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“Being able to speak English is one thing, knowing how to write it is another” Young Icelanders’ perceptions of writing in English

A qualitative study on perceived relevance of secondary school English studies in Iceland is reported. Interviews with secondary school and university students and young people in employment give insight into perceptions of studying English at secondary school. The paper focuses on what value writing in English at school has for students and what changes to classroom material and activities could benefit them. The article opens with a brief overview of recent scholarly discussion on writing in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The 2011 Icelandic national curriculum for secondary schools and the *European Language Portfolio* are discussed. The findings of the study suggest a need for advanced language accuracy and fluency in employment. Participants enjoy writing in English, but mention a lack of autonomy and self-assessment skills. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study for learners and teachers of English.

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„Eitt er að geta talað ensku, annað að kunna að skrifa hana“:

Viðhorf ungra Íslendinga til ritunar á ensku

Greint er frá eigindlegri rannsókn á meintu gildi enskunáms í framhaldsskólum á Íslandi. Viðtöl við framhaldsskóla- og háskólanema, og ungt fólk í atvinnulífinu veita innsýn í viðhorf þeirra til enskunáms í framhaldsskóla. Í greininni er lögð áhersla á hvert viðhorf nemenda er til ritunar á ensku í námi og hvaða breytingar á námsefni og kennsluaðferðum gætu komið þar að gagni. Greinin hefst á stuttu yfirliti um það nýjasta í fræðilegri umfjöllun um ritun í kennslu ensku sem erlends tungumáls. Fjallað er um aðalnámskrá fyrir framhaldsskóla fyrir árið 2011 og *Evrópsku tungumálamöppuna*. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að þörf sé á umtalsverðri nákvæmni og flæði í tungumálakunnáttu þegar kemur út í atvinnulífið. Þátttakendur hafa flestir gaman af því að skrifa á ensku en nefna skort á sjálfstæði og færni í sjálfsmati. Greininni lýkur með umfjöllun um þýðingu rannsóknarinnar fyrir enskunemendur og enskukennara. Höfundur er doktorsnemi við deild erlendra tungumála, bókmennta og málvísinda á Hugvísindasviði Háskóla Íslands.

Introduction

Writing is a skill that concerns modern language teachers and their students at all levels of proficiency. Beginners may feel pride in their first basic phrases and sentences in writing. They gain more understanding of the relationship between letters and letter clusters and the sounds of the language. Writing also helps them grasp the structure of the language better, possibly allowing them to “notice” (Schmidt, 1990) features in a more concrete way than receptive skills do. More advanced learners may find that writing consolidates grammar and vocabulary knowledge and gives them practice in using newly-learned structures (Hedge, 1991). Although writing a paragraph on *What I would do if I won a million pounds* may not instill the 2nd conditional once and for all into the minds of learners, it does give them the opportunity to practice a structure that often seems to pose problems and that might otherwise be avoided. For very competent language learners, writing in the classroom or at home becomes a means of expression, a way to get down on paper thoughts and ideas. It may not be overly dissimilar to writing in the first language (with the exception of differing discourse conventions) and difficulties may be less concerned with whether an idea can be communicated at all than with which particular word or phrase expresses it best.

For the language teacher each level of proficiency presents its own challenges. Beginners may feel frustration with their lack of language skills while other students may battle with fossilized grammar or spelling mistakes, which are hard to overcome. Advanced learners may have specific problems with discourse conventions (Hedge, 2000). Teachers of large classes may find it difficult to keep track of student progress and individual needs and to pitch writing tasks at a suitable level. Equally well, it may be hard to take into account students’ needs for writing in the foreign language, to situate them in their present contexts of sportsperson, musician or part-time employee and their future contexts of university student, parent, or full-time employee (to name but a few possibilities) and to contemplate what relevance writing in English and school writing tasks in English have for them.

