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English skills of young learners in Iceland

“I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me.”

This article presents findings from a recent study of reading, listening and communication skills in English of Icelandic children. The study was carried out in five urban schools with children (age 8) who had not received formal English instruction. In addition, parents of the most competent children were asked to describe their children’s English learning and use in the home. The results of the study show that children begin to learn English outside of school at an early age in Iceland. Most children can understand basic spoken English and many can participate in simple conversations in English. Parents primarily attribute their children’s language learning to their exposure to English through media and computer games and their interest in learning English.

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Enskukunátta átta ára barna á Íslandi

Í greininni eru kynntar niðurstöður úr rannsókn sem hafði það að markmiði að kanna enskukunnáttu átta ára barna áður en formlegt enskunám þeirra hefst. Gögnum var safnað í fimm skólum á suðvesturhorninu. Kannaður var les- og hlustunarskilningur barnanna ásamt samtalsfærni þeirra á ensku. Foreldrar þeirra barna sem sýndu mestu samtalsfærnina voru beðnir að lýsa með hvaða hætti þau hefðu lært ensku. Niðurstöðurnar sýna að mörg börn eru byrjuð að skilja einfalt enskt talmál mjög snemma og nokkur fjöldi þeirra getur tekið þátt í einföldum samtölum á ensku. Áhugi barnanna á að læra ensku er mikill og aðgengi að ensku í daglegu umhverfi þeirra er töluvert. Þetta tvennt nefna foreldrar oftast sem skýringu á því hvernig börn þeirra hafa lært ensku.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing trend throughout Europe to lower the age of foreign language instruction in schools. In many countries language instruction begins at the onset of primary education or even earlier. This is in response to the changing social and linguistic reality of Europe which, because of globalization and mobility, is becoming increasingly multicultural and multilingual. The focus of this article, however, is on lan-

guage learning *outside* the classroom – how children seem to be picking up English on their own in a naturalistic setting. The research study discussed in this article looks at the English skills of eight year-old children in Iceland before instruction begins and the factors that may influence their English learning. The article begins with a review of language research in regard to young learners and is followed by a description of the research study and its findings.

Background research

Language research in recent years has increasingly looked at issues having to do with young language learners. Generally speaking, young language learners are defined as children from five years up to twelve or thirteen years, or approximately the span of primary school education. Some of the topics that have been investigated are issues pertaining to the starting age of foreign language teaching, development of language skills, age-appropriate teaching methods and materials, and characteristics of learners themselves (Drew & Hasselgreen, 2008).

Discussion regarding the age issue is often divided into two camps. Those who promote an early start to language teaching use the argument that young children have positive attitudes and are highly motivated to learn languages (Cenoz, 2003; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003). Others point out that older learners have a faster learner rate due to their cognitive maturity and catch up with younger learners over time (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow, 2000; Munoz, 2006b). Some researchers argue that the benefits of an early start are contingent upon the amount of input received by the learner. Large amounts of language input, more than what children are exposed to at school, are needed for young learners to outlearn their older peers (DeKeyser, 2003; Larson-Hall, 2008; Munoz, 2006a).

A common characteristic of young learner language research is that it centers on school-based learning rather than learning in a naturalistic setting. Typically these studies call for more research into the role of language exposure outside the classroom and how it contributes to young learners' language learning (Munoz, 2008; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2006). In this regard, recent studies carried out in Belgium have demonstrated the positive influence of subtitled television programs on children's and adolescents' foreign language learning (Van Lommel, Laenen & d'Ydewalle, 2006). Most recently, a study by Kuppens (2010) looked at the long-term effects of English language-subtitled media and computer game use of children in grade 6 who had not received formal education in English. The results showed a positive influence of English media use and computer games on the pupils' oral translation skills (Kuppens, 2010).

Studies of children's English learning outside the classroom have also been done in Iceland. In 1991 Björn Þ. Jóhannesson looked at English listening, reading, speaking and writing skills of eleven year-old children in the country. At that time English teaching began at age twelve. His study showed a wide range in English proficiency from basic understanding of English to considerable communicative ability (Björn Þ. Jóhannesson, 1991). A similar study was carried out by Auður Torfadóttir in 1994 among eleven year-old children in four schools in Reykjavík. Her study focused on vocabulary recognition, reading comprehension and open-ended writing and also revealed widespread knowledge of English. About ten years later, a third study was undertaken with younger children. In this study, nine and ten year-old children in eight schools around the country who had received very little or no prior instruction in English were tested as to their English comprehension and communication skills (Auður Torfadóttir, Brynhildur Ragnarsdóttir & Samúel Lefever, 2006). As before, the findings of the study showed that a large numb-

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

er of pupils had acquired considerable competence in understanding simple oral English prior to the onset of English instruction in the schools.

