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Challenges facing Gnöbe English Teaching Majors: An Exploration of the Quinquennial Plan for the Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract
In this paper, we scrutinize the extent to which authorities and professors from the Coto Campus, Brunca Extension, have orchestrated efforts to ensure the successful implementation of the Quinquennial Plan for the Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica (QPIP). We focus on examining the experiences of three Gnöbe students enrolled in the B.A. in English Teaching offered at the Coto Campus and on analyzing the perceptions of professors and the administration regarding the implementation of the QPIP. Data collected by means of interviews, questionnaires and focus groups suggest that the objectives of the QPIP have been only partially met and that further efforts are needed to ensure its successful implementation. We finish this paper by translating the students', professors' and administration's concerns into concrete suggestions geared towards securing the success of the QPIP.

Keywords: equity, justice, indigenous education, EFL, assimilationist approaches

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Resumen

En este estudio, examinamos los esfuerzos que las autoridades y profesores del Campus Coto, Sede Regional Brunca, han realizado para la implementación exitosa del Plan Quinquenal para los Pueblos Indígenas de Costa Rica (PQPI). Nos enfocamos en analizar las experiencias de los estudiantes Gnöbe matriculados en el Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés y las percepciones de profesores y la administración respecto a la implementación del PQPI. Los datos recolectados por medio de entrevistas, cuestionarios y grupos focales sugieren que los objetivos del PQPI han sido parcialmente alcanzados y que más esfuerzos se deben realizar para asegurar su implementación exitosa. Concluimos con una serie de recomendaciones, las cuales surgieron a partir de las preocupaciones expresadas por los participantes de este estudio.

Palabras clave: equidad, justicia, educación indígena, EFL, enfoques asimilacionistas

Introduction

Geared towards the democratization of higher education, a coalition of the four government-run public universities (UNA, UCR, UNED and ITCR) was formed to design the Quinquennial Plan for the Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica (QPIP), to better cater to the educational needs of these historically marginalized populations. This plan, orchestrated by representatives of the four universities in collaboration with members of the 24 indigenous territories in the country, was built upon three interrelated objectives: providing indigenous students with access to higher education, securing their retention up until successful completion of their majors, and addressing their educational needs in culturally relevant ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. As a consequence of this plan, Universidad Nacional, Coto Campus, has experienced an increase in the enrollment of Gnöbe and *Térraba* students, some of whom major in the B. A. in English Teaching. Right from the start, however, these students face major challenges causing them to fail courses, fall behind in their studies, and even drop out.

Against this back drop, we resolved to engage in dialogue with three Gnöbe first-year students about their experiences as English Teaching majors at Universidad Nacional—Coto Campus—as well as with their *Inglés Integrado I* instructors and the Vice-dean (administrator of the QPIP) of this UNA branch. Such dialogue provided a glimpse into the successes and pending challenges of QPIP. By means of interviews, a survey, and focus groups conducted with the students, instructors and one administrator, we collected information about the actions that the English Department has taken to meet the educational needs of the target population and about the extent to which these actions have helped accomplish the objectives of access, retention and cultural relevance established for the QPIP. At the end of this paper,

the voices of the research subjects are translated into concrete suggestions so that the English Department can continue to work towards the goals of the QPIP; and thus, secure these students' success in their studies.

Theoretical Considerations

We start this section by briefly summarizing the international laws, bills, and decrees that serve as frameworks for worldwide projects related to indigenous peoples' rights. Subsequently, we survey the work that has been done in Australia and Canada in the direction of indigenous peoples' right to access to education. Additionally, we provide a historical account of bills passed and projects executed in Costa Rica, at the government level, to safeguard and improve the living conditions of these marginalized and minoritized populations. We finish by recounting the development of the Quinquennial Plan for Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica to provide a clear picture of the panorama in which we conducted this study.

Indigenous Students in Higher Education: the Case of Australia and Canada

In Australia, indigenous peoples have traditionally been the most socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged cohort; reason why various agencies have created programs to increase their participation in education, especially at the tertiary level. Notwithstanding these often-fragmented efforts, Australian Aboriginals are still underrepresented and their educational needs and aspirations remain largely unmet (Malin & Maidment, 2001; Aseron, Wilde, Miller & Kelly, 2013). In light of the above, Aseron et al. delved into an investigation around the challenges hindering indigenous peoples' participation in higher education to shed light on future strategic actions and policy-making initiatives at the tertiary level of education.

Driven by their desire to problematize the current deficit view of indigenous peoples' under-representation in Australian universities, Aseron et al. conducted focus group discussions with 50 indigenous participants, in which they identified two major themes. First, indigenous peoples feel apprehension towards pursuing university studies, given that universities can be alienating and uncomfortable. Many feel that the university is still unable to provide consistent engagement activities for indigenous students and that campuses have a low rate of recruitment of indigenous students and staff. Secondly, there are conflicting ideas about what comprises education, for the knowledge imparted in class is created and taught by non-indigenous individuals and does not include Australian Aboriginals' viewpoints of their cultural history. This, they assert, is a call for higher education institutions to bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. By and large, aboriginal students' dissatisfaction with the above has an impact on their decision as to whether or not to continue their studies (Morgan, 2001).