This article opens with a brief overview of recent scholarly discussion on the role of writing in the teaching of English as a foreign language. I report next on the provisions of the new Icelandic national curriculum for secondary schools and on the guidelines of the Common European Frame of Reference and the European Language Portfolio. The findings of a qualitative study into students’ perceptions of the relevance of English instruction at secondary school in Iceland are then presented, with particular reference given to writing. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings, both in their own right and in the light of Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) *L2 Motivational Self System*, and the implications of the study for learners and teachers of English in Iceland and elsewhere.

Why writing matters

Hedge has described writing as “a complex process which is neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language writers” (Hedge, 2000, p. 302). For some students, writing colloquial English may be, in fact, both easy and spontaneous. Extensive access to films for which English subtitles can be chosen and to interactive computer games, email, instant messaging and social networking sites gives students (at least in northern Europe and Iceland) a great deal of experience reading conversational language. This may lead, without inordinate effort, to similarly colloquial writing output in the form of message replies and status updates, an important type of informal communication between young people today.

On the other hand, academic writing in a second language calls for language and discourse skills that are unlikely to be “picked up” in students’ immediate surroundings and that need, instead, to be consciously studied. Writing can be learned (and taught) and with sufficient practice is likely to improve (Sokolik, 2003). Learning writing skills in a second language may be of particular benefit to those students for whom instruction in strategies for formal writing in the first language has been lacking (Hedge, 2000). Research in Iceland has also shown that skills learnt in writing in English do transfer to writing in Icelandic (Berman, 2007). Age may also be a factor in progress, and questions have been asked about whether progress in writing in English is due to maturational effects rather than to instruction (Sigurðardóttir, 2007). Suitability of classroom material must also be taken into account here, since if material and tasks are pitched at a level above learners’ age and maturity, they will not perform well.

Writing in a second language should not, however, be seen simply as a series of skills attained as students advance with their peer groups at school, nor as a linear task involving a set of discrete steps leading to a well-composed text (Uribe, 2008). It is a complex activity involving progress and setbacks in which goals may change as proficiency evolves and learners are aware of the improvement they have made and yet want to achieve more (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Writing in a foreign or second language calls not only for strategical planning but also for knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and discourse conventions, as Nunan advocates with a discourse approach to writing which “will show learners how to use their knowledge of grammar in the construction of coherent texts” (Nunan, 1999, p. 290). Weak language proficiency may force L2 English students to expend energy on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of organisation (Berman, 2007). It seems likely that, for these students, content may also suffer. Content, organisation and language proficiency are clearly closely linked. It is not enough for a learner to know *what* he or she wants to express – knowing *how* to put thoughts into words and onto paper, or into a computer, is a complex task. In this way, writing may be seen as dynamic, as “the act of juggling a number of simultaneous constraints” (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p. 31).

Although much classroom work may involve fundamental (and necessary) writing practice with its traditional focuses on grammar, vocabulary and spelling, special attention also needs to be given specifically to academic writing. Academic English, which comprises not only writing but also reading, speaking and listening (for a discussion of what Academic English constitutes, see e.g. Coxhead & Byrd, 2007) is necessary for academic and career success, entailing as it does “the multiple, complex features of English required for success in public schooling and career advancement” (Scarcella, 2003, p. 1). In this way, having the ability to use formal written language is part of the empowerment that Bourdieu (1976) discusses when he questions the role schools play in perpetuating social inequalities. In the broad discussion about curriculum planning and goals, it has been claimed that the aim of education is to prepare children for “a future of open-ended possibilities” (Walker & Soltis, 1997, p. 25). In order to prepare students for future opportunities and to empower them by giving them the opportunity to take an active and productive part in society (Scarcella, 2003; Uribe, 2008) schools must ensure that they provide the best possible foundation for the future. Students expecting to use English in a range of different contexts in the future (for example, those in Iceland and other northern European countries) need to be equipped to function beyond their own limited fields of experience and to be able to “catch the subtleties of the language” (Diller, 1978, p. 136).