In light of the outcomes of these studies, it is not surprising that many parents and teachers have pushed for an earlier start in English instruction at school. Both the National Curriculums of 1999 and 2007 lowered the onset of English teaching (currently in grade 4) and many schools have chosen to introduce English instruction in even younger grades (Lefever, 2007). At the same time, more information is needed about the English knowledge children bring with them to the classroom as a basis for better teaching. Thus, an additional study was carried out in 2009-2010 among seven and eight year-old pupils in grade 3. The study focused on the reading, listening and oral communication skills in English of children who had not received any formal instruction in the language. In addition, information about the children's background and use of English in the home was obtained through interviews with their parents. The study was partially funded with a grant from the University of Iceland Research Fund.

Research method

The study consisted of four parts – three tests of English skills and interviews with parents of the participants. The study was carried out in five schools in the southwest area of the country from November 2009 through May 2010. The participants were grade 3 pupils (seven and eight year-olds). Ten schools were contacted for participation in the study and five of them fulfilled the selection criteria. All the schools were 'partner schools' with the School of Education (in conjunction with teaching practice) and none of the schools had begun to teach English in grades 1–3. The school principals gave permission for participation and the study was registered with The Data Protection Authority (*i. Persónuvernd*). The parents of the children in grade 3 were informed about the study and permission for the children's participation was received. Björg Jónsdóttir, an MA student, assisted with the administration of the various parts of the study. Each part of the study will be described in greater detail in the following sections of the article.

Reading skills

The first part of the study focused on the reading skills of the participants. The research tool was a set of 4 reading exercises based on the Cambridge examination for young learners. This internationally recognized test is aimed at children ages 7–12 who have received approximately 100 hours of English instruction. The reading exercises were first piloted with grade 3 pupils in a school in the capital area. The final version of the test was then given to a total of 182 children in grade 3 (94 boys, 88 girls) in the five participating schools. A practice test which consisted of the same types of reading exercises was given to the pupils a few days earlier to prepare them for the actual test. The children were told that they were taking part in a research study; not taking a test that was to be graded. They participated with a great deal of enthusiasm and seriousness.

Instructions for the exercises were written in Icelandic and examples of correct answers were given in each of the exercises. The children were instructed to look at drawings, read questions and answer them as well as they could. They were told that they could omit answers and were given ample time to complete the exercises. The questions were not read aloud for the children, even if they asked for help.

There were a total of twenty items on the test equally divided between four tasks. The first task was a matching activity where pupils were asked to draw a line between a sentence and a corresponding drawing. In the next activity, pupils were supposed to answer yes or no questions based on a drawing of an outdoor scene with children and animals. The questions tested knowledge of common nouns, adjectives, action verbs and prepositions

of place. The third activity consisted of drawings of a child's bedroom and the task was to read questions about the drawings and write a single word answer, either in English or Icelandic. This task involved the use of question words, common nouns and verbs. In the final exercise, pupils were asked to complete a short descriptive text by filling the gaps with the missing words. The words and corresponding drawing were provided in a box below the text. Incorrect spellings of the words were allowed. The exercise tested pupils' understanding of syntax and reading context and their ability to use background knowledge.

Conversational skills

For the second part of the study a smaller group of pupils from the 5 participating schools was randomly selected to participate in individual interviews with two researchers, one male and one female. All the participants were 8 years old at the time of the interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate how well the children could understand and participate in simple conversations with an English speaker. A total of 51 children (31 boys, 20 girls) participated in the interviews, which were carried out in a quiet space in the children's school close to their classroom. The interviews were taken on the same day as the reading test (prior to its administration) and took approximately 10 minutes with each child. The interviews were recorded and the task responses that provided the most oral production were transcribed.

Drawings of familiar scenes, picture cards and set questions were used to elicit answers from the children. The same materials and questions were used as in the 2005 pilot study with older children (Auður Torfadóttir et al., 2006). No reading or writing was necessary to complete the tasks – participants only had to listen and respond verbally or non-verbally (by pointing or moving picture cards). The interview began with simple questions that could be answered non-verbally and progressed to more demanding, less structured tasks requiring more understanding and oral production. The interviews concluded with an informal conversation about topics familiar to the children.