Likewise, indigenous peoples find themselves in a problematic position in the Canadian society, which has created multiple barriers to their participation and success in higher education. In the Canadian case, the success of indigenous peoples in post-secondary

education will not be possible unless all the scope of barriers are factored in. Still today, unfortunately, indigenous peoples have a sense of distrust towards higher education due to the assimilationist and alienating policies of previous decades. Further, low academic preparation at the secondary level appears to be another factor affecting their participation and success in tertiary education, coupled with lack of indigenous role models who have successfully completed higher education studies. Some indigenous students even report that they still see the university as a hostile site of potential discrimination where their culture, traditions, and values are not recognized. That is, the university world is substantially different from the aboriginal world, which dissuades them from even attempting to enroll. This is worsened by the low percentage of indigenous staff on campuses who could serve as role models, mentors, and advisors to indigenous students (R. A. Malatest and Associates Ltd, 2004).

In this regard, Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, and Muir sustain that "although contemporary Canadians are not responsible for the past abuses perpetrated in the name of the crown, they are now responsible for how they choose to act to change these realities." (2010, p. 330) They also state that the education of aboriginal Ontario citizens is in a crisis stemming from underfunding, deplorable infrastructures, shortages of qualified indigenous and non-indigenous teachers, community disconnectedness, and a curriculum that is not culturally relevant to the aboriginal peoples, all of which combine to double the dropout rate in comparison to that of non-aboriginal students. These last two factors are alarming, given that they result in an approach to education that does not reflect the epistemic heritage, values and beliefs at the core of the indigenous communities (pp. 331-333).

All in all, it seems that the cases of Australia and Canada all coincide in that there is lack of dialogue between universities and the indigenous communities which they serve and in that indigenous education initiatives continue to be assimilationist and paternalistic. No matter the number of initiatives government agencies put into operation, if these continue to expect indigenous students to assimilate into the mainstream culture and to fail to include their cultural perspectives and educational needs and aspirations, indigenous students' participation, and success in higher education will continue to be low.

EFL Teaching to Indigenous Students: the Case of Colombia and Panamá

Before explaining the specifics of the QPIP, we refer to the experiences of indigenous students in three EFL programs. It comes as no surprise that indigenous peoples face even more hardships in academic programs that require that they add a third language and culture to their repertoires. As these students struggle to survive the ambivalence of having to navigate between their native language and culture and those of the university (Spanish), they undergo excruciating amounts of pressure to communicate in another language that brings along yet another culture. More often than not, this complicates the landscape even more.

Lagos Romo (2013) reflected upon the role of multiculturality in English teaching at Normal Superior de Putumayo (NSP), Colombia, where more than 50% of students belong to two indigenous groups with a strong desire to preserve their native language/culture. This strong sense of identity has forced teachers to diversify their practices to find common ground in the classroom, and orchestrate intercultural practices that motivate students in the learning/use of a third language. The author hinted that teachers at NSP have succeeded and concluded that the key to enhance teaching and learning under these circumstances is to intertwine culture, language, and communication. In so doing, the Significant and Semantic Communicative Approach has proven to be effective, for it articulates social interchange, written/oral communication, meaningful experiences, and language functions in the mediation of classroom activities at NSP (pp. 309-311). The author also suggested that the learning of English would not have been successful if such views of language teaching in an intercultural context had not been coupled with the teacher's disposition to execute suitable pedagogic strategies and ludic practices (Lagos Romo, 2013, p. 320).

An exploratory study conducted with Gunas, Ngäbe, and Emberà students at the University of the Americas in Panamá also sheds light on the complications indigenous people face in EFL programs (Tamayo, 2011). The purpose of the study was to determine the variables that come into play in these indigenous students' learning of English. The author reported that forty-four percent of the students stated to be afraid of participating orally in English despite having a positive concept of their instructor. Students were also apprehensive about Spanish or native language interference, as well as about the lack of resources to be in contact with English, such as the Internet or dictionaries. This author concluded that, from an intercultural perspective, English teaching should reinforce values, beliefs, and identity for language learning to take place and be boosted, which can be done by incorporating interculturally-oriented didactic strategies in a curriculum that connects language teaching to the folktales, legends, and short stories with which students can feel culturally connected.

We cannot downplay the efforts made to ensure equal access to education and the learning of foreign languages to indigenous students in other countries. The examples previously described make it clear that Colombia and Panamá are working toward a more inclusive curricular structure in EFL teaching, at the heart of which lie interculturally-oriented didactic strategies, diversified and contextualized teaching and learning practices, and a well-articulated blend of culture, language, and communication. These efforts exerted by the Colombian and Panamanian governments serve as a lens through which to look at what is going on with indigenous peoples in Costa Rica and their access to EFL education at the tertiary level. According to the State of Education (2015), only 14% of indigenous students whose ages range from 18 to 24 attend the university (p. 200). Given such poor indicators, four out of the five Costa Rican public universities devised the QPIP, which will be fully explained in the next section.