The 2011 Icelandic national curriculum for upper-secondary schools sets out the matriculation requirements for students of English according to the levels specified in the Common European Framework of Reference (Europe, 2001) and the European Language Portfolio (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2006). By the time students leave school, normally at around age 20, they should have reached level B2 or C1. The fact that students’ receptive and productive skills may not be at the same level must be borne in mind, but the descriptors for B2 and C1 do nonetheless give some indication of the sorts of tasks they should be able to complete. Examples of B2 writing skills are:

I can write an essay which develops an argument, giving reasons to support or negate a point of view, weighing pros and cons.

I can write summaries of articles on topics of general interest, and summarize information from different sources and media.

C1 skills are described thus:

I can express myself fluently and accurately in writing on a wide range of personal, academic or professional topics, varying my vocabulary and style according to the context.

I can elaborate my case effectively and accurately in complex formal letters (e.g. registering a complaint, taking a stand against an issue). (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2006)

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It is clear that the demands made here far exceed those made at the lower B1 level (students entering upper-secondary school are expected to be at B1 or B2 level):

I can write simple connected texts and essays on topics of personal interest, making appropriate use of dictionaries and reference resources.

I can describe the plot of a film or book, narrate a simple story or report on an event. (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2006)

A study of writing in English at the end of compulsory schooling in Iceland, however, found that many students aged 15-16 had not reached the B1 or B2 proficiency level specified by the national curriculum for compulsory schools. A total of eighty compositions were analysed for structure, fluency and connectives. It was found that:

... many students have a limited capacity to write a connected text according to accepted conventions and do not, therefore, fulfil the writing objectives demanded by the curriculum. (Torfadóttir, 2007, p. 7, my translation)

The author goes on to say that some texts were well-written and showed a good, albeit colloquial, knowledge of English. She suggests that student production may have been limited by the constraints of the examination (a story based on a picture sequence), and that students might have expressed themselves better if they had been allowed to choose their own topic. These conclusions are supported by other scholars who claim that students are likely to write in a more appropriate register if they are aware of what imagined audience they are writing for (Hedge, 1991) and will produce their best work if they are doing something they are interested in (Ingvarsdóttir, 2004).

In the absence of standardised testing at upper-secondary school in Iceland it is difficult to make conjectures as to how many students fail to meet the upper-secondary curriculum objectives, but it is clear that for young people planning on entering tertiary education or the workforce, a high level of written English proficiency is necessary. All five Schools of the University of Iceland offer courses taught through English at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, where students may be obliged to submit work in English. An increasing number of universities offer courses through the medium of English and in 2011 there were over 2000 Icelanders in tertiary education abroad (Iceland, 2012), many of whom will have been studying through English. For university students studying and writing through English “the challenges are enormous” (Nunan, 1999, p. 271). Many employment situations in Iceland involve written communication in English with contacts abroad or domestically with non-Icelandic speaking employees, and a professional level of language is likely to be expected. The widespread use of English in Iceland (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007, 2009; Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2010) means that all students should anticipate needing good written English proficiency in the future. It is up to teachers to provide that level of communicative competence (Hedge, 1991).

The study

The qualitative study reported in this article involved interviews taken in 2010 with young Icelanders at secondary school or university or in employment. The study aimed at investigating student perceptions of English courses of study at upper-secondary school in Iceland, with the pedagogical objective of suggesting ways in which students can be better prepared for life and work in today's global society. The main research question put forward was:

What characterises perceptions of practical and personal relevance of English studies at secondary school in Iceland?

Two secondary research questions provided a future and past perspective on the relevance of English at school. Participants at secondary school were asked how they saw themselves as users of English in the future and what relevance they thought their present studies had to that future. Participants at university or in employment were asked about their present uses of English and what relevance they felt their school studies (now completed) had for them at this stage of their lives.