The first interview task was at the beginning level of the Cambridge young learners tests (100 hours of learning) and the other tasks were at the next level of instruction (175 hours). After a brief introduction and some warm-up questions the children were shown a drawing of a garden and asked to identify objects on picture cards and put them in the correct place on the drawing. They were also asked to describe aspects of the drawing by answering simple questions. The questions tested the children's knowledge of objects, numbers, colors, actions and locations. In the next task children were asked to find the differences between drawings of a classroom scene. The relevant language included common objects, colors, clothing, and animals. In the third task children were shown a series of drawings (a visit to the zoo) and were asked to tell the story. The researcher began by describing the first drawing and then asked the child to complete the story based on the drawings. In each of these tasks the researcher provided verbal prompts in English when necessary to encourage the children to speak. The final part of the interview was an informal conversation about familiar topics such as favorite foods, family, hobbies or pets. The researcher initiated the conversation with a few open questions and encouraged the child to speak in English.

Listening skills

The third part of the study was a test of listening comprehension in English. For comparison purposes, the same listening activities were used as in the previously mentioned study with 9 and 10 year-old children (Auður Torfadóttir et al., 2006). The test consisted of a set of four listening tasks which were based on the Cambridge tests for young learners and intended for use after 100–175 hours of formal instruction. The tasks were

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

based on drawings of familiar scenes and related dialogues read by native speakers, both children and adults. The tasks varied in difficulty; the fourth task was the same type as the second task but was linguistically more demanding. No reading or writing was required to complete the tasks. Again the children were told that this was part of a research study and not a test. As before, they were very willing to participate.

The listening test was given to a total of 175 children in grade 3 in the five participating schools. The total number of valid responses was 172 (89 boys, 83 girls). The pupils were first given a pre-test to familiarize them with the format of the test. In the same week they were given the listening test in four parts (20 items) using color drawings of familiar scenes and objects and a CD with the dialogues. Instructions for the exercises were given in English and examples of correct answers were given for each of the exercises. The children were instructed to look at the drawings, listen to the dialogues and complete the tasks as well as they could. Each dialogue was listened to twice and children received ample time to complete the tasks.

In the first task the children were asked to listen to a dialogue and draw lines between an object and its location on a drawing. This task tested knowledge of common nouns (household objects and animals) and prepositions of place. In the next activity, children were asked to listen to a dialogue between two children and choose the correct drawing out of three possibilities that best answered the question. The drawings depicted familiar scenes at school, at home or during free time and tested knowledge of nouns and action verbs (common places, things and actions). The third task required pupils to locate and color a ball on a picture using the correct color. This task tested knowledge of nouns (objects and colors), prepositions of place and imperative verb forms. In the final task children were again asked to choose the correct drawing out of three possibilities, but the language use was more advanced. This task included the use of nouns (common places and things), adjectives (descriptions of appearance), past tense verbs, modal verbs and negative contractions. The children had to derive the answers from multiple bits of information given in the dialogues. The tasks also tested whether children could understand instructions given orally in English.

Parent interviews

After the third part of the study parents of the children who had the highest level of conversational skills in the interviews were contacted and the majority consented to a telephone interview. Prior to the interview the parents were sent a list of questions and were given the option of responding via Email. The parents were asked questions about their child's English learning and use of English in the home. They were also asked for background information regarding their age, education and profession.

A total of ten interviews were taken, which provided background information for seventeen parents (sometimes both parents of a child). The educational and professional background of the parents was varied. Most of the parents (76%) were 35–45 years old and had various kinds of professional training. Approximately two-thirds (65%) had some form of higher education and were employed in typical "white collar" jobs. Just over one-third of the parents had basic education and/or trade school training and worked at "blue" or "pink collar" jobs.

In the next section the findings of all four parts of the study will be presented.

Results

Reading comprehension

The average percentage of correct answers for the twenty items on the reading test was 50%. There was very little gender difference between the pupils' average scores. However, there was a considerable difference between the outcomes of the various parts of the test as can be seen in *Figure 1*. The percentage of correct answers decreased with the increased difficulty of the tasks. Overall, the results of the reading test suggest that children are beginning to attain basic literacy skills in English before formal English instruction begins in school.