Indigenous Peoples' Participation in Education in Costa Rica and the QPIP at UNA

With respect to education policies, Costa Rica has made political efforts to pay off the debt with its originative peoples. Guevara Berger (2000) pointed out a series of actions taken by the Costa Rican government to comply with the indigenous rights agenda to which it is ascribed through international treaties. In the beginning, the country embraced convention 107 by the International Labor Organization in the Indigenous Law endorsed in 1977. This legislation advocated for the access to education in the public sector. In the 1980s, the Indigenous Education Counseling promoted the decree 16619-MEP, which recognized the bilingual and multicultural context of the groups living in these territories. More recently, in the 1990s, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) created the Indigenous Education Department to both promote bilingual education and carry out a more needs-oriented curricular contextualization (p. 34). Two decades later, in 2011, this dependency changed its name to Department of Intercultural Education, keeping the same functions. At last, by 2013, executive decree 37801-MEP established a new structure for indigenous communities to participate in the designation of teachers for these territories (Guevara-Víquez, Nercis-Sánchez & Ovares-Barquero, 2015, p. 321). Despite such achievements, many aspects have been left aside to bridge the existing achievement gaps that indigenous students experience in Costa Rica. In general terms, Guevara Berger (2000) reported that elementary and high school students living in these territories face inconveniences regarding school infrastructure, didactic materials, bilingual education, geographical distance, access, funding, and professional development (pp. 71-72).

Safeguarded by the laws and decrees to which the country circumscribes, indigenous peoples have questioned the assimilationist and excluding practices of educational institutions nationwide and claimed that little access to information, poor financial standing, and cultural discrimination have hindered their participation in higher education. Against this backdrop, authorities from the four government-funded universities at the moment agreed to design a plan, in collaboration with representatives from the indigenous territories of the country, to warrant higher participation of the latter in higher education. This Quinquennial Plan for Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica was elaborated upon the Framework for Planning for Indigenous Peoples and bore the following objectives: providing indigenous students with access to higher education, securing their retention up until successful completion of their majors, and addressing their educational needs in culturally relevant ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. Even though this plan was devised by the four universities, it has been executed differently in each university in response to the particularities of each institution.

Grounded on this QPIP, the UNA, Brunca Extension, envisioned a better future for indigenous students and embraced the QPIP to guarantee the admission of this population to the university. Jiménez and Robles (2015)

delineated distinct actions followed by this regional entity to begin with the aforementioned plan in 2015. The university approved a quota of 17 students distributed in the two campuses of the Brunca Extension, 12 of whom were placed at Coto Campus and 5 at Pérez Zeledón Campus. The university also requested the support from the Academic Vice-president's Office to give shape to a complete proposal that could assist indigenous students in their endeavors to cope with the academic demands of their careers and their initiation in college. In the same vein, the Vice-president's Office for Student Life was petitioned to allocate budget and scholarships to the students included in the plan (p. 6).

Jiménez and Robles highlighted that such initiatives started their implementation as planned. Sixty-two students from originative peoples were summoned to a meeting in the county of Buenos Aires, where the requirements to be part of the plan were explained: ID card, high school diploma, a letter certifying membership to an indigenous territory, and an essay about their indigenous life and academic goals. At the end of this process, 14 students were selected and granted the aforementioned benefits. They received an induction session at which career advisory was provided. The university paid for their housing near campus, offered full-scholarships, and made the Academic Success Program available for students struggling with academic work. Likewise, professors were to give personalized attention to these students (pp. 7-8). Since the beginning of the QPIP, unfortunately, 100% of the Gnöbe students have failed *Inglés Integrado I*. Some have retaken the course multiple times and failed again and again, without professors or the administrator taking action to alleviate or remedy this down-hearting situation.

Methodology

The motivation to conduct this study arose from informal conversations between researcher one and researcher two about the hardships facing Gnöbe university students majoring in the B. A. in English Teaching at UNA, Coto Campus. Overwhelmed by frustration and driven by a sense of advocacy, both researchers started reading about government-run initiatives to safeguard the access to and success in higher education of the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica and the legal framework protecting indigenous students enrolled at Coto Campus. This pushed both to document the experiences of the target population, which for this particular study was three first-year Gnöbe students majoring in English Teaching.

The Setting and Context

UNA, Coto Campus, is located in the county of Corredores, Puntarenas (Costa Rica) and was formally created as an academic unit in 2004, as part of the Brunca Extension. By 2017, the university projected itself to the region through B.A. programs in business administration, systems engineering, international business and commerce, and English teaching. The latter opened at Coto Campus in 2011 after both the Brunca Extension and the School of Literature and Language Sciences authorized its functioning.

The number of students and professors in the major has steadily gone up since its creation on this campus, with nearly 90 active students enrolled by January 2017 and ten English professors working for the English Department; nine of whom teach in the B. A. in English Teaching.

This region is well-known for having people from different ethnic groups, being the Gnöbe community the most conspicuous among the minorities. Youth in Gnöbe territories, unfortunately, face an array of challenges since elementary school because its infrastructure is in poor conditions. Likewise, there is a lack of qualified teachers in the communities. As a matter of fact, many students finishing high school are asked to work as teachers upon graduation and some college indigenous students are proposed to abandon their higher education studies to take a vacant position at a MEP Gnöbe institution. Most Gnöbes live in poverty and do not have any financial assistance to purchase textbooks and materials to successfully complete their education. Additionally, they voice a great deal of concern regarding their identity and native language loss. Students in the QPIP enter the university system with the aforementioned background, which eventually has negative consequences when they take the course *Inglés Integrado I* at the start of the major. Researcher two has previously imparted the course to students of this population and has frustratedly observed how most fail or drop out of the course.

