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Exposure to English in Iceland A Quantitative and Qualitative Study

Very little research is available on the amount and type of English the average adult in Iceland encounters in his or her daily life. In this article, results of two studies of the amount and nature of English exposure in Iceland will be presented. The first study is a telephone survey of over 750 informants who live throughout Iceland who were asked about their exposure and use of English. This is a representative sample of the population. The other is a qualitative study designed to give a clearer view of the type of English encountered and used by individuals. Fourteen Icelandic men and women of different ages in different professions were asked to keep a diary over their use English during the course of an average day. The results provide a good picture of Icelanders' exposure to and use of English and show a high and consistent presence of English in Iceland. However, as expected, the exposure is mostly receptive. These studies provide empirical evidence which supports previous notions presented by the author and others that English exposure is to a large extent passive which encourages English perceptive language skills over productive skills.

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Enskuáreiti á Íslandi: Megindleg og eigindleg rannsókn

Mjög lítið er til að rannsóknum um eðli og magn enskunotkunar í íslensku málumhverfi. Þrátt fyrir fáeinar almennar kannanir um viðhorf til ensku, hefur engin rannsókn tekið saman hve mikla og hvers konar ensku Íslendingar heyra í daglegu lífi. Niðurstöður tveggja rannsókna sem skoða einmitt þetta eru kynntar í þessari grein. Fyrri rannsóknin er könnun sem var hluti af stærri rannsókn framkvæmd af Félagsvísindastofnun. Sjö hundruð og fjörtíu Íslendingar voru spurðir um magn enskunotkunar – hversu oft þeir hlustuðu, læsu, töluðu og skrifuðu ensku. Úrtakið er marktækt og endurspeglar þjóðina með tilliti til kyns og búsetu. Hin rannsóknin er eigindleg og fólst í að skoða nánar hvers eðlis máláreitin voru sem svarendur byggju við. Fjórtán einstaklingar frá 18 ára til 66 ára voru beðnir að halda dagbók þar sem þeir skráðu enskunotkun sína yfir einn ákveðinn dag. Eins og við var að búast eru niðurstöður þær að Íslendingar heyra og lesa ensku mun oft en þeir tala hana eða skrifa.

Höfundur er prófessor í annarsmálfræðum við Deild erlendra tungumála, bókmennta og málvísinda á Hugvísindasviði Háskóla Íslands.

Introduction

This is a partial report of findings of a three year study that aims to map out exposure and use of English as a Lingua Franca¹ in Iceland. As in all of the Nordic countries, there is wide exposure to English in Iceland and there is increased pressure to use English in all walks of life including in education and business, even amongst speakers for whom English is not a native language (Phillipson, 2008; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2007). The assumption in Iceland, as in all the Nordic countries, is as stated in the Nordic Policy on Multilingualism from 2006 that “Nordic people, internationally speaking, speak very good English”. Studies by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir (2010) and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir and Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2010) support the notion that the majority of university students and faculty members at the University of Iceland consider their English to be good or excellent. This is also the case for almost 600 members of the business community surveyed about their perceived English skills by Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir (forthcoming). A presumed reason for the perceived high proficiency is the assumption that the high exposure in the Nordic countries to English in every day life through movies and television broadcasts and computer use makes the average Scandinavian, including the average Icelander, a good English speaker. Yet very little research is actually available on the amount and type of English the average adult in Iceland encounters in his or her daily life.

In this article, results of two studies of the amount and nature of English exposure in Iceland will be presented. The first study is a telephone survey of over 750 informants throughout Iceland who were asked about the amount of exposure and use of English. This is a representative sample of the population.

The other is a qualitative study designed to give a clearer view of the type of English exposure encountered by individuals. Fourteen Icelandic men and women of different ages were asked to keep a diary documenting their use of English during an average day. The results provide a good picture of Icelanders' exposure to and use of English.

These studies are an important part of an ongoing three year project funded by the Icelandic Research Center which began in 2009 and will end in 2011. The project was a collaboration between researchers and graduate students from the School of Education and the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland and has five major components. They examine;

1. the exposure, proficiency and awareness of English by children at the onset of formal instruction
2. the status of English at the transition from primary to secondary school,
3. the status of English at the transition from secondary to tertiary education including views about the relevance of English in study and work,
4. perceived proficiency and actual use of English in the business community and
5. the amount and type of exposure of English encountered by Icelanders, which is the topic of this presentation.