Reading comprehension

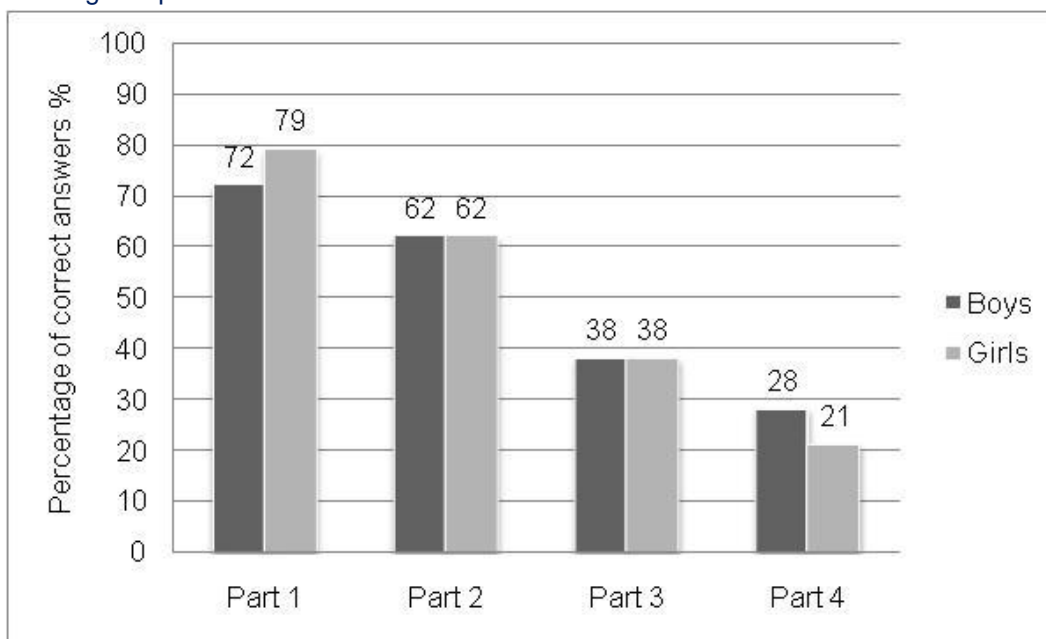


Figure 1 – Percentage of correct answers according to gender and test part.

Listening comprehension

The results of the listening test show a high percentage of correct answers. On ten of the twenty questions, pupils scored 70% or higher. The average of the average percentage of correct answers was 68%. *Figure 2* shows the average scores for each question on the listening test.

The results are very similar to the findings of the 2005 study with older children where the average of the average score was 72%. The distribution of the scores was in the high end – 11% of the pupils answered all twenty questions correctly. Interestingly, the average scores in this study were up to seven points higher than in the previous study on four questions (8, 9, 12, and 15).

The difference between boys and girls in this part of the study was minimal as was also the case in the 2005 study. The average of the average percentage of correct answers for boys was 70% and 67% for girls. Boys answered more questions correctly than girls but in eight questions the gender difference was less than 5% as seen in *Figure 3*.

The results of the listening test indicate that a large number of grade 3 pupils have already acquired considerable competence in understanding basic spoken English without having received any formal instruction in the language.

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

Listening comprehension

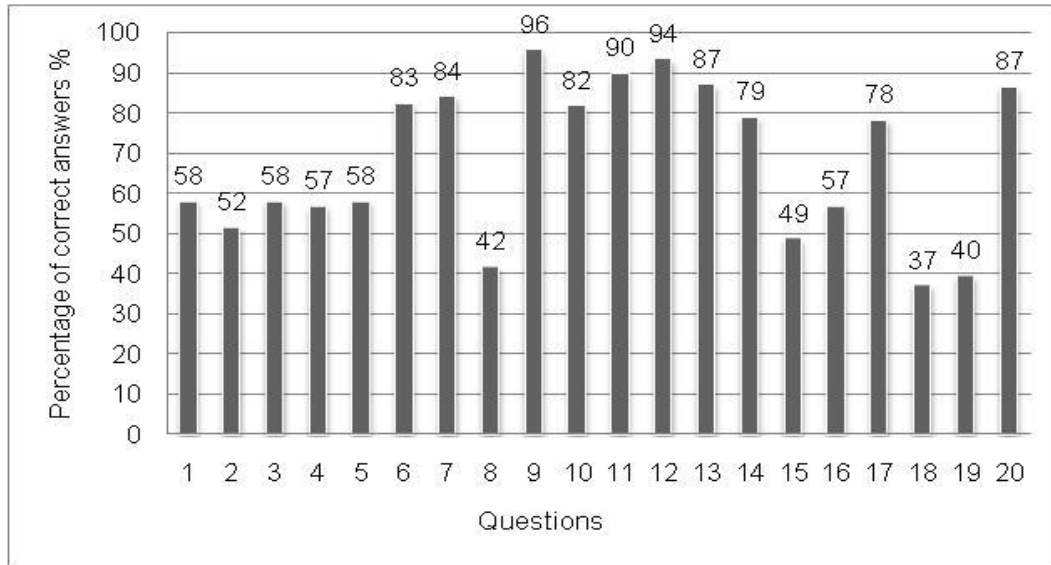


Figure 2 – Percentage of correct answers to twenty listening items.