The Participants

For the year 2017, three Gnöbe students were admitted to the B. A. program in English Teaching: two females and one male. Their ages ranged from 20 to 46; the oldest participant (male) already had a child and had been some years prior to college out of school, whereas the two female participants had graduated from high school in recent years. One of the females had a child, and the other was pregnant at the moment the study was being conducted. Regarding the oral language competence of these three indigenous, the professors assigned for *Inglés Integrado 1* reported in an informal interview with researcher 1 that 2 students were able to communicate in Spanish, whereas the other still struggled organizing his ideas and displayed some limitations in terms of grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, the three students showed a poor performance in their Spanish written expression. Additionally, their professors of *Inglés Integrado I* affirmed that only 1 of them could properly organize basic chunks in English and effectively transmit the meaning of the language through her speaking and writing skills.

The instructors and the Vice-Dean also played a paramount role as participants of this study. By 2017, both instructor 1 and instructor 2 held a B. A. in English Teaching. Instructor 1 also held a licentiate's degree in education from Universidad San Marcos, concluded another licentiate's program in applied linguistics at UNA (graduation pending), and was a student of the Master's in School Management at Universidad Metropolitana Castro Carazo. Her three years of experience imparting *Inglés Integrado 1* and other courses in the Bachelor's in English Teaching at UNA allowed her to voice her concerns about the QPIP student's

academic failure in that course during the last 3 years. With respect to instructor 2, he also graduated from a Master's in School Management with a Concentration in Leadership at UNA and started working for UNA, Coto Campus, in 2017. He has been known for his activist role in favor of the most underrepresented groups of the Brunca region. The administrative participant took office in 2014; she had previously been the coordinator of the English Department at UNA, Campus Coto, and a co-developer of the project CI-UNA. In her academic achievements, we can highlight her Master's in Second Languages and Cultures from UNA and her Master's in School Management from Universidad San Isidro Labrador. She has been the chief in charge of running the QPIP in the Brunca Extension of the UNA.

Data Collection Instruments

Throughout the course of 2017, we conducted an initial interview, applied a questionnaire, and held follow-up focus-group discussions with the three Gnöbe students enrolled in the English teaching major. We resolved to use these types of data collection tools, as the interaction among participants at different points in times allowed for clarification and explanation of key issues affecting their success and added to the richness of the data. Guiding questions in the interview and focus group were open and revolved around the objectives of the QPIP and the educational goals/aspirations of the students. Further, we held semi-structured interviews with the professors of the Gnöbe students and Vice-dean of the Brunca Extension (who is in charge of the QPIP on this campus) to identify actions taken under the framework of the QPIP. Subsequently, we cross-examined the data collected to build a proposal that was congruent with the QPIP and the educational needs, goals and aspirations of the Gnöbe students.

Caveat on the Scope of this Study

Needless to say, this is not a linguistics or sociolinguistics study. Instead, this paper presents qualitative research that relied on open-ended interviews, questionnaires and focus groups to examine the experiences of three Gnöbe students in their first year of the English teaching major. Perspectives and opinions of these students were understood in light of further data coming from interviews we held with their instructors and one administrator (the Vice-Dean). This data triangulation gave us a glimpse into the QPIP's implementation and enabled us to make suggestions for its betterment. By no means, however, do we intend to say that our recommendations are the panacea for the QPIP. Rather, our preliminary analysis and the suggestions that derived, we hope, will trigger more studies on topics that fall out of the scope of this present study (e. g. high school preparation, backlash effect of being exempted from taking the admission exam, etc.).

Data Analysis

In this section, we outline the major themes and concerns that arose from all data collection instruments applied to three main stakeholders: the students, the professors, and the administrators

involved in the QPIP. The divergent and convergent perceptions of these three actors are organized in the following manner. First, we discuss the ideas and aspirations Gnöbe students had in relation to higher education and EFL prior to starting their first semester (initial interview). Second, we voice their concerns regarding their performance towards the end of the semester (questionnaire and follow-up focus group). We finish by comparing and contrasting the opinions of professors and the administration as to the success of the QPIP.

The Students: First Impressions

Despite not being well-informed about the demands of higher education, the participants reported to be highly motivated to study English. They stated that they understand the Teaching of English as a profession that entails facilitating learning to those interested in EFL and the university as a site where students learn to be professionals in their chosen fields. As regards their chosen major (English Teaching), the expectation was to continue to build upon what they learned in high school. When asked about their high school formation in English, they reported to have learned only the basics of English and that their EFL classes were not demanding (little did they know at the time that this was going to become a challenge for them). Prior to starting the semester at Universidad Nacional, these students were involved in a three-day orientation program, whose aim was to give them a glimpse of the major. This included English lessons to prepare them for the demands that they would face in the first English course to take. When asked about their perceptions regarding what this orientation program did for them, they stated that their biggest realizations were that: (1) they were to use English only in the classroom, and (2) that the professors were very knowledgeable of the field.

An important question in this initial interview revolved around the participants' perceptions regarding any strengths or weakness with which they thought they would walk into the program. Among their strengths, they mentioned: (1) their motivation to become *somebody*, (2) their desire to serve as role models for their community, (3) their experience learning Gnöbe and later Spanish, (4) their keenness on reading, (5) and their fearless attitude towards using a foreign language. On the flip side, one student reported that his drive to learn was bigger than his fears; another referenced her fear of failure and the third confessed that she gets confused easily when faced with new learning situations. It was evident in the initial interview that the students were highly motivated and resolved to learn English and become someone who can be a role model for others in their community. Their little knowledge of and experience with the structure of the B. A. in English Teaching at UNA, however, confronted them with issues that they could have never foreseen.