¹ The term English as a Lingua Franca here refers to a situation where English is used for communication among native speakers of other languages. English as a foreign language is used to describe a learning situation where English is learned in an environment where it is not used in every day life (ex. learning English in Hungary). Learning English as a Second Language refers to the acquisition of language in the context where it is spoken, as an immigrant in Britain would.

The preliminary results of the different components of this project may be found in previous publications of the author and other participants in the project, Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, Samuel Lefever, Anna Jeeves, Ásrún Jóhannsdóttir and Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir. Preliminary results indicate that before English instruction begins, young learners see themselves as English users and that students who begin formal English instruction in the 4th grade have already exceeded the curriculum goals for English in that grade. Students, once out of school, feel that their English education had little to do with their actual English use. In business, there seems to be an hiatus in proficiency between colloquial English and technical terminology. Throughout speakers seem to overestimate their English proficiency.

The ultimate goal of the exposure study is to determine how the nature of the input encountered in everyday life might affect and explain the type of English proficiency attained by Icelanders. We are especially interested in examining whether there is a difference in exposure to receptive language (reading and listening), and use of productive language (speaking and writing), as there is a consensus among applied linguists that different skills are required for comprehending language, or using receptive language, and for producing language.

Use of English in Iceland

This study focuses on English usage by Icelanders from the point of view of the speaker. Users were asked to report on their own use of English. This method of study relies upon subjects' views about their English use. In an effort to obtain the best possible overview of the use of English, a short quantitative survey of a cross section of the population was conducted, as well as a smaller qualitative study where individuals were asked to describe in some detail their encounters with English during an average day in their lives. First a short overview of material broadcast in English by Icelandic media during a one week period in June 2011 is presented.

English in the Media

This study was conducted by Sergio Garcia Ortega as part of his BA thesis completed in September, 2011. Ortega reports that individuals in Iceland spend an average of 2.5 hours daily watching television (Capacent, 2011). He examined how much English material was broadcasted by three channels in Iceland, *RÚV – Sjónvarpið*, *Skjár Einn* and *Stöð 2*. He found out that of a broadcasting time of 73.7 hours for one week in June, 57.2 were devoted to Icelandic and 16.15 to English material (Ortega, 2011). During the same week, all of the 126.4 broadcast hours by *Skjár Einn* were in English (Ortega, 2011). Out of a total of 49.4 broadcast hours by *Stöð 2*, 38 hours were in English and 11.4 in Icelandic (Ortega, 2011). Accounting for the total amount of hours broadcast by these channels during the same week in June, 2011, 68.6 hours were of domestic origin with 180.9 hours of English language broadcasting. That is to say, that just 27.4% of the material broadcast by Icelandic TV stations was in Icelandic.

A study conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2010 showed that half of the survey's almost 700 respondents read books for pleasure in a foreign language and for 92% of those the language was English (p. 37). Seventeen percent of respondents preferred cultural material in foreign languages and 40% had equal preference for foreign and domestic material. For the the age group from 18-29, the percentage rose to 43% who preferred materials in a foreign language, mainly English (Andrea Dofradóttir, Ásdís A. Arnalds, Guðlaug J. Sturludóttir & Friðrik H. Jónsson 2010, p. 40).

The results provide empirical support for previous notions that a substantial amount of programs in English is broadcast through the media and that Icelanders are exposed to more English than Icelandic programming in their television viewing.

A Quantitative Study of English Use

The four questions on exposure presented in the quantitative study were created by the author with Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir and included in a larger survey executed by The Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland (i. *Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands*) in the winter of 2011. The overarching research question is: What is the amount and nature of English usage among Icelanders including listening, reading, speaking and writing?

Methodology and Data Collection

Félagsvísindastofnun conducted a phone survey from the 5th to the 16th of February, 2011. The overall survey included questions on varied topics including the four that focused on respondents' use of English. Respondents were asked how often they heard, read, spoke and wrote English. The sample consisted of 1200 individuals selected randomly for the census of adult Icelanders who are 18 years or older. Of the 1200 who were approached, 740 were willing or able to respond, or 61.7%. Twenty-four respondents were eliminated for various reasons and 7 could not take part in the survey due to illness or handicap. The overall response rate was therefore 62.9% of the population approached.