Listening comprehension – Boys/Girls

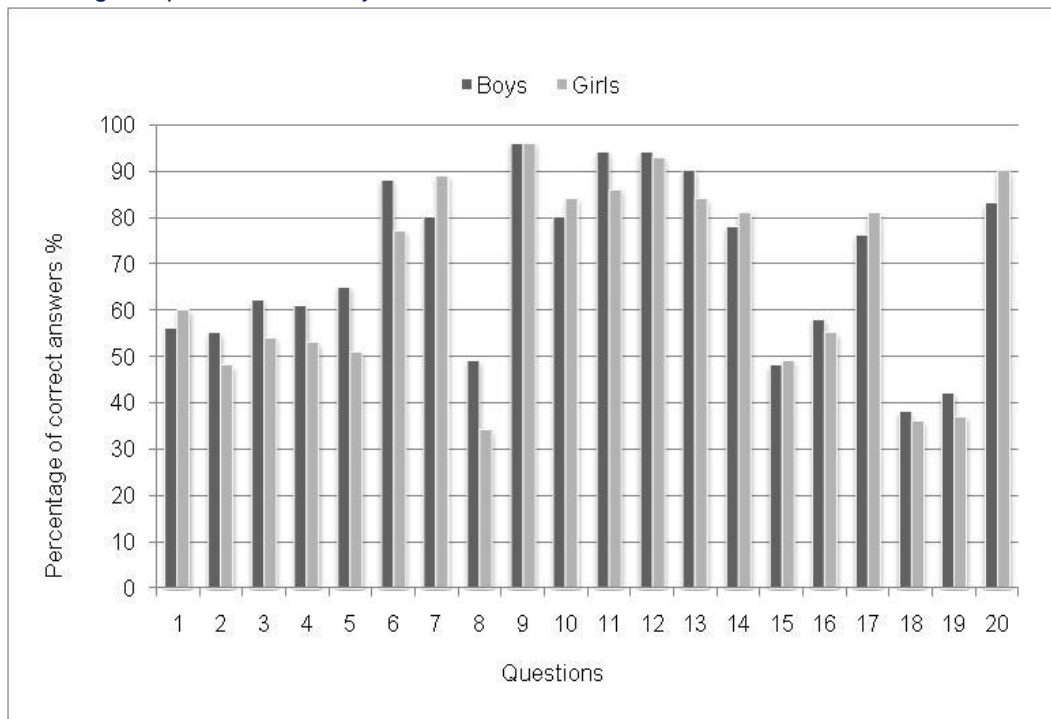


Figure 3 – Percentage of correct answers according to gender.

Oral communication

The interviews with the children were analyzed and grouped into three levels of English communicative competence based on the following criteria: understanding of oral instructions and questions, amount and type of oral production, range of vocabulary use and code-switching. The results from the interviews showed a wide range of ability from basic understanding of spoken English but little oral production to uninhibited interaction and extended conversation in English.

Group 1 consisted of the children that in most cases could understand simple English but could not use it to communicate effectively. About half of the participants (49%) were categorized at this level. These children demonstrated verbally or non-verbally that they understood the task instructions and simple questions but produced little or no spoken English. They were limited by their lack of basic English vocabulary and had a tendency to answer in Icelandic.

In group 2 the children could take part in a simple conversation with occasional prompting from the researcher. Just over one-fourth of the participants (27%) matched this level. These children understood and could answer questions in English using single words and short phrases. They were capable of using basic English vocabulary but occasionally used Icelandic words in their responses.

The remaining fourth of the participants (24%) were categorized in group 3. These children showed the highest level of communicative competence. They could respond without code-switching and little prompting was needed. Their responses showed examples of advanced syntax and grammar use. They had a wider vocabulary and could use chunks of language appropriately. Some of the children were capable of spontaneous interaction and had a strong desire to express themselves. The results of the oral communication study are shown in *Figure 4*.