In total, 38 interviews were carried out with 40 participants, following a pilot study of seven interviews done in the autumn of 2009 in order to finalise the interview framework. Interviews were semi-structured and were conducted and transcribed verbatim in Icelandic. Of the 40 participants, 16 were at secondary school, 13 at university, and 11 in employment, their ages ranging from 18 to 28 years. There was an equal division of male and female participants. Interviews were taken in the Greater Reykjavík area and in northern and southern Iceland. Different types of schools and universities were represented and participants in the workforce came from a variety of employment situations (notwithstanding that this was the hardest group in which to find participants!).

Analysis of data involved techniques from Grounded Theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), such as open-coding and grouping of codes into themes. The three main coding categories established (the *Affective Self*, the *Cognitive Self*, and the *Interactive Self*) also took into account Zoltán Dörnyei's acknowledged *L2 Motivational Self System* (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009).

Background to the study

Combining constructs from theories of motivation and from the psychology of the self, Dörnyei developed the *L2 Motivational Self System* paradigm, whereby the learner is shown to be motivated by future images of him/herself. These images may be of the *Ideal Self*, the person the learner strives to be, or the *Ought-to Self*, the person the learner feels obliged to be or wishes to avoid becoming. The third element in Dörnyei's paradigm is the *Learning Experience*, covering instruction material, the influence of the teacher,

social pressures, and all that goes on in the classroom. Dörnyei’s *L2 Motivational Self System* has had far-reaching influence on the study of second language motivation, moving the discussion on from the long-standing integrative/instrumental debate (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972), and creating new interest in the study of motivation. His framework has been supported by research both in Europe and Asia (e.g. Lyons, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Yang & Kim, 2011).

Much of the research done so far into the *L2 Motivational Self System* is based on quantitative methods. Surveys used the original Hungarian studies have been adapted and translated for use in different national contexts. More recently, the focus of interest in research into second language motivation has been extended to qualitative research and the study of the *person-in-context* (Ushioda, 2009, 2011a), and to a *complexity* or *dynam-ic systems theory* view of the foreign language classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Ushioda, 2011b).

The desire to learn English for international communication also influences the study. This *International Posture* (Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Yashima, 2009) has been researched in relation to learners’ “English using ideal self” (Yashima, 2009, p. 159) and concerns learners’ need for personal expression through the second language.

The concept of *relevance* is known from the fields of philosophy and logic, and refers to the deep-felt need of humans for things to make sense. Although they call relevance a “fuzzy term” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 191), the authors base their first *Principle of Relevance* on the idea that “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 260), that is, that our need for relevance is evidenced by the fact that we look for meaning and context in every situation we find ourselves in or any task we undertake. Relevance has also been applied to information technology (Saracevic, 1975) and to second language acquisition (de Paiva & Foster-Cohen, 2004; Foster-Cohen, 2004) but has yet to be formally discussed in relation to individual differences and classroom motivation in foreign language learning.

Results of the study

As mentioned above, analysis of student responses to a range of questions exploring the idea of relevance in English studies at secondary school established three main areas of interest: *affective* (what participants felt about English at school, e.g. enjoyment or boredom); *cognitive* (what participants perceived they learned in English classes, e.g. grammar or literature ‘classics’); and *interactive* (what they used English for, apart from school tasks, e.g. choir-singing or computer games). Since it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all the findings, I will account here only for participants’ comments about writing in English. I will begin by reporting what uses learners have for written English and what they find more, or less, enjoyable, and move on to what they consider useful.

Outside school, participants at secondary school write in English mainly for social reasons. They put comments on social networking sites and send emails to friends and relatives abroad. One talks about an American penpal to whom she writes once a month. Several participants talk about “chatting” on online computer games: when asked to elucidate they explain that “chatting” can be in spoken or written form. Only one participant discusses using English creatively. A keen guitar-player, the songs he composes have English lyrics, as “there’s something inside you that makes you write music in English”. For him, the value of knowing less common vocabulary is that he can work them into his lyrics, which he thinks may make people listen more closely to his songs.