There was an almost even distribution of men and women respondents (51% and 49%) and an equal distribution according to residence in the Reykjavík metropolitan area or outside Reykjavík. This indicates that the sample is an accurate representation of the overall population of Iceland in terms of sex and residence. In terms of age distribution, there is a slightly lower number of actual respondents in the youngest age group, 18–29 years, or 54%, and slightly higher or 69% in the age group from 40–49 years. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents had completed primary school. Approximately 39% had completed some sort of secondary education, and 33% were university educated. This is a representative sample of the population and gives a good overview of how respondents evaluate their English use.

Respondents were asked how often they heard, read, spoke and wrote English. They were given the following response options: daily (more than 4 hours pr. day), 1–4 hours daily, less than 1 hour a day, 3–6 times a week, 1–2 a week, 2–3 times a month, or once a month or less.

Results are presented in four tables, one for each skill. A chi-square analysis was used to test the relationship between (variables X) and (variables y).

Results

Respondents were asked two questions about their receptive use of language. The first question was how often they heard English. The answers may be seen in *Figure 1*.

	Responses	Share	Margin +/-	Share
once per month or less often	19	3%	1.1%	3%
2-3 times per month	9	1%	0.8%	1%
1-2 times per week	23	3%	1.3%	3%
3-6 times per week	49	7%	1.8%	7%
daily, less than 1 hour a day	157	21%	3.0%	21%
daily, 1-4 hours a day	378	51%	3.6%	51%
daily, more than 4 hours a	101	14%	2.5%	14%
Number of responses	736	100%		
No response/doesn't know	4			
Total	740			

Figure 1 – How often do you hear English?

About 86% of respondents hear English every day and 65% hear English more than one hour a day. Fourteen percent hear English less than daily.

The next question asked how often respondents read in English. The results are presented in *Figure 2*.

	Responses	Share	Margin +/-	Share
once per month or less often	176	24%	3.1%	24%
2-3 times per month	59	8%	2.0%	8%
1-2 times per week	104	14%	2.5%	14%
3-6 times per week	82	11%	2.3%	11%
daily, less than 1 hour a day	135	18%	2.8%	18%
daily, 1-4 hours a day	144	20%	2.9%	20%
daily, more than 4 hours a	33	5%	1.5%	5%
Number of responses	733	100%		
No response/doesn't know	7			
Total	740			

Figure 2 – How often do you read English?

Surprisingly almost half of respondents or 43% read English every day. A quarter read in English once a month or less. Both of these questions focus on ascertaining how much receptive use of English goes on in Iceland. Receptive language refers to language that is heard, but does not need to be spoken. In Applied Linguistics it is accepted that most speakers understand much more than they can produce.

So the next pair of questions, centered on the productive use of language, are presented in *Figures 3 and 4*.

	Responses	Share	Margin +/-	Share
once per month or less often	301	41%	3.6%	 41%
2-3 times per month	83	11%	2.3%	 11%
1-2 times per week	126	17%	2.7%	 17%
3-6 times per week	73	10%	2.2%	 10%
daily, less than 1 hour a day	69	9%	2.1%	 9%
daily, 1-4 hours a day	54	7%	1.9%	 7%
daily, more than 4 hours a	24	3%	1.3%	 3%
Number of responses	730	100%		
No response/doesn't know	10			
Total	740			

Figure 3 – How often do you speak English?

Figure 3 shows a very different picture from the one presented in Figure 2: the results are almost opposites. In Figure 3, 41% say they speak English once a month or less and 19% speak English daily.

	Responses	Share	Margin +/-	Share
once per month or less often	367	50%	3.6%	 50%
2-3 times per month	71	10%	2.1%	 10%
1-2 times per week	97	13%	2.5%	 13%
3-6 times per week	51	7%	1.8%	 7%
daily, less than 1 hour a day	86	12%	2.3%	 12%
daily, 1-4 hours a day	49	7%	1.8%	 7%
daily, more than 4 hours a	12	2%	0.9%	 2%
Number of responses	733	100%		
No response/doesn't know	7			
Total	740			

Figure 4 – How often do you write English?

The same patterns appear when respondents are asked about the extent of their own writing. About half of the respondents write once a month or less. Very little difference is found in English use among men and women although men hear English slightly more often in the most frequent category, or 11% women to 16% men. English use increases gradually the younger the respondent. However there is no distinct difference in English use according to level of education or of residence. Please see Andrea Dofradóttir et al. (2010) for a more detailed discussion of the results. The important aspect of these findings is the clear and overarching predominance of receptive English exposure over productive English use.