Oral communication

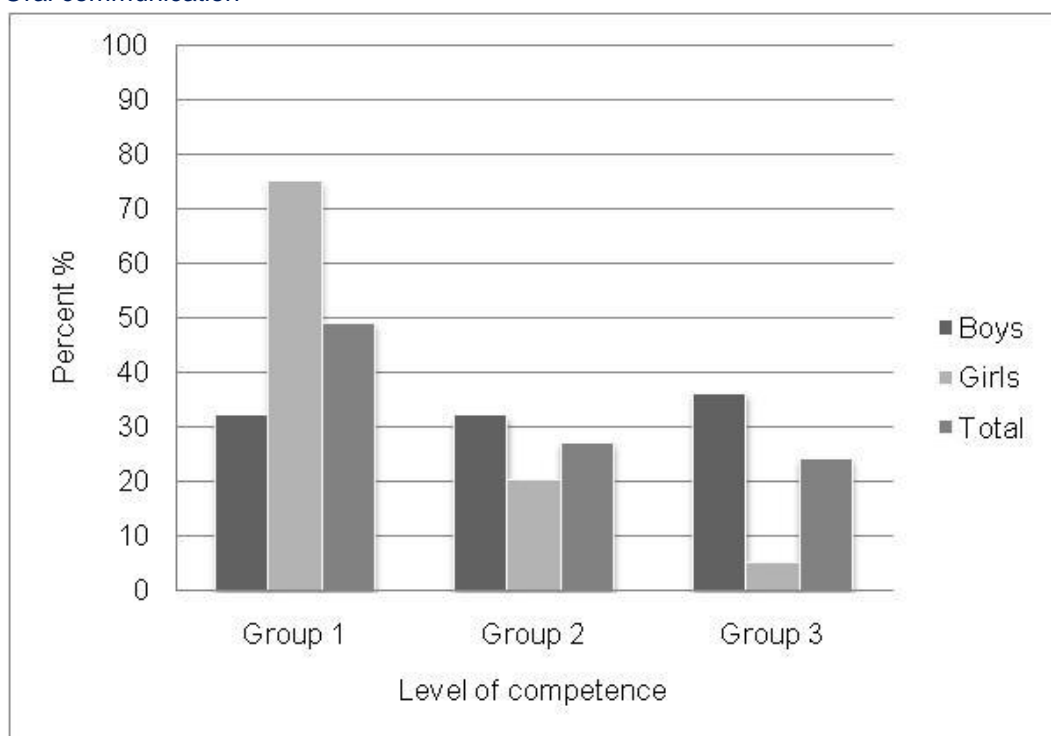


Figure 4 – Level of competence according to gender.

A clear gender difference was found in this part of the study. A majority of the girls (75%) was categorized in the group with the lowest level of communicative competence in English. On the other hand, the boys were more equally distributed between the competence levels. Overall, the findings of the oral communication part of the study show that a large number of the children could successfully participate in a simple conversation in English even though they had not had any formal instruction in English.

Speech samples

The following samples of the children's speech illustrate the various levels of oral competence. The first examples are taken from the interviews with children at group 2 level of competence. They are responses to the task where the children were asked to describe what was happening in a series of drawings (a trip to the zoo):

Researcher: ... *Now can you tell me the story? What happens?*

Boy 1: *He go and a monkey take the hat and ... he haven't ... and he gonna cry. And he give the banana and the hat.*

Researcher: *Who gives the banana?*

Boy 1: *Monkey*

Researcher: *The mother. What does she do here?*

Boy 1: *Give the monkey banana.*

Researcher: *And what does the monkey do?*

Boy 1: *Give the mother a hat.*

Researcher: *OK. And how does the boy feel?*

Boy 1: *Good.*

Researcher: *Why?*

Boy 1: *Uhhh. He does the hat back.*

Researcher: *That's right. He gets his hat back. ... Here he's crying but here he is...*

Boy 1: *Glad.*

Researcher: ... *Now you tell the story.*

Girl 1: *Monkey takes, monkey takes hat off the kid and kid start cry and so give Mother... apa (Icelandic for 'monkey'), monkey banana and monkey give boy hat again.*

Researcher: *Very good, and how does the boy feel?*

Girl 1: *Glad.*

Researcher: *He's glad. How does he feel here?*

Girl 1: *Crying.*

These children could participate in the conversation with prompting from the researcher. They could use vocabulary for objects, animals, actions and feelings and could answer in phrases or simple sentences. Although the children had difficulty with grammar aspects such as the use of articles, pronouns and verb endings, they could successfully describe the series of actions and express the feelings of the person in the drawings.

The next excerpt shows the types of code switching that occasionally occurred in the interviews. Sometimes the children adapted an Icelandic word to make it resemble Eng-

lish or substituted Icelandic words for vocabulary they lacked in English. Occasionally children used an Icelandic word even though they knew the English word.

Researcher: ... *Now can you tell me what happens?*

Boy 2: *Monkey his takes to hat ...umm boys. [R: uhuh] Og (Icelandic for 'and') boys he's going to grat (adaptation of Icelandic word for 'cry'). [R: uhuh] His mummy he skipti (Icelandic for 'exchange') to banana and the hat.*

The following speech samples are from the highest level of competence (group 3). These children were capable of completing the 'zoo' task with little need of prompting. They could describe a sequence and provide the main points of the story in complete sentences. They showed an understanding of English sentence structure, possessive pronouns, third person singular form, articles and verb tenses, although several errors occurred. The phrase 'goes to cry' is a direct translation from Icelandic (*fer að gráta*) and is thus an example of mother tongue interference.

