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Anna Jeeves

English at Secondary School

Perceptions of Relevance

This study explores the question of perceived relevance of secondary school English studies in Iceland. Little work has been done on the role and nature of relevance in language learning and its relationship to recognized concepts such as motivation, autonomy, self-concept, self-efficacy, and international orientation. The focus is on the experience of students and young people, and on acknowledging the voices of language learners themselves. Through semi-structured interviews, attitudes of secondary school students towards English and English secondary school studies are investigated, along with the perceived relevance of these studies to their future identity as English users, and their language needs outside the classroom in the present and the future. In this paper, emerging themes from interviews with secondary school students are discussed and a four-self model of relevance is proposed.

The author is an Adjunct Lecturer and doctoral student in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics at the University of Iceland.

Enska í framhaldsskólum

Markmið rannsóknarinnar er að kanna viðhorf til gildis enskunáms við íslenska framhaldsskóla. Lítið er vitað um eðli gildis og hvaða hlutverki það gegnir við tileinkun tungumála. Einnig hafa tengsl gildis við þekkt hugtök svo sem hvata, sjálfstæði í námi, sjálfsímynd, og afstöðu til alþjóðasamfélagsins lítið verið rannsökuð. Rannsóknin beinist að upplifun nemenda og ungmenna, og mikilvægi þess að hlusta á raddir málanema. Opín viðtöl eru notuð til að kanna viðhorf framhaldsskólanemenda til ensku og enskunáms. Ennfremur er reynt að komast að gildi enskunámsins og tengingu þess við framtíðarsýn nemenda sem málnotendur, svo og þarfir þeirra hvað varðar tungumálanotkun fyrir utan skólastofuna. Í grein þessari eru kynntar fyrstu niðurstöður úr viðtölum við framhaldsskólanemendur, og lögð drög að „4-sjálfra“ líkani gildisins.

Introduction

This paper discusses an exploration of the concept of relevance in English studies at secondary school. The focus is on perceived relevance of English studies to the lives of young Icelanders and the experience of students at secondary school, in the present and with hindsight. The study considers the perceived needs for English language proficiency of young Icelanders at secondary school and aims to explore a possible “discrepancy between English language students’ present and future needs” (Kormos, Csizér,

Menyhárt, & Török, 2008, p. 69). Relevance in foreign language learning is under-researched. The concept of relevance is discussed with regard to curriculum design, learning outcomes and the overarching aims of school education (Goodson, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2007; Noddings, 2006; Tyler, 1949; Walker & Soltis, 1997), but relevance in terms of student perspectives of learning foreign languages seems to be wanting.

The central research question of the study is: *What characterises perceptions of practical and personal relevance of secondary school English studies in Iceland?*

Although the research question is considered from the perspective of Icelandic students and young people during and after secondary school, this paper will focus on interviews with secondary school students. The paper begins by explaining the objectives and novelties of this research, and describes briefly the background to the study and its methodology. After a short overview of previous work into motivation in foreign language learning, the main body of the paper is taken up with preliminary analysis of data and emerging thematic codes. A “four-self” model of relevance of English language learning at secondary school level is proposed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the analysis and an outline of the on-going research.

Background to the study

This qualitative study investigates perceptions of relevance of English secondary school studies to students, in the present (while students are at school) and with hindsight (after leaving school), and the role of relevance in international orientation and the development of a second-language self. Establishing relevance as a factor in English-learning motivation and in the creation of young Icelanders’ linguistic self may open up a valuable new area of study. Relevance is concerned with contextualisation as we try to make sense of the world around us, using context to aid comprehension: “the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition” (Sperber & Wilson, 2005, p. 608).

The study also aims to make student voices heard, and to give a perspective to the learning and teaching of English that has been little emphasised in Iceland. It seeks to respond to a question evidently seldom asked elsewhere: “Why, I wondered, were the learners themselves not asked?” (Barkhuizen, 1998, p. 85).