A Qualitative Study of English Language Exposure and Use

We were interested in examining what type of exposure was encountered by a cross section of Icelanders, i.e. how much English a person living in Iceland hears/uses every day through TV, films, radio, music, meetings, conferences and conversations. This includes 1) amount of programming watched without subtitles and 2) the nature and amount of code switching (using English words, phrases or sentences in Icelandic speech). This article presents the results of the first of many of these kinds of studies and follows the

experiences of 14 informants. The research question is: What is the amount and type of English encountered and used by a cross section of Icelanders on an average day through the media and through everyday interaction?

Methodology and Data Collection

Students in a university class on English as a Lingua Franca were asked to find two informants each and ask them to keep an English diary over a typical day. They were also instructed to serve as field researchers. The study was part of the requirements of the course. The instructions to the field researchers (students) was that the two informants should not be bilingual (English/Icelandic) nor speak English at home. One informant should be male and the other female and they should not be the same age. Field researchers were instructed to ask each informant to fill out a background information sheet that included questions about their age, sex, education level and English background, and they were asked to evaluate their English proficiency. This background survey is identical to one used in other components of the larger project. Secondly, informants were asked to keep an English diary over the course of 24 hours and to write down all instances of English exposure and use. An English diary sheet was provided. Finally, informants were asked to fill out a reflection sheet and field researchers were asked to interview the informants for about 30 minutes to obtain elaborations and clarifications on the reflections or anything that they thought was relevant to the study.

Sixteen informants took part in the study. Two informants had to be eliminated as they were native speakers of Polish and were therefore not representative of the targeted population, the average Icelander. Therefore the experiences of 14 informants are presented in the study. There was an even distribution of men and women, seven participants of each sex. The informants ranged in age from 18–66+. It turns out that six of the fourteen were in the youngest age group; 18–24 years. Six of the informants were students and 10 had various professions. Two of the professionals also happened to be studying at university. Others were teachers, an IT worker, service industry personnel and one retiree.

Results

The overall tabulations of the amount of time spent using English are presented in *Figure 5*.

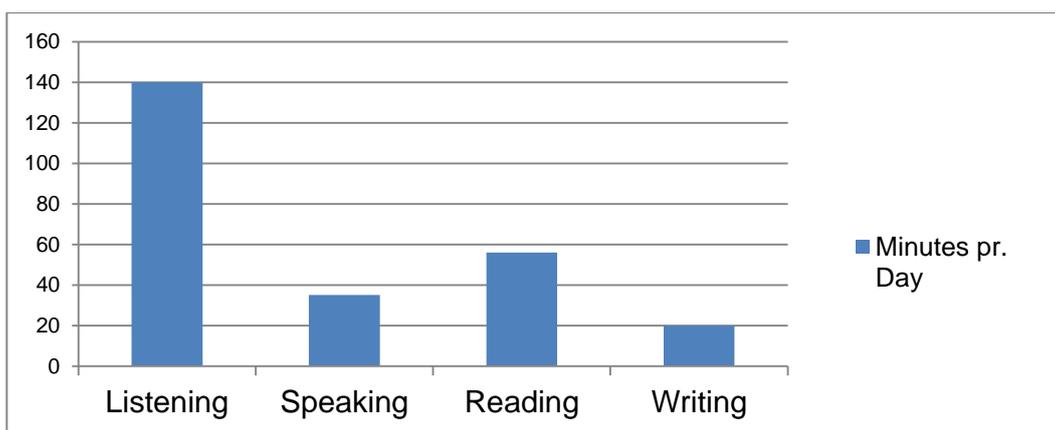


Figure 5 – Overall time spent on using English.

This study supports the findings of the quantitative study presented earlier, as Icelanders are engaged in listening to English for over triple the amount of time that they spend speaking it. And they spend three times more time receiving English input (listening and reading) than they spend producing output (speaking and writing).

As the data is based on the English use of only 14 informants, the distribution of the scores is wide and the standard deviation is high. Listening times ranged from 5 hours to 30 minutes – mostly spent watching (listening to) movies and TV shows. The younger the informant, the more likely he or she was to be watching movies or shows on the computer that did not have subtitles and were not dubbed.

Speaking time ranged from 0-240 minutes, with most informants spending no time or only a few minutes each (at work) speaking English. The bulk of the 240 minutes was spent by one informant, an actor who recited monologues in English in acting class that day. Other informants did not document much speaking other than two in the youngest age category who spoke for a few minutes with non Icelandic speaking work colleagues.