Researcher: *Now can you tell me the story?*

Boy 3: *The monkey take his hat, Ben goes to cry and his Mom give the monkey banana, and the monkey, uh, give the hat to Ben.*

Researcher: *Can you tell me the rest of the story? What happens?*

Girl 2: *They are laughing at the monkey and now the monkey is taking his hat off and here he is wearing his hat and he is crying and now the monkey gives ... they trade with banana and the mother take the hat and gives it to the boy.*

Researcher: *Can you tell me the rest of the story?*

Boy 4: *Then, when they going, the monkey takes the hat from Ben and he goes to cry, and then, his mom talks to the monkey and gives him a banana, change by the hat. And then everybody was glad, or happy.*

The following are excerpts taken from the informal conversations with the children in group 3 about familiar topics such as family or pets. The examples show how the children could expand on the topic, use fillers, take turns, and backchannel. They used both present and past tense forms although they were not consistently used correctly.

Researcher: *Do you have any brothers or sisters?*

Boy 5: *Brothers, two brothers.*

Researcher: *How old are they?*

Boy 5: *One was sixteen in January and the other one is eleven. [R: OK.] And they are pretty annoying.*

Researcher: *Can you tell me more about your family? What do your parents do?*

Boy 6: *My mother is ... my mother is working in a hotel. And my father is a ... he's fixing cars.*

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

Researcher: *Do you have any more animals?*

Boy 7: *No, I had fish ... but now he is gone.*

Researcher: *What happened?*

Boy 7: *My dad sell it, 'cause my cat was trying to eat it.*

Researcher: *Do you have any animals?*

Boy 8: *I had. A fish.*

Researcher: *You had a fish? What happened?*

Boy 8: *He just don't want to eat any, then he die. And I have a umm... a bird. I have a bird and he just died one time when the, when the friend of my dad was there and he found him dead in his house or what you (call it).*

In the next example the child uses repair strategies to establish the correct meaning and obtain the lacking word.

Researcher: *Do you have any brothers or sisters?*

Boy 8: *One brother and one sister.*

Researcher: *OK, how old are they?*

Boy 8: *My brother is thirteen and my sister is uhh... ten, not years ...*

Researcher: *Not years?*

Boy 8: *It's not one year, just ten ... [R: months] Yeah.*

Some of the children in group 3 showed examples of wider vocabulary that was usually linked to personal experience or an area of interest.

Researcher: *How about your father?*

Boy 9: *My father, he ... is ... 54 years old. Yeah I just know that.*

Researcher: *What's his job? What's his work?*

Boy 9: *He builds for kids.*

Researcher: *He builds for kids? [Boy 9: Yeah.] What does he build?*

Boy 9: *Build castle.*

Researcher: *A castle?*

Boy 9: *Yeah, and um... water slides, [R: water slides?] slides.*

Researcher: *Slides? So things on the playground [Boy 9: Yeah.] for kids to play on?*

Boy 9: *Yeah, that's it.*

Several of the children in group 3 had specific ideas about how they had learned English, as can be seen in the following examples. Most of the children attributed their knowledge to watching television or learning it from other English speakers.

Researcher: *Can you tell me, where did you learn your English?*

Boy 9: *I did learn it on the TV.*

Researcher: *On the TV? Do you like to watch English on the TV?*

Boy 9: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *Do you have a favorite TV show?*

Boy 9: *Yeah, that's Discovery.*

Researcher: *Discovery with ...?*

Boy 9: *Science.*

Researcher: *So you like to watch Discovery channel?*

Boy 9: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *That's good. Do you like to watch cartoons?*

Boy 9: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *And they help you learn English?*

Boy 9: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *How do you learn English? What's the best way to learn English?*

Boy 6: *I just hear my brothers sometimes and my mother, and I just ...then I know English.*

Researcher: *You are very good in English. Do you know anyone who speaks English?*

Boy 8: *Yeah, two friends.*

Researcher: *Two friends?*

Boy 8: *Yeah, uhh... the friends of my dad who live in America and they...*

Researcher: *Does your dad live in America?*

Boy 8: *No, he just go like very much time to other lands and teach me uhh... English.*

Researcher: *He teaches you English?*

Boy 8: *Yeah, and so his friend do.*

In the next example the child spontaneously began to talk about his English ability early in the interview.