Few of these younger participants in the study have a clear vision of how they will use English in the future. Some see unspecified uses of English in possible future clerical work. Most see their present use of English for computer-based communication and game-playing as continuing unchanged from the present. Two participants are planning to follow programmes in English at university in Europe. One of them (interestingly enough, Vala¹ speaks English at home with one family member) expresses fear of never learning to write English correctly and of being considered stupid:

You make mistakes in writing, then you’re stupid or an idiot. You don’t know what you’re talking about, something like that, you know. I don’t want to be the idiot who’s always making mistakes.

One participant who is at university outside Iceland does indeed have to submit all her coursework in English. None of the participants at university in Iceland have taken courses through English (that is, course material may be in English but lectures and assignments are in Icelandic). However, several foresee the possibility or likelihood of taking courses taught in English (either due to the presence of foreign students or because a course instructor does not speak Icelandic). Although hoping to do postgraduate work in an English-speaking country, Bjarki is concerned that he may not have the necessary language skills. The only writing he has done in English since he left school has been at an informal level through the Internet and, as he says, “No-one’s going to tell me off for grammar mistakes on the Net”. He seems to regret no longer having a teacher to check writing tasks and fears that the lack of feedback, along with computer spell-check programs that make corrections for him, have caused his formal written English to deteriorate:

I’m a bit scared that I’ve actually lost some of my ability to write correct English because obviously for the things you wrote at secondary school, then obviously you got a grade for spelling and so on, but now you only have to write something that’s nearly right, I mean just enough for the computer to understand,

¹ All participants’ names given are pseudonyms.

and because I haven’t been writing formal texts I haven’t been getting comments on whether the language is correct either.

Another participant at university is writing a novel in English in his spare time. For him, being “able to write texts that aren’t just comprehensible – they need to have style as well” is important and (like the songwriter at secondary school) he wants to use varied and unusual vocabulary. Other uses for written English among university students are similar to those mentioned by participants at secondary school; that is, posting messages on social networks and sending emails to friends and relatives. One girl helps her father when he writes emails in English. Some participants at university, however, report never writing anything in English.

Participants in the study who have matriculated from secondary school and are now in full-time employment also report social uses of English: writing emails to friends; messaging through computer games; and posting messages on online community sites. Lilja posts on the Internet and is well aware that “you have to know more” because it is less accepted to make mistakes in writing than in speaking. Magnús gets good reviews for stories he posts on a “fanfiction’ website”². However, several participants also need to write in English at work. Writing at work is mainly in the form of sending work-related emails, for example, answering queries, sending in stock reports, or confirming restaurant bookings. For one participant, sending 30 emails in English in a day is not unusual. Using English internationally in an employment situation calls for more than basic writing skills in English. Magnús says that in “business English, I have to know it to be in line with these companies”, while Jakob explains that “in a job like mine you may need to use sophisticated English”.

Moving on from what participants say they write in English in their own free time or at work, we should look at the types of writing tasks they do during their two or three final years of English study at secondary school and what they think of these tasks. Examples participants give of written assignments are: relating the plot of a television programme or movie; translating a text from Icelandic; expressing opinions on various topics; doing projects on famous people; and writing essays on works of literature. One participant with dyslexia reports having had a dispensation from all writing tasks in English. Freyr also has dyslexia and entered vocational training, never anticipating that his job would involve Internet searches for information in English and writing emails in English to clients on a daily basis.

While at this stage of their studies describing the plot of a film should be a relatively easy task for learners (given as a Common European Framework of Reference descriptor at level B1, the minimum proficiency level expected of students *entering* Icelandic second-

² ‘Fanfiction’ is a term used for fiction written by amateurs about the characters created by, or in the style of, recognised authors.

ary school), writing an essay on literature calls for a wide vocabulary and for cognitive processing through English, as Kolbeinn explains:

you really need to use your vocabulary if you want it to be good ... it makes you think more about the topic, go deeper into the topic, and actually, I don't know, you sort of think it all through in English.