Ascertaining students’ views on their English courses at school could lead towards valuable improvements in the school curriculum, as well as promoting a new vision of students’ personal involvement in their studies. Understanding may be gained as to what students perceive as being of most benefit to them at secondary school, whether aspects of the language are insufficiently covered at school, and how exposure to English in Iceland is linked to perceived relevance. Students may become more motivated and proficient, and thereby better prepared for life in today’s global society.

To date, Dörnyei’s “L2 Motivational Self System” (2005) has not been applied in an Icelandic context. By taking into account the perceptions and views of Icelandic learners and users in their late teens and early twenties, this research seeks both to situate previous research within the context of Iceland and to establish the element of relevance in the continuing debate on foreign language learning.

The impetus for this study comes from the study of student motivation and objectives, self-concept, autonomy and metacognition. Work on learning, objectives and motivation (Bruner, 1960; Cody, 1995; Covington & Roberts, 1994; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Nunan, 1988) paved the way for further research into individual differences in second-language learning

(Brantmeier, 2003; Braten, Lie, & Andreassen, 1998; Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Skehan, 1997).

Dam (1995, 1999, 2003), Benson (2003), Ade-ojo (2005), Little (2007), Ushioda (2006, 2008, 2009) and, in Iceland, Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir (2004) and Lefever (2005) have brought the issue of the autonomous learner to the foreground. Concepts from cognitive psychology, such as self-concept and self-regulation (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Miller & Brickman, 2004; Tabachnick, Miller, & Relyea, 2008) are also taken into account in this study, as is work into multilingual identity (Pavlenko, 2004; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). The desire of language learners to be part of the international community (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos et al., 2008) without losing national identity is also important (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Finally, the methodology of this study follows Ushioda's "person-in-context" (2009), placing emphasis on the individual stories of learners.

In recent years, much attention has been given to the "L2 Motivational Self System" (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) which has extended older research into "possible selves", self-concept, cognition and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Dörnyei's three-fold model encompasses the "Ideal L2 Self" (the learner aspiring to become a successful second-language user); the "Ought-to L2 Self" (the learner fearing lack of success); and the "L2 Learning Experience" which incorporates various elements connected to the classroom situation. Further research on motivation and the L2 Self has been carried out in many different countries (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Csizer & Kormos, 2008; Kormos, Hegybíró Kontra, & Csölle, 2002; Lamb, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Yashima, 2009).

Essentially, qualitative research seeks to expose a wide spectrum of human experience by exploring "the idea of multiple realities" (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). This interpretive phenomenological study situates itself within the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer (Dancy & Sosa, 1993; Warnke, 1987) rather than within the search for the essence of the phenomenon in the tradition of Husserl (Tugendhat, 1994). More recently, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) acknowledges the dynamism involved in interviewing and the double hermeneutics of the interviewer attempting to make sense of the interviewee's account of his experience (Conroy, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Although the aim of the research is to understand the experience of students at secondary school through an interpretation of students' own voiced opinions during interviews, the interviews are not expected to be the basis of a "true" picture of students' views on relevance in English language learning. However, through the use of interpretive phenomenology, it should be the case that "they are plausible given the data" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 24).

Methodology

Although many aspects of the language-learning experience can be studied through quantitative approaches, the emphasis in this research is on exploration of "a problem or issue [that] needs to be explored" (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). It is a desire "to identify and describe the subjective experiences" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 226) of students, by delving into their perceptions of relevance, an aspect of foreign language learning that has been neglected in recent research, that is the force behind this study.