The Students: Emerging Concerns

Upon enrollment in the major, these students had to take several courses in Spanish and one in English, *Inglés Integrado I,* which is the focus of this study. *Inglés Integrado I* is a course that exposes students to

a total of 12 hours of EFL instruction per week and in which they practice and improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in an integrated manner. It is normally the expectation in this course that students be spoken to and that they rely solely on English. In other words, English is both the language of instruction and the subject matter under study. Unfortunately, just as has been the case of other Gnöbe students part of the QPIP in the past, these students were faced with hardships in this introductory course to EFL, all of which have historically caused them to fail the course up to three times. Thus, in face of this, researcher 2 applied a questionnaire and conducted a subsequent focus group with these three students to allow them to voice their concerns regarding their performance and progress in the learning of English, specifically in the course *Inglés Integrado I.*

Coming from an underserved territory in a secluded area of the country, it comes as no surprise that they reported to be struggling. Specifically, they expressed concern about their weak listening skills and their limited vocabulary in English. They explained that their instructor's no use of visual aids in class and the embarrassment that derived from having to ask the teacher for additional explanations hindered their learning. When questioned about why asking would be embarrassing, they confessed that they felt their constant asking would lead to boredom for their non-indigenous classmates whose language proficiency was higher than theirs. Despite the high levels of motivation initially reported, the reality that they faced in this course had an impact on their performance. They reported to have remained quiet and passive in class often due to their fear of misusing English and not getting their message across. This, together with their reported lack of appropriate study habits/techniques, resulted in their low performance. As they claimed, however, despite the fact that their low marks lowered their motivation, this did not deter them from continuing to try and improve their skills.

In addition, the students claimed that they do feel welcome on campus and at the university in general, but that they feel intimidated in the English class due to their classmates' higher proficiency in the language. Unfortunately, two of these students recounted that, despite this evident gap of skills, they did not receive additional help or support on the part of the professors, which led them to lag even more. Their limited formation in English put them at a dangerous disadvantage in comparison to their classmates who were able to communicate in English without much of a problem. Overall, QPIP students claimed that although the university tried to help them by giving them an induction, this did not seem to be enough for them to successfully incorporate into this English-only course in which their skills were below the class average. In this regard, they suggested that this induction be longer, align more with their needs, and be accompanied by follow-up activities geared toward securing their academic success (this makes sense considering that being exempted from the admission test is already an acknowledgement that their academic formation is low).

Despite their concerns about their low marks, their little progress, and the demotivation and frustration that

derives, they pointed to factors that push them to stay in college: (1) their dream to be able to give their children a better quality of living, (2) their aspiration of going back to their communities to help those who want to learn English, (3) their resolve to become the indigenous EFL teachers who teach English to their fellow Gnöbe community members. Their resilience and perseverance is commendable and laudable. Nonetheless, what is the role of UNA professors and administrators involved in the QPIP in addressing the hardships these students describe? Our reading of the students' accounts suggests professors and administrators have only partially made efforts to ensure the successful implementation of the QPIP. As evidenced in the questionnaire and focus groups, administrators and professors did not work hand in hand with these students. Beyond the induction program at the beginning of the semester, there was no follow-up on the needs of the target population, despite knowing that they had been uprooted from their hometowns and placed in an institution that serves the needs of a culturally different population: non-indigenous students. This situation was only complicated by the fact that: (1) teachers did not modify their pedagogical practices to incorporate Gnöbe cultural views, (2) there was no dialogue with Gnöbe leaders, (3) the Gnöbe culture played no role in the classroom (all of which are required to accomplish objective #3 of the QPIP).

As stated elsewhere in this paper, the QPIP has three main objectives: (1) providing indigenous students' with access to higher education, (2) securing their retention up until successful completion of their majors, and (3) addressing their educational needs in culturally relevant ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. However, the accounts provided by the participants seem to suggest that effective work is definitely done regarding the first objective and that there is still a long a way to go as to the other two. This rather discouraging landscape described by the students was further confirmed in the interviews conducted with their professors and the administrator of the QPIP, as discussed below.

Professors and Administrators: Divergent Views

The situation described by the students is illuminated by the professors and administrators mostly contradictory views as to what needs to be done to ensure the success of the QPIP and who should be responsible for this. While actions need to be taken to resolve QPIP students' situation, it seems professors and authorities struggle to engage in dialogue with one another and create solutions to assist this population in the face of their academic plight. In the following subsections, their views are juxtaposed to outline the forces hindering the success of the QPIP.

Professors' Stance

In the interview, professors accepted that, although they tried to help Gnöbe students during office hours, they were not knowledgeable about the Gnöbe language and culture, which limited their understanding of the target population and their capacity to better cater to their needs. One of the professors knew a few phrases

in this language, but did not use them to devise mediation strategies while the other did try to promote linguistic/cultural appreciation for indigenous roots but did not claim any knowledge of the Gnöbe language. Whether or not these students' are full Gnöbe-Spanish bilinguals, the fact that half of who they are (Gnöbe) is not included in class or during office hours does not align with the QPIP's third objective: addressing their educational needs in ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. This lack of cultural awareness brings about an array of consequences for the students. For instance, the assistance that they received in class did not differ from the one given to the rest of the students. On the whole, considering that they are demanded to assimilate to a culture that has traditionally discriminated against the originative peoples places them at a disadvantage, in which the exclusion of the Gnöbe worldviews and beliefs from the classroom, coupled with their limited knowledge of and proficiency in English, is bound to bring out the difficulties that are herein described and contradicts what the QPIP intends to accomplish.