Another participant goes so far as to say, "the only English study that I enjoy is when we read books and do essays about them". It seems that writing tasks involving interests or a personal response appeal most to students. Expressing an opinion about current affairs "was sometimes quite good fun", while Bogi says, "getting to write about what interests me is the best, because it's so boring just writing about some nonsense". Doing translations is perceived as both challenging and useful because it calls for looking up new words in a dictionary and working out how to express ideas. Feedback on translations is also seen as valuable, as is the simple fact of getting a lot of opportunities to write in English.

It is this opportunity to practice and improve one's writing that students in Iceland seem to value most, since writing is the skill they find hardest to attain on their own outside school. As a university student, Snorri, points out: "Being able to speak English is one thing, knowing how to write it is another, knowing how to write a text in English that's correct". Linda talks about the most useful things she did in English at secondary school being grammar and essay writing, "because that's something I don't learn anywhere else." Other participants make similar comments about the value of writing practice and of gains in spelling and specialist vocabulary made at secondary school: "the business package" and "vocabulary that you don't always think you need, but which is really useful to know".

Snorri, a student of environmental science, explains the importance of knowing English well enough to perform accurately in a range of writing and speaking contexts. It is as if accuracy and fluency empower him and boost his feelings of self-esteem:

Most useful? Hard to say. ...knowing how to use a major language ... knowing how to write a formal letter, knowing how to express yourself informally as well, and doing it right. I think that increases your credibility.

Although participants speak in general in positive terms about progress they have made in writing in English at secondary school, there seem to be areas that need more attention. These include, for example, grammar, syntax, self-assessment strategies and autonomous study skills.

Marta, a university student, says she often has to rephrase a sentence she is writing because she is unsure how to continue, and whether the words are in the correct order. She feels she would have benefitted from more feedback on errors in her writing at

school. Steinunn, now in employment, describes her frustration at not being able to express herself well enough on Internet chat sites:

When I started using English more on the Net, my English was terribly limited. I had such a small vocabulary and I couldn’t construct sentences well enough and write something that made sense without it sounding as if a 12-year-old kid had written it.

Similarly, Svava says that writing in English at school made her feel “lost” (she uses the English word) and that word order was given little importance, although “it’s those little things that make a huge difference”. She points out that written work was corrected but opportunities for learning from positive feedback were not taken advantage of:

You saw writing that came back with more red on it than white ... but it was never ‘Okay, this is a weak point, let’s just go over this’. I mean, it doesn’t take a long time to explain it, you know, to get it into our heads.

Self-assessment strategies seem to be lacking in the classroom, since once out of school participants appear unable to evaluate their written English without teacher corrections and grades. It would also seem that choice, personal response and student interests do not always feature in writing tasks.

Discussion and implications

Participants in this study made many interesting and revealing comments about writing in English and writing classes at secondary school. Pleasure in writing in English is evident, especially when choice of topic, personal opinion or creativity is a factor. Significant gains in writing skills are perceived by the majority of participants and school is the platform for writing practice and improvement (whereas listening and speaking skills may frequently be practised and improved outside school through popular entertainment and socialising). Writing is also seen as a means towards making gains in grammar, syntax and vocabulary as students put effort into finding the correct constructions and words to express their ideas. Accuracy in grammar and spelling is seen as necessary, and proficiency in formal language is important, particularly among participants in employment, be they shop assistants, office clerks, or food industry employees. An extensive vocabulary is necessary for creative writing in English, for example for participants who write fiction or song lyrics. Specialist vocabulary is also needed in many job situations, for instance, for email communications with head offices abroad.

Credibility, intelligence and grammar accuracy in writing seem to be closely linked in students’ minds. It may be “tough” to put comments in English on social networking sites, but, as Dagný, a shop assistant, says, “it’s got mistakes in it, you kinda go, ‘Oh, you’re so stupid’”. However, although participants are clear about the importance of having a good grasp of grammar and syntax if they want, for example, to “sound serious”, textbook

grammar exercises have little appeal and are not perceived as useful. Magnús says, “going through a book and writing words into sentences that have words missing” does not test students’ knowledge of English in the way that trying to get an idea or an opinion across “on paper” does. Copying English words along with their Icelandic equivalents (translated by the teacher) off the blackboard is also perceived as a useless exercise as “it doesn’t sink in”. This view is echoed in the literature, where it has been suggested that “the type of grammar-focused teaching activities used in many language classrooms” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 223) does not reflect first-language learning, and that task-based activities may aid second language learning more effectively.