Data for this study was gathered through interviews with students and young people until "saturation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 160), when no new information is extracted. A preliminary benchmark of 32 interviews was established at the outset of the study: half to be with secondary school students and half with university students and employees. An equal

balance of male and female participants was sought, both from within and outside the Reykjavík area. This article is based on data from 16 interviews taken with students aged 18-21 at eight secondary schools in different parts of Iceland. Most of the students have completed three or four terms of English, although some have taken more. Of these interviews, 11 have been closely analysed, and four provide the quotations given here (in English translation). Interviews are one-to-one and are conducted in Icelandic (the first language of participants). Authenticity and trustworthiness are further supported by participant anonymity and by verbatim transcription of interviews. Since this research centres on specific aspects of students' learning experience in English, semi-structured rather than open interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) were used. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of facilitating empathy and exposing new areas for exploration (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Methods used in interview analysis include coding, condensation and interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Data has been analysed using open and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), and themes have been isolated for a description of the study subject. Interpretation involves going beyond participants' actual words to the deeper, underlying significance of their responses. My purpose in exposing concealed layers of meaning in these interviews is not to impute feelings or opinions to students. On the contrary, by concentrating on not "selectively interpreting and reporting statements, ...overlooking any counterevidence" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 213) I hope to show the richness of this data through multiple meanings and emotions expressed.

In the quotations from interviews "..." represents words omitted from a longer passage of speech. Quoted words in *italics* indicate that the words were spoken in English. Quotations in normal font have been translated from Icelandic.

Analysis

Preliminary analysis took place immediately after each interview, when significant comments or recurring themes were noted. Potential themes for coding were also isolated during interview transcription, as similar ideas were touched upon by participants.

Prior to analysis, I had anticipated seeing a distinction between practical and personal relevance. I expected, for example, that students might discuss secondary school English courses in terms of the practical benefit they offered (for example, learning to write letters of complaint or understand talks on academic topics) and of their own spheres of interest (such as literature, sports, or conservation). I was keen to investigate whether students found relevance to their personal context in the class materials presented in English courses.

After reading through the first few interviews taken, it became clear that English studies at secondary school affected students in a wide variety of ways, and that a simple "practical/personal" distinction would not suffice as an interpretation of the significance of English to young Icelanders.

Four main areas of relevance of English studies at secondary school were isolated from interview data. With reference to the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) and Dörnyei (2005, 2009) I have chosen to call them the *Inner Self*, the *Learning Self*, the *International Self*, and the "*English*" *Self*. The first three categories concern English studies at school, whereas the "*English*" *Self* has to do with students' identity as English users outside school. Here the main elements of each "Self" will be highlighted before each one is described in more detail and supported with examples translated from the Icelandic interview transcriptions. The *Inner Self* concerns the strong common thread running through

interviews of students' strong feelings towards English studies. These feelings include pleasure, self-esteem, and interest. This topic also concerns areas such as self-assessment, responsibility for learning, and boredom. The *Learning Self* deals not with how students feel about their English learning, but about what they are learning at school: language proficiency, study and social skills, and the accessing of new knowledge through the English language. Included in this coding category are student perceptions of the role and responsibility of the classroom teacher, as well as the circumstances during which students believe they learn English. As the coding name suggests, the *International Self* centres on student beliefs about how secondary school English affects their dealings with foreigners abroad and on their reasons for future travel abroad. On the other hand, in the "*English*" *Self* we see students' beliefs about the role of English in their lives in Iceland. Each *Self* will be described on a sliding scale of presence or absence of elements, e.g. both positive and negative feelings towards English at secondary school.

Figure 1 shows this four-self model.