As to the professors' impressions on the QPIP's participants, they were able to identify each student's academic attitudes and frustrations. All in all, they regarded QPIP 1 as hardworking but discouraged due to low marks; QPIP 2 as a low aptitude language learner who barely did homework and gave few contributions to the class, and QPIP 3 as a remarkable student who completed assignments and displayed understanding of the topics studied. Despite their knowledge that this population is socially excluded and educationally underserved and that the program does not include QPIP students' social and cultural reality, professors relied only on the office hours to close the existing linguistic gaps, thereby downplaying their individual differences.

Professors and Gnöbe students concurred on the fact that they require more administrative support to better deal with this challenge. Unfortunately, the efforts made by the administration have not been sufficient to truly remediate the problem. The Dean's Office has collaborated with the attraction of Gnöbe students by visiting the communities and providing economic welfare by means of scholarships. Additionally, the administration organizes an induction program for Gnöbe students to alleviate the QPIP students' burden to some extent. However, all freshmen QPIP students in previous years (2015, 2016) failed *Inglés Integrado I* and those who have retaken the course have failed them repeated times.

Likewise, the professors agreed that they need training on how to incorporate the Gnöbe language and culture into the curriculum so that they can better serve them. Also, they considered the induction program not to be sufficient support on the part of the administration to help these students succeed in their academic endeavors. Yet, another professor stated that he had his reservations regarding incorporating Gnöbe students to majors that might not respond to the needs and reality of the Gnöbe community, as is the case of English. This professor sustained that cultural aspects of the community should be brought to the forefront when deciding to which majors these students may be incorporated.

The Administrators' Stance

To bring this study to closure and to triangulate the data collected, yet another interview was held with the administrator in charge of the QPIP at UNA, Brunca Extension: the vice-dean. When asked about what the administration could do to improve the reality facing professors and Gnöbe students, she stated that they have done what is within their reach to ensure the students' attraction and permanency in the system. In this sense, she highlighted the following achievements of the QPIP: (1) The incorporation of Gnöbe, and other indigenous students, is facilitated by exempting them from the admissions exam, which in the past had proved to be an obstacle to their inclusion in higher education; (2) the efforts made by Committee of Permanency, academic and project advisors, as well as the major coordinators have resulted in an increase in the number of indigenous students enrolled; and (3) the integration of indigenous communities in the program through university visits to the targeted territories to obtain their approval and execute the plan.

In regard to the additional and necessary support requested by both professors and QPIP students, the vice-dean claimed that it is the academics' responsibility to search for ways to involve these students more efficiently in the classroom, taking into account their needs, cultural origin, and linguistic background. This administrative authority also stressed that hopefully the QPIP students will be able to preserve their identity and culture in college, as they have been sensitized about it in Pérez Zeledón Campus, though that has not been the case in Coto Campus. Further, she stated that these students' exemption from the admission exam requires that their academic needs be addressed in differentiated and culturally relevant ways. The professors, however, reported that they do not have the training to do such job. The problem here is that the administration seems to assume that this is primarily the professor's responsibility. In addition, she claimed that the responsibility of the administration of the Brunca Extension is to a large extent limited to visiting the communities, having meetings with community leaders, exempting these students from the admission exam and securing financial support for them. In the interview with her, there was no mention of any follow-up measures or upcoming trainings at the Coto Branch of UNA.

In light of the positions taken by professors and the administrations, whose responsibility is it to ensure the success of the QPIP in its three overarching objectives? The answer to this question is out of the scope of this paper; however, it is clear that although efforts have been made, more needs to be done if the QPIP is to be successful not only in the attraction of Gnöbe and other indigenous students but also in their retention and in the creation of culturally relevant pedagogies. Here other questions arise: why has nothing been done about the fact that indigenous students have historically failed the courses which they enrolled (up to three times)? And what does this say about the success of the QPIP? The conclusions we drew from these divergent opinions are outlined below.

Conclusions

In the landscape that we encountered, educators and administrators failed to build a curriculum that responds to the needs of the communities it serves. And not only that, we also found that there seems to be disagreements between professors and administrators as to who should be responsible for the success of the QPIP. Likewise, little collaboration with the indigenous communities, other than the initial meeting the vice-dean holds prior to students' enrollment, is orchestrated between the university authorities and the leaders of the Gnöbe communities regarding cultural perspectives, needs, and goals of the latter in relation to EFL education of their youth.

A resemblance we found to the case of Australia (Morgan, 2011) was that there are conflicting ideas about what comprises education, as the students' views of teaching and learning do not coincide with the teaching practices professors in this B. A. in English Teaching have, which largely serve the mainstream non-indigenous population. Likewise, classes are taught by non-indigenous professors with little to no knowledge of the Gnöbe culture and language; reason why they fail to bridge indigenous and western knowledge systems, to create culturally relevant pedagogies as intended by the QPIP. By and large, aboriginal students' dissatisfaction with the above has an impact on their decision as to whether or not to continue their studies. The three participants in this study, as all previous ones, failed this course, and there is not knowing if they will try again or desist in their aspiration to higher education.