Reading was mostly done online, looking up information and browsing social network sites. As 6 informants were students, they wrote that they read academic books (Two said they struggled with understanding their academic books). In terms of time spent writing, two of the informants wrote online blogs and chatted (wrote) with foreign friends (not just native English speakers) on social networking websites such as Facebook.

Informants were also asked to reflect on their English use and whether this was a typical day for English use. They were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- a) Was this an average day in your life? If not, how was it different?
- b) Do you remember using English words in otherwise Icelandic speech? Do you remember others using English in otherwise Icelandic speech? Can you give examples?
- c) Do you mainly watch television shows with subtitles (Icelandic channels) or do you watch foreign channels without subtitles? Can you estimate the percentage of your viewing of each?
- d) Is there anything else about English in your life that you think might assist us in mapping out the status of English in Iceland?

This was indeed an average day for most informants who all admitted to code switching or using English words, phrases and sentences in otherwise Icelandic speech. One informant said he did not code switch, but then actually did so during the interview according to the field researcher's notes. Another informant said he did not notice if, or when, he code switched but was sure that he did. Younger informants were more likely to code switch or admit to code switching, and two of the older informants believed that younger people were more likely to code switch than older people and admitted to code switching more when speaking to younger people like their students.

Younger people were also more likely to watch movies and shows without subtitles on the computer and some watched exclusively movies without subtitles. Below are some comments taken from the last part of the study where informants were asked to share other reflections about English use:

“I use English a lot and could imagine just using English”
Young male student

“There is more English use now than when I was younger”
Older male retiree

“Some of my teachers use English to explain ideas”
Young female student

“People from all over, including Scandinavia, use English to talk to Icelandic people”
Young female in the service industry

The overall results of this study indicate that for these informants about 16% of waking hours is spent listening to English. If one takes away time spent on daily errands and such spent in silence, the percentage is even higher. Informants reported that they listened to English lyrics on the radio while getting ready for work and on their way to work, as well as during work. But the bulk of their leisure time outside work was spent listening to music while doing housework, watching television and, increasingly among younger people, are engaged with English while on the computer. It should be emphasized that these findings are based on a very small sample.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that supports views presented previously by the author and other members of the *English as Lingua Franca in Iceland Project*, namely that the high exposure to English indicates that English should no longer be considered a foreign language in Iceland. Preliminary results of other components of the project provide clear representations of the consequences of the changing status of English in Iceland. Ásrún Jóhannsdóttir's (2010) research has demonstrated that young children's English proficiency far exceeds the curriculum goals for their first year of instruction. Her interviewees cannot imagine life in Iceland without English as they are already using English watching TV, playing video games and using the computer. Samuel Lefever's (2010) ongoing studies of young children's English proficiency support Ásrún's results.

Anna Jeeves (2010) interviewed young adults, both in and out of school. Her informants enjoyed English classes but did not feel challenged, expressing a dissonance between their English exposure and use of the language outside of school and the work required of them in school. Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir has described the effect the new status of English has on teaching and learning in the 10th grade (Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2011). One of the key results of Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir's forthcoming doctoral study of the status of English in business is that perceptions of English proficiency exceed the actual use her informants are able to make of English. She has identified what seems to be a collective over-estimation of English skills in the business world. Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir's and Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir's studies of university students and faculty have shown an overwhelming satisfaction with their English skills and preparation to tackle a curriculum mostly written in English. However, when probed, students and faculty alike acknowledge that using English increases work load and that at least a third of university students have difficulty understanding their university textbooks (Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir and Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2010; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010).

This group of researchers has suggested that the status of English in Iceland may be closer to a second language situation than a foreign language situation. This is not really the case as demonstrated by the studies presented in this paper. Input is to a large extent receptive and does not provide opportunities to develop productive skills, i.e the ability to use English for expression.

In Iceland (and perhaps also Scandinavia) a new language context at the national level has thus been created where exposure to a different language than the national language is high and yet it has no clear status. The language exposure and use is intense enough to affect Icelanders' identity and general language use. Still, English is treated like any foreign language in language and educational policy. English is clearly no longer a foreign language in Iceland. This new linguistic context has implications for the maintenance

of local languages and identities as educational and institutional support varies according to the official status of a language as a national, second or foreign language.

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