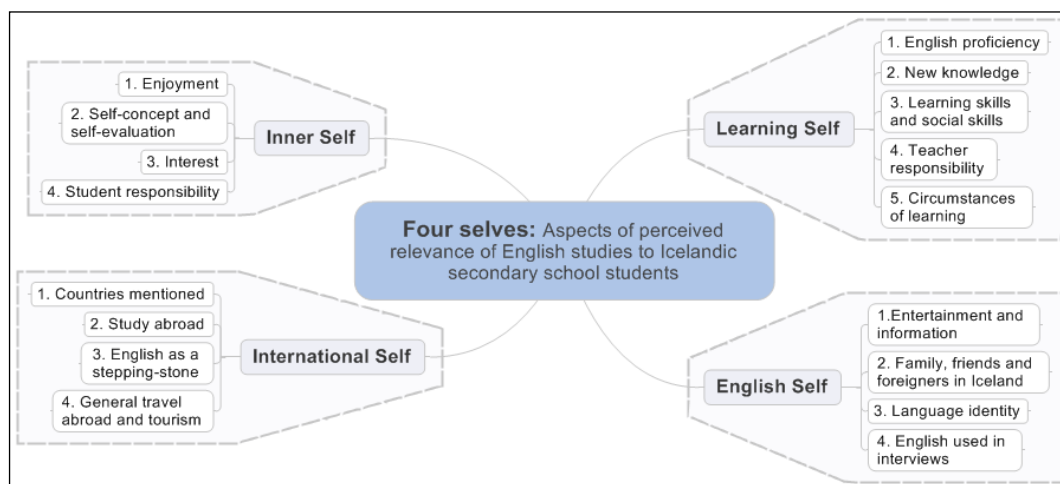


Figure 1 – The four-self model of relevance.

The Inner Self

There appears to be a striking link between English at school and enjoyment. The dominance of English in popular culture in Iceland may be a key factor, but the English classroom itself appears to be a good place to be, and expressions of positive feelings in the interview data far outnumber those of negative ones. English classes are fun and largely stress-free, good feelings prevail and little anxiety is evinced. In many instances links can be seen between English and positive self-esteem, interest and responsibility, but there is also a general feeling that school English was simply tied up with unspecific entertainment and fun. Students comment that English is “just a fun language, it’s different from Icelandic”, or that “I’m just very happy with the teaching and with how varied it is, and I just find it very good. Anyway, I enjoy it a lot...”. Some class tasks are fun: “Yes, it’s fun to get to browse on the Net”, and “We were in fits of laughter, the whole class, we were all laughing, and it was so silly and funny and I thought it was really good fun”.

Apart from this general sense of enjoyment, English at school gives a boost to students’ self-esteem. Bogi, who had experienced failure in some subjects, had “sailed through” some English courses. Participants’ self-assessment of their proficiency (they were not asked about their grades) was often expressed in terms of “I’ve always been very good at English”, “I don’t find English difficult”, and even “I don’t think I really need to improve, not very much”. This belief in their own language ability at school also gives students increas-

ed self-confidence, and even a sense of superiority to English speakers in other countries:

[My American penfriend] is always so envious of how I can speak many more languages, because she really only has English. She is learning French, maybe it's not going very well, but I already know three languages, that's quite a difference.

I think there are quite a lot of people who speak English in France, of course not very well, but you can understand them.

Positive feelings about English studies include not only having good proficiency but also attaining acceptable grades with little effort. Soffia says, when asked what level of effort she puts into learning English, "Not very much in English. I somehow feel I know English well". As she goes on to explain how hard she works when necessary, it seems that Soffia is prepared to put in effort, but does not often have to do so in English.

Self-confidence in social interaction is also gained through English studies at school. Group work based on different combinations of students is good because "some people of course find it difficult to make friends so they get to know new friends too." One student who sings in a band has gained stage confidence through making presentations in class:

...it's very useful...especially for example when I'm performing at a concert. I've really had this problem, when I was younger I got so stressed out that I shook and couldn't do anything. And this helps me a lot because we're always performing, every other week, when we've done a project that we present....I just find it very useful.

However, although students experience success and high self-esteem through school English, they talk about "getting by" in English, about the need to "improve *communication skills*", and about the fact that in the classroom "you learn pronunciation of course...It becomes sort of more *fluent*." The use of terms such as these suggests that students' positive self-assessment may be only superficial and not deeply felt.

Other factors within the confines of the *Inner Self* category are interest in course material and student responsibility for learning. English class material or activities may connect with students' previous interests or awaken new interest:

...an article about medicine, which I'm very interested in because I'm going to study medicine, and it was all about the beginnings of medicine, how it all developed, and that was very interesting.