What is surprising about the views on writing in English expressed in the study is the gap between secondary school students’ perceptions of their future needs in writing in English and the actual needs mentioned by older participants at university and in employment. Some school participants do not see beyond their present social uses of written English for computer chat and emailing, and there seems to be very varied awareness of university study material being in English, let alone entire courses and coursework. In general, English seems to be seen as a useful tool for travel, entertainment and online information-gathering and socialising, none of which involve serious amounts of writing. There are, however, some clear exceptions of younger participants who do expect to have to write in English at tertiary level. Not all participants who are at university have had to write assignments in English, but there seems to be a general acceptance that this may arise in the future and, as one university participant says, “if you aren’t prepared to take a course in English you just have to go and study something else”. Nonetheless, this same student seems to assume that incorrect English in an assignment will be tolerated and laughs at the possibility of being given a lower grade because of English grammar and spelling mistakes in her work.

It is the group of older participants who are in full-time employment who seem to have the clearest realisation of how essential writing in English is and the accuracy and formality it can entail. They are obliged to write emails, letters and reports – something that, on the whole, they had not anticipated when they entered employment. They also realise that errors that may be acceptable or may go unnoticed in spoken English are not acceptable in writing and will diminish the writer’s credibility. These errors are presumably also unlikely to advance employees’ career prospects.

Clear messages come across from participants about writing in English at school and after school. What is perhaps less obvious is how teachers can best prepare learners at school for the sort of writing they may have to do later on. Teachers should perhaps devote more time to discussing the role of writing at work and university with their students. Secondary school students often take their final course in English at age 18 (or even younger) and some may find it difficult to look beyond their present situation and imagine the more advanced and formal writing skills they are likely to need in the future.

Discussion of writing proficiency alone is naturally of little benefit; students also need ample opportunities to practise various forms of writing and ample feedback on which to base improvements.

Feedback on writing is clearly seen as potentially useful, although a distinction must naturally be drawn between *feedback* and *correction*. One participant at school mentions that she does not get feedback on her written work because when the “teacher goes over [my writing], then actually I haven’t made any mistakes”. This comment raises several questions: Is feedback only the correction of mistakes? Why does Telma get no guidelines as to how she can improve her writing? If her written work is faultless, at what level of proficiency is it? Is she writing correctly at a CEFR B1 level, that is, below the level that the course she is taking should be pitched at? If in fact her writing is at C2 level, will she not benefit from being guided towards still more ways to express herself? A more student-centred approach to feedback may encourage learners like Telma “to see their own learning and skill development reflected in how well they perform the task, and to view the task as a means of further enhancing their skill and competence“ (Ushioda, 1996, p. 23).

Feedback also needs to include self-assessment strategies that will enable students to be independent users of English in the future, to be able to judge the accuracy and appropriacy of their written language and to make changes for the future. Asking questions relating not only to present performance but also to the future, such as: “Where am I going? How am I going? and Where to next?” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 88) may be useful. Learning editing skills through rubrics, especially in pairs or groups, can also help students to correct errors, learn from each other and gain a sense of independence (Sokolik, 2003).

