, Global Englishes might serve as an analogy for the potential value of using a US academic model in another context. Because a Global Englishes perspective does not limit the “appropriate” use of English to those within the Inner Circle, it emphasizes the need for new cultures to adapt English to their own purposes and to take ownership. I believe that the exporting/importing of academic models can be viewed in a similar way. And while I am skeptical of the beneficent Westerner providing the answers to all the problems of the world, I do think that academic models can serve as just that—models by which other academic communities can begin to support their students’ writing. But it must be a flexible model. It must be taken and shaped to meet the needs of the culture it serves. This is where new writing centers such as the Ritver are. They have taken the model used in the US and implemented it in a new context. As they continue to grow their program and discover the needs of both faculty and students, they may find that they need to adapt their program to better serve the culture.

Sigurðsson and the tutors of the Ritver are also beginning to build the foundation for an Icelandic writing center community that can study and address the local context. First, their creation of an APA resource in Icelandic adapts this American model to the new context and makes it accessible for students. Second, Sigurðsson and Jóhanna are engaging in research within their writing center and beginning to build a uniquely Icelandic writing center literature. Sigurðsson has written and published on the Ritver and has maintained statistics on the use and success of the Ritver from early on. Jóhanna is developing her master’s thesis research within the Ritver in hopes of assessing her own work as a tutor. Sigurðsson also hopes to incorporate more research into the training course so that tutors view writing centers as a field of study. As they write and do research within this context, they develop a literature unique to the Ritver and Iceland which in turn “makes it their own.”

Conclusion

It may be that the problems students face in writing are somewhat universal. My very limited ability to compare my experience as a peer writing tutor to that of a few tutors in Iceland is insufficient to understand how global these problems might be. However, as we’ve explored sites from a variety of countries in this class, we have found similar concerns and needs. We have also found cultures shaping the idea of the writing center to suit their own purposes, and while I think it is valuable to problematize this exportation of an American model, I think understanding it the way we understand Global Englishes can help us appreciate its usefulness and will hopefully make such cultural exchanges a two-way street.

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