Of course it's singing and the piano, especially singing like I said, pronunciation ...you know, if you have a text in front of you that you have to understand so you can sing it right and with feeling.

...for the next two weeks we're talking about linguistics in English, how English today is a world language and how it's related to other languages. I'm interested in that.

A lack of interest causes boredom and diminishes learning, because "...if you're not interested in the books, then of course it's rather difficult to read them". Grammar tasks and other "ordinary tasks" come into this category; they are dismissed as boring and therefore not memorable (although some participants do believe that some "ordinary tasks" aid learning). Compulsory tasks lacking any element of choice arouse the most

negative feelings in students and seem to have least relevance to students' lives: "something you no way want to read about, camels in Australia or some other rubbish"; "[the previous course] absolute garbage...didn't make any sense"; and "... *Pride and Prejudice*...it wasn't much fun". Choice is valued highly, and students base tasks on their own hobbies when possible. However, working on a wide range of topics is acceptable since "...I mean, what I find boring someone else may find very interesting, so [the teachers] can't just take one thing".

A final point in this theme is that some students are prepared to take responsibility for their own learning. Jón, for example, is pro-active about not understanding course material in English: "I got Dad to help me, he's an English teacher at primary school." Similarly, Soffía, asked to imagine English not being taught at her school, replies:

I would definitely find some course and take English somewhere else, because...it's good to know it, and it's fun, ... so I would definitely do a distance-learning course or something, just to try ... I think it's so difficult not to know English because I need to know it so much, that I would rather try to find something, just find another school that taught English.

The Learning Self

Moving from how students feel about English classes to what they gain in terms of learning, a second significant area of relevance to students of English studies at secondary school concerns learning. Apart from improvement in English proficiency (or wished-for improvement), students gain new knowledge on a variety of topics, as well as study and social skills. Included in this coding category is the area of teacher responsibility for student learning and the circumstances (outside as well as inside the classroom) in which students believe that learning English takes place.

Vocabulary expansion seems to rank high in the minds of many students when they consider learning gains. There is an awareness here of practical relevance: "... gaining this vocabulary has helped me enormously in understanding more than before and being able to express myself better...". Specifically, vocabulary gains at school are linked to an improved understanding of register and appropriateness:

...if you're not in English and just play computer games then maybe you only understand the English in computer games, not necessarily the vocabulary connected with something else. ... You wouldn't say that at work or something, AFK [away from keyboard, author's note], and then just walk away or something.

Obviously it's vocabulary and word usage because word usage in movies isn't correct. It's usually some sort of slang and so on that's used nowadays. It's not old language, language that used to be used, old words, difficult words. You learn them here ... I like knowing them.

Students are also aware of other improvement. Some read faster and with less effort, and develop inferential skills: "...we're put in groups and discuss what's happening in the book, and why, and what the author is trying to say, and I find it very exciting to sort of read between the lines like this..." Soffía, the singer, has had help with her pronunciation, for which she is grateful, since pronunciation "always has to be correct so that you can sing correctly". For others, however, there is only general but unspecific improvement in the language:

I mean, you're obviously learning something new all the time...it's like going on to the next course. It's always harder and harder and more complicated and obviously you just learn more and more.

Finally, but importantly, asked what difference it would make if English was not taught at secondary school, some students express the belief that they have gained little. One sees little point in the classroom task he is currently engaged on; another fears not understanding "*scientific terms*" in university study, and believes that it is only his spelling that has improved in English classes. Others feel that insufficient emphasis is put on speaking and pronunciation practice, especially in early courses at secondary school. It would seem that, despite participants' positive self-assessment, self-confidence in English may not extend to the spoken language and in-class tasks may not be effective:

And perhaps there really should have been [more speaking practice] but there were so many students who are shy about it that it's difficult to make people do something that they aren't really ready to do.