Moreover, just as in the Canadian context (R. A. Malatest and Associates Ltd, 2004), the policies and practices endorsed by the English Department are assimilationist and alienating, as these students are uprooted from their communities and expected to assimilate into the teaching and learning culture predominant at UNA. No evidence was found of professors or administrators working towards the creation of culturally relevant pedagogies that meet the needs of the Gnöbe students. Again, professors with little to no knowledge of the Gnöbe culture and the nonexistent Gnöbe professors in the department place the students at a disadvantage, given that their culture is neglected in the course *Inglés Integrado I* and the B. A. in English Teaching at large. The neglect of the needs of Gnöbe students is also alarming because it results in an approach to education that does not reflect the values and beliefs at the core of the indigenous communities and with which they align their entire existence (Cherubini *et al.*, 2010, pp. 331-333).

By and large, the QPIP could potentially become a step forward for the Costa Rican State, and particularly for UNA, to rupture institutional structures that have kept indigenous populations underserved socially and economically. The constant failure of such attempts, however, only demonstrate the force that these structures still exercise on the oppressed, of which the hardships faced by these Gnöbe students are only an example. As evident in this study, effective work is done to attract indigenous students to UNA, Coto Campus. However, little to no work is done to secure the retention of these students and to devise

alternative pedagogies that respond to the needs of this population and strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. And yet, an analysis is called for here which is critical to the work that has been effectively done. With respect to this, Flores suggests, efforts to offset the marginalization of minorities often call for a broader analysis of non-linguistic factors at the root of their marginalization. Flores rightfully proposes a materialist anti-racist approach to bring attention to the economic inequalities affecting the lives of minoritized communities (2017, 566). Thus, we devote a few lines to this enterprise.

As explained by the vice-dean, students from indigenous territories are exempted from the admission exam. By doing so, authorities acknowledge that these students come from underserved high schools and that their academic skills are underdeveloped in comparison to mainstream non-indigenous classmates and who did undergo the scrutiny of the admission exam. Otherwise, the exemption would have not have been granted. However, exempting indigenous students from this exam alone does not secure their success in higher education. Although we concede that such practice does open doors to them, if not accompanied by modifications/adaptations in the curriculum and teaching practices and by the necessary support along their learning process, students are doomed to fail, as has historically been the case since the beginning of the QPIP three years ago. We know for certain, however, that beyond their exemption from the exam and the induction program prior to enrollment, no modifications are made or follow-up actions taken in this direction, as reported by both professors and the vice-dean, which is basically setting them up for failure.

Beyond this, however, we think it is questionable to assume that such exemption is the panacea to the achievement gap facing these populations. We believe that if the QPIP aims at securing the success of indigenous students in higher education, UNA authorities and professors have the responsibility to investigate why these students are not ready for higher education and propose actions to ensure that they are no longer underserved. This would require that UNA work hand in hand with authorities from the Ministry of Public Education to guarantee that these peoples receive the same quality of education that mainstream students from privileged areas, such as the Capital City, have access to.

Another questionable practice we identified in the QPIP is measuring its success by means of statistics regarding how many indigenous students enroll each year. As useful as these numbers are, these do not reveal much if similar records are not kept about how many of these students stay in college and how many drop out. The latter records could serve as an indicator about whether or not further actions to be taken to secure their retention and their success. That nothing has been done to scrutinize why these students fail the course *Inglés Integrado I* up to three times suggests these records are not kept; thereby hindering the QPIP's goals of attraction, retention, and success of the indigenous students who have been largely underrepresented at UNA.

To conclude, the vice-dean reports that she, along with professors, visits the community to disseminate information about the QPIP and recruits

students that can potentially enroll at UNA. And indeed these visits are necessary steps in the execution of the QPIP. We believe, nonetheless, these could serve other purposes as well. That is, both administrators and professors could use them to become acquainted with the indigenous cultures and languages; which has not been done yet, as suggested by the fact that professors claim to have no knowledge of the culture and language of their Gnöbe students. Realizing that the QPIP is still in its infancy after three years of its genesis is concerning for us as educators and researchers working for a university with a humanistic view of education and a clear aim at serving students from less privileged sectors of the Costa Rican society. Although we concur that the steps taken so far are important, we also acknowledge that the QPIP is far from being successful. Beyond the success of the QPIP as a program, however, our biggest concern is that a sector of society that has for years been neglected, underserved, and underrepresented continues to face the same hardships, even in the face of well-intended initiatives such as the QPIP and all other government efforts that have taken the form of programs, decrees, and legislation bills. Unfortunately, as this study indicates, and just as has happened in other countries, we continue to approach the inclusion of indigenous peoples from an assimilationist and paternalistic point of view. It is for this reason that in next, we take the liberty but also the responsibility to outline recommendations that we deem urgent and timely.

Recommendations

In this section, we lay out recommendations that we think are urgent, from our perspectives as educators and researchers. By no means do we imply that these are the only actions that should be taken to secure the success of indigenous students in higher education. Instead, we have tried to translate the voices of the indigenous students and the opinions of professors and the administration into concrete actions that are likely to further support an initiative as laudable as the QPIP. Also, we are aware that these suggestions would require herculean efforts that would necessitate the cooperation of all actors involved.