The years devoted to studying English at secondary school in Iceland are obviously intended to develop learners’ skills: higher level grammar, vocabulary and writing skills need, therefore, to be emphasised. Understanding of appropriate register is also called for, and students need to appreciate the difference between academic writing with its demands for “accurate use of grammar, vocabulary, and higher order thinking” (Scarcella, 2003, p. 26) and colloquial speech. Unless students (and their teachers) are content with not being able to express complex ideas and nuances in writing, they must be introduced to advanced language forms. Grammar is, after all, according to a best-selling author, “the pole you grab to get your thoughts up on their feet and walking” (King, 2000, p. 135). Attempting to teach discrete items of grammar and words out of context may not, however, be the most productive way to improve language skills. Whole tasks involving the expression of complex ideas, personal narratives and heartfelt opinions will in themselves call for exact structures and precise words.

What is also clear is that teaching writing successfully necessitates taking the individual student into account. School students have their unique personalities, interests, study

goals and career prospects. In English classes they are not merely learners of English but enjoy multiple identities as sportspeople, musicians, employees, future university students of a wide range of subjects, as well as friends and relatives of people with whom they use English as a *lingua franca*. In Iceland, where classes are large and teaching groups may change every term, it may be hard for teachers to see every student as an individual or “as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intentions” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220). On the other hand, English study need not be limited by the textbook (Ingvarsdóttir, 2004). Helping students develop personalised skills and strategies and giving them more freedom to write about what interests them may be a way to a more autonomous and learner-centred classroom, which may both reduce the workload on teachers and increase both student involvement and learning.

The study aimed at exploring relevance in the learning of English in Iceland. If, however, we look at the findings in the light of the established *L2 Motivational Self System* (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), we see that the *Ideal L2 Self* is not very apparent. There is little evidence to support the idea that learners seek to improve their written English due to a “desire to reduce the discrepancy between ... actual and ideal selves” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). The future prospect of doing written course work in English at university does not prompt secondary school students to put in extra effort, possibly because they feel their “actual” present proficiency is sufficient or that work will be graded for content alone and that language errors will not matter. Other participants foresee no change in their uses of written English in the future, and already perceive themselves as good writers.

On the other hand, the *Ought-to L2 Self* (Dörnyei, 2009) is more evident. Participants do not mention having to meet the expectations of others (e.g. parents or peers), but some do seek “to avoid possible negative outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). A fear of appearing foolish due to making mistakes in writing is expressed, as well as the insecurity of not knowing whether one is making mistakes or not. This suggests that participants do not feel *external* pressure from others to perform well in English, but rather pressure *from within* to avoid ridicule.

Conclusion

Returning, then, to the main research question in the study, there is little doubt that students believe that writing in English at secondary school and improving writing proficiency do have relevance. Learning to write well is a long process, and teenage students may lack a clear perspective of their present proficiency and how it differs from the advanced level that university and employment demand. Participants’ responses suggest that some aspects of practical relevance may be easier to grasp with hindsight. Teachers need to bear in mind that the courses they teach and the demands they make should reflect the future needs of their students. Basing curriculum planning on the assumption that if “real

life, practice, and motivational criteria [are taken] into account, a relevant writing programme can be negotiated” (Hedge, 2000, p. 321) may enable teachers to create learning environments that are both productive and enjoyable.

Little work has been done on the construct of *relevance* with regard to motivation in second language learning. The findings of the study clearly point to the concept as an individual difference worthy of further research. This discussion of the relevance of writing in English studies at secondary school in Iceland concludes with the words of one participant in the study. The perspective of this young man, Jakob, only a few years out of secondary school, shows well how complex learners’ realities are, and how complex foreign language learning is, with knowledge of the language developing over time. It suggests that strengthening advanced writing skills is beneficial and that well-designed writing instruction that takes into account the special situation of Iceland, with its vast exposure to colloquial English, can help students make progress:

I don’t think I really realised that studying English at school was helping. It was something you didn’t need help with, because you’re so surrounded by English. But when you leave secondary school, or when you’re in a job like mine, you may need to use sophisticated English and then it’s really good to have done English ... When I look back at what I was writing when I started English at secondary school, stuff that I thought then was really good, what I see was mainly wrong with it was that the grammar was often really bad ... you hear it so much, you watch movies, you listen to music, and somehow it doesn’t always get through to you how grammar works in English.

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