Besides English language, gains in other areas are made in English classes. Students enjoy gaining new knowledge on diverse topics through reading and projects. Birna says, for example, that "by reading an article I've been introduced to other topics that I wouldn't have otherwise, and I like that a lot". Students read more than they would if they were not studying English, and are introduced to fiction that they might not choose to read themselves. English even helps in learning French because of the similarities in vocabulary, so that "if you know the words in English then you know what they mean in French".

Both study and social skills are gained in English classes. Inferential reading skills have already been mentioned, but perseverance is also learned, in continual assessment courses where "you have to keep on going steadily over the semester". Social skills are strengthened through group work, which for one student who had been bullied at primary school was the most enjoyable thing about English classes: "group work, if you're with good [students], who work well then it's less pressure instead of having to do it all by yourself".

It would seem that a range of learning takes place in the English classroom. A key-person in the classroom and one who bears a huge responsibility in the eyes of participants is the teacher. This responsibility involves not only selecting course material and explaining new ideas but also being entertaining: "What was most fun? In English? I don't really know. Sometimes it depends on the teachers, who is most fun". Lack of understanding may be attributed to the teacher, leading to situations where "Nobody understood it; it was just that the teacher wasn't good enough". Even a one-off clash of temperaments means a student may be unable or unwilling to make progress: "I got landed with one English teacher who I didn't like and then I just couldn't be bothered to study. I didn't want to..."

Before moving on to discuss the *International Self*, it is worth noting that not all English learning by older teenagers in Iceland goes on in the classroom. For some, the main source of knowledge of English is "obviously through the computer and, you know, all of that, television and movies and so on, ... books that you read ... obviously you learn from them too". All of these participants mention television, movies and computer games, making it evident that they are rated highly, alongside school, as sources of learning English. Another factor mentioned by several participants is learning from English-speaking friends and extended family. One describes how her father will explain a word that her English-speaking step-mother uses "and helps me understand, and teaches me how to use it in everyday language and not just in books". It would appear the norm rather than

the exception to have non-Icelandic-speaking family members with whom English is used, either through face-to-face conversation or through spoken or written communication via the Internet. Many have relatives abroad who visit Iceland, so that English is often used in the home and “you’re always learning something new”. Another learning scenario unconnected with school is working abroad with native and non-native English-speakers, since “you learn most when you go abroad and are around English-speaking people, obviously you learn most from that”. To what extent vocabulary and grammar skills learnt in the classroom, as well as confidence also built up in classes, are a necessary catalyst for this out-of-school learning is hard to assess.

The International Self

Relevance of secondary school English, or students’ individual connection with school instruction, is thus closely associated with an inner self of emotions, confidence, interest and autonomy, and to a learning process in which students add to their proficiency in English, their general knowledge and their study and social skills. In some cases students perceive limited gains in their English language skills.

Moving outside the immediate confines of the classroom, English study is also closely linked to students’ *International Self*, their lives with reference to the world outside Iceland. Obviously, young Icelanders can access knowledge of the world through the Internet and through television and films without leaving Iceland, but the *International Self* is concerned with the relevance of English studies to students in a foreign context, through family, holidays and work experience, or future plans. Countries that students mention when talking about family and friends, work or study include Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the UK, France, Australia, Indonesia and the USA, and in all these cases English is the *lingua franca* students use or expect to use.

Going abroad to study seems to be an attractive prospect for many students, and endows English with immediate relevance. Soffía, who says “I really want to go abroad to study, so you know it’s very useful for me”, has concrete plans for the future and already knows that she will be applying for study in an English-speaking country. For others, however, the future is far from clear even though there is a clear desire to move abroad, and a realisation of the need for English:

...of course, living abroad and so on, it’ll help to know English. ... Just get a job and then see if there’s something that I want to study at university, then I’ll go and find a university.