The first and most important step toward the successful implementation of the QPIP lies in building strong communication bridges between UNA and the indigenous communities that our institution serves. Those bridges should be built to make possible the critical transformations necessary for the attraction and retention of indigenous students at UNA and the meeting of their educational needs in ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. These transformations could take the form of (1) alternative approaches to EFL, (2) culturally relevant pedagogies, (3) critical language and culture awareness in the EFL classroom, and (4) activism and advocacy for the equal access to high quality of education for all students. As these transformations materialize, the communication bridges will become stronger and more solid, thereby making further curricular transformations possible.

Communication Bridges

Although the QPIP was designed in cooperation with representatives from the indigenous territories the public universities were going to serve, our data indicate that such communication channel has not been kept open beyond the yearly visits from the administration for the purpose of recruiting students, in the case of UNA, Coto Campus. Maintaining and bolstering these communication bridges, however, is of utmost importance for the successful implementation of the QPIP, for only this way will we know for certain if our institution is indeed catering to indigenous students' educational needs in ways that strengthen their identity and cultural affiliation. Thus far, the participation of indigenous community members in the execution of the QPIP has been minimal. Therefore, we recommend that further efforts be made so that the indigenous communities that UNA, Coto Campus, serves take active part not only in communicating their needs, hopes, and wants but also in executing the QPIP in all of its stages, especially assessments of the success of the program. In this process, it is pivotal that community members be allowed (a) to decide which majors that UNA offers most align with what they want for their territories, (b) to provide input about how they best learn, and (c) to shed light on how to strengthen the identity and cultural affiliation of their youth.

Critical Transformations

The communication channels aforementioned have the potential to foster critical transformations that will make possible to achievement of the three overarching objectives set forth in the QPIP. That is, constant dialogue with indigenous community members and their constant participation in decision-making can provide the input needed to secure the success of indigenous students in higher education. Below is a list of such transformations that can stem from solid and honest communication bridges.

1. Alternative Approaches to EFL: In cooperation with indigenous community members, a study can be carried out, from a more ethnographic perspective, about alternative approaches to the teaching of English to indigenous students, which align with their views of education, teaching and learning. In other words, we recommend that the administration and professors investigate how the indigenous students learn best, especially because they are already bilingual in their native language and Spanish prior to enrollment; asset that should be leveraged.
2. Culturally Relevant Pedagogies: Authorities from The Brunca Extension and the coordinator of the B.A. in English Teaching should join forces with the School of Literature and Language Sciences (ELCL) and the Rural Education Program from the School of Education (CIDE) to help alleviate the problems facing Gnöbe students at Coto Campus. Through the ELCL, the Brunca Extension authorities can negotiate curricular modifications that foster QPIP students' integration in the major by adding indigenous rights as a cross-curricular theme. Likewise, geared

toward inclusiveness, the authorities of the Brunca Extension can also consult students and professors from the Rural Education Program about the state of rural education to help the professors of the English Department in Coto better understand the reality of Gnöbe students as an underrepresented people.

3. Language and Culture Awareness in the EFL Classroom: Several initiatives could be put in place that transform the English classrooms of the B.A. in English teaching at UNA, Campus Coto, into spaces in which the indigenous students and their languages and cultures are appreciated. This, undoubtedly, would require extensive training so that English instructors become acquainted with indigenous languages and cultures and, concomitantly, equipped to open dialogues about matters of human rights in connection to indigenous peoples and to execute activities that allow for the appreciation of native cultures and languages of the country. In like manner, critical dialogues should be open in class about the status of English and its connection to late capitalism and neoliberalism (Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Kubota, 2011; Park, 2010; Pennycook, 2000), the value of devalued indigenous languages (Truscott & Malcolm, 2010), and the urgent repositioning and redressing of *othered* types of multilingualism that do not include English (Matsubara, 2000).
4. Advocacy and Activism: To conclude, it is important that professors and students develop a sense of advocacy for the rights of indigenous students and engage in activism. For example, knowing the questionable quality of English lessons that indigenous students receive, professors can propose extension programs to strengthen the teaching and learning of English in indigenous territories so that future indigenous students are more likely to go beyond the first semester of the major. We agree that improving the quality of high school education in their territories will help them more than exempting them from the admission exam. Yet another way to partake in activism would be engaging in indigenous language revitalization and the design and teaching of indigenous languages courses that non-indigenous students and professors can take. Such endeavors have the potential (1) to bring indigenous and non-indigenous communities closer together, (2) to strengthen cross-cultural communication from respectful stances, and (3) to make indigenous students more visible on campus. Finally, following the materialist anti-racist approach to activism that Flores (2017) suggests, the professors, the students, and the administration from Coto Campus must also come together to problematize the non-linguistic factors at the root of the marginalization of these indigenous populations (ideology critique).

These recommendations, we hope, will allow us to break away from assimilationist and paternalistic approaches to the inclusion of indigenous peoples in higher education and to devise strategies to serve them in ways that honor their identity and aspirations for their

communities. We laud the QPIP initiative and hope for the proposal and execution of many more similar programs. As educators and researchers, we aspire to see UNA become an institution where indigenous peoples' knowledges and worldviews are respected and appreciated. Although we are aware that reversing the oppression and marginalization these communities have endured for years would require the rupture and erasure of the very structures of domination predominant today, we remain optimistic that UNA will continue to seek for equity and justice for all students.

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