Possibly because of a belief in their own language-learning skills or because of an awareness of the need to integrate into an adopted culture, students may see English as a temporary “world language”, a stepping-stone to the language and culture of a non-English-speaking country. Addi says:

Obviously I want to travel a lot, and English is a sort of world language which will help a lot. And of course I want to move abroad too, so English should help for the first few months while I’m getting used to the language and the culture and so on.

However, although students do talk about possible future study, many perceive the relevance of English at school as connected primarily to tourist travel. English classes are considered “a good basis for going abroad”. Students have experience of foreign travel and are aware that “it’s good to know [English] because if you go abroad then you can get by completely”. In this context it is worth noting that students perceive only a basic

level of proficiency as necessary for tourist travel, and talk in terms of being able to “manage” or “get by”.

The “English” Self

The fourth and final coding category in this study of student perceptions of relevance of secondary school English is the “*English*” *Self*. Unlike the *Inner*, the *Learning* and the *International Selves*, the “*English*” *Self* is not directly connected with classroom study, but is intended to give an overview of the role that English plays in the lives of young Icelanders in Iceland. Areas in which English is used in the day-to-day lives in Iceland of participants are: entertainment and information; family, friends and foreigners; and work and hobbies. Finally, the question of language identity will be considered briefly.

It will come as no surprise to anyone living in today’s cyber world that students’ main use of English is computer-linked. They use computers for finding information via the Internet and for entertainment, watching TV series and films, as well as playing computer games. For these activities students need English: “...the Internet, that’s a very good source of information, computer games and television and so on. English is in everything...” Young people’s lives are not, however, focused uniquely on entertainment. Students watch BBC and CNN news broadcasts, and a prospective medical student points out that “in medicine you’re often referred to a website in English and it’s very important to understand what it says”.

Apart from information-gathering and entertainment, students use English for communication with friends, family, and foreigners. Instant-messaging and social-networking sites, such as Facebook, are used in English. Relatives from abroad visit Iceland. Participants have foreign step-parents or friends, or siblings who have foreign partners, or simply find themselves in situations where they need to help foreign tourists in Iceland. In every situation the common language used is English. Even within an Icelandic group of friends it may be appropriate to use English because “jokes are funnier in English than if you translate them into Icelandic”. If a non-Icelandic-speaking friend leaves the room for a moment, young people may continue to chat in English “Just, I don’t know, because we can, somehow”.

Many students use English at work, possibly because co-workers are not Icelandic, or because the job involves dealing with foreigners. One participant had worked as a tour guide on glacier trips, another in a hospital. The latter comments that English “has helped me a lot too at work, me, as a nursing assistant. Foreigners have sometimes come, and again it’s the language that we move into...”

The final element in this “*English*” *Self* coding category concerns identity, that is, to what extent these students identify with the English language that they claim is so important to them and whether they value the Icelandic language and their identity as Icelanders. Some students’ first reaction to being asked how life would change for them if they knew no English was to laugh, as if the idea of life without English was simply ridiculous. Knowing English is not a bonus, giving some extra dimension to life, but is part and parcel of life for young people in Iceland. As one participant says,

...everyday things are all so tied up with English, like computers, they’re not all in Icelandic. How are you supposed to be able to do this and that if you don’t know English?

The students who took part in this study are not merely conscious of their good ability in English, but seem to regard it almost as a second mother tongue. One talks about thinking in English and speaking without having to translate from Icelandic. For another, grow-

ing up listening to English in music and films means that “you just speak it automatically, you just think it automatically... It just all comes automatically”. Forgetting a word in Icelandic does not mean searching for an Icelandic synonym. Instead:

Sometimes you completely forget what *interesting* is or something like that, so you are like “Yes, it’s very *interesting*, and people say “Yes, yes”, like that. That’s just how it is with people now, they express themselves a lot in English...

Three of the participants offered to be interviewed in English (the offer was not accepted). Many of them describe the ease with which they speak English, and pepper their conversation with English words. However, a closer look at the English they actually use during interviews reveals a tendency to use single words or two-word collocations, some of which appear to be borrowed from English textbooks. Examples of these are *vocabulary*, *communication skills*, *technical terms*, *scientific terms*, *topic sentence*, *conclusion*, and *business*. Others are slang terms widely used in Iceland such as *meika sens* [make sense], *á sama leveli* [at the same level], *piece of cake* and *away from keyboard*.

Finally, as far as Icelandic identity is concerned, participants appear to see little cause for concern. Despite the conviction that they speak English effortlessly, not one participant felt that their Icelandic identity was compromised by English. On the contrary, they believe it necessary to know other languages, especially English, which they can use so universally, and are aware that the responsibility for communication lies with them since foreign visitors to Iceland cannot be expected to understand Icelandic. Icelandic remains important “for the country itself... To keep your, you know, your origins”.

Discussion

That young Icelanders have a positive view of English will come as a surprise to few. The level of exposure to English in Iceland and its influence escape nobody, nor does the fact that entertainment and English seem to go hand in hand. What this article has attempted to show, however, is that the relevance of English at secondary school has an extremely broad basis.

At secondary school, students feel they gain a depth of proficiency in English that enables them to understand more and express themselves better. Through English, they gain new knowledge; in areas they are already acquainted with and in new fields opened up for them through class tasks. Relevance is also evident in skills gained through English. Study strategies, such as “reading between the lines” are transferrable to other subjects and to daily life situations. Social skills are enhanced through group work when students learn to trust each other and share responsibility. Patience and perseverance, furthermore, are developed through English study, characteristics needed by all young people.

Developing adequate proficiency in English is deeply relevant to participants in this study as many envisage themselves living, studying or holidaying abroad. For them, English constitutes a key to the world. In the context of Iceland, English has bearing on many aspects of life from television entertainment to work to communicating with non-Icelandic-speaking friends and family. Not knowing English is regarded as extraordinary and almost ludicrous.

This study does not make use of empirical data on students’ proficiency in English. There is, of course, no reason to doubt that students have successfully completed the secondary school English courses they claim to have taken, and indeed this study is concerned itself with students’ perceptions rather than their tested ability. The fact remains, however,

that students' self-confidence about their ability in English may not be as all-encompassing as they proclaim. It seems unlikely that participants would talk about Icelandic in the terms they use about English: people have no need to "practice pronunciation", or to seek improvement in "communication skills" in their first language. Students talk about "getting by" or "coping" in English, suggesting that they do not have the near-native competency of level C2 of the European Language Portfolio (Europe, 2010), where a speaker "Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations". Icelandic teenagers seem to be content with the more basic level B1, in which language users "Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken" (ibid.).

The main implications of the evident desire for relevance in studies are that choice, participation, and learning are essential to secondary school English. An area of relevance extending beyond the classroom concerns student strategies for assessing progress and taking responsibility for learning. It appears that students develop little autonomy but rather look to their teachers for evaluating their proficiency and for creating a fun-filled learning environment. If English is not the entertaining and ego-boosting subject that students seem to expect, the blame may be laid upon the teacher, who is judged either boring or incompetent.

In Iceland today, there may be a somewhat dinosaur element to the term "motivation" as regards English-language learning. English plays such a large and unquestioned role in the lives of young Icelanders that it may no longer be appropriate to talk of motivation alone. The four-self model described in this paper is an attempt to extend the current discussion of motivation in language learning into the area of relevance.

Conclusion

This paper has described interpretive phenomenological research into perceived relevance of English studies to Icelandic secondary school students, based on student voices. Themes of relevance emerging from interview data gained were discussed in terms of a "four-self model", extended from past work on the second-language self.

These preliminary findings will be re-considered in the light of interviews with Icelanders reviewing their secondary school English classes from the perspective of university study or employment. It is hoped that a complex picture of what English and English studies at school represent for young Icelanders today can be built, and that the new dimension of relevance in the field of foreign language learning opened up for further research.

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