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

Boy 4: *I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang! Just fall into me.*

Researcher: *It just fall into you! OK. Do you know anyone who speaks English?*

Boy 4: *Not that much.*

Researcher: *Not that much. Not your Mom or Dad?*

Boy 4: *No, nobody in my family.*

Researcher: *Nobody in your family? So how did you learn English?*

Boy 4: *Just ... I don't really know how to ... it just...*

Researcher: *It just came?*

Boy 4: *Yeah, I started watching English movies and English people, I was always ... just learning.*

It was surprising to see how willing many of the children were to express themselves in English and how natural their expression was. The next example shows how the child confidently expanded upon the topic and spontaneously related a personal anecdote. He used a variety of tense forms (with occasional errors) and modal verbs. He also used chunks of language, linking words and complex sentence structure. An example of mother-tongue interference is the child's use of 'gard', which is an adaptation of the Icelandic word for 'garden' (garður).

Researcher: (What are some) *things that you like to do, after school?*

Boy 4: *Play with my friends, but first I have to go home and let my 2 dogs go out to pee [R: Oh, you have 2 dogs?] in the gard.*

Researcher: *What's the name of your dogs?*

Boy 4: *Txx and Dxx. One's from Iceland, one is ..., I don't know where the other one is from. ... Don't really remember. One is 9 years, that's Dxx, the other one is 7 months old. Yesterday he run off and I was trying to get him back ... and then I got him, he ... was done running around, all ... done running... maybe he was done running for awhile then I try to steer him home, and when we were home, I tried to get him in but he was just there, didn't want to move and I opened the door for him to go in the gard again and then he just peed and goed in. [R: OK.] The other one was afraid of somebody would come and steal everything from my house because it was... the door was open. [R: OK.] I was so afraid. My other dog was just there watching (hums a tune).*

Researcher: *He didn't go away.*

Boy 4: *No, he's learned it, he's 9 years old. [R: OK.] One year older than me.*

English use in the home

The information gleaned from the parent interviews describes the English use and learning conditions of ten children (nine boys and one girl) and gives insight into the parents' views about their children's English learning. All of the ten children were native speakers of Icelandic, although two of the children had previously lived in the UK and had attended English playschool for one to two years. However, no special attention had been given to maintaining their English after returning to Iceland. In six of the ten homes English was,

as a habit, not used for communication. In one home English was used by one parent as a second language and in three homes English was often used with visitors or relatives.

Parents provided a variety of information about their children's use of English. Parents of three children said their child often used English when playing with other children, for example bilingual children; three parents said their child sometimes used typical English phrases during play and parents of four children said their child did not use English when playing with other children. On the other hand, all the parents said their children watched English programs on television, DVDs or films. Most of this material was neither subtitled nor dubbed in Icelandic. Some examples of the types of programs children watched were *Cartoon Network*, *Animal Planet*, *Discovery Channel*, *Myth Busters* and *SpongeBob Squarepants*. In addition, one parent reported that his/her child watched English video clips on *YouTube*.

The children were also active users of computer games in English. Parents of eight children said their child often played computer games such as FIFA Football, Flight Simulation and other Playstation games. Internet games found on websites such as Club Penguin (Disney.com) and Boomerang were also widely used by the children. In contrast, the parents reported that traditional print materials in English were not widely used, although parents of three children said their children read football magazines or cartoons in English. Lastly, all the parents said their children listened to songs in English on the radio, television or via the computer, for example on *YouTube*. One of the children had also learned English songs in the school choir.

The parents gave a number of explanations for their children's English learning. By far the most common explanation was the children's exposure to English through various media. Parents also mentioned children's exposure to other languages, their contact with speakers of other languages and their interest for learning English as contributing factors.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the study was to investigate the English skills of children before formal instruction in the language begins. The findings of the study indicate that children of this age group are strongest in understanding spoken English. This is not surprising given that much of their access to English is through listening. It is notable that the listening comprehension scores found in this study are comparable to those found in the previous study using the same measurement tool. Grade 3 pupils showed an average score of 68% on the listening test compared to an average score of 68% in grade 4 and 77% in grade 5 in the 2005 study (Auður Torfadóttir et al., 2006). Little difference was found between boys' and girls' scores in each grade. The older children scored highest, which is to be expected since they have had more years of exposure to English. More importantly, the results of the study clearly show that a large percentage of children have already attained a basic understanding of spoken English by the age of eight years without any formal instruction in the language.

The results of the reading test indicate that children as young as seven years old are beginning to understand written English. Of the four reading tasks, children performed best on matching a sentence to a picture, which was, in effect, a word recognition task. This suggests that children are beginning to access English through reading as well as listening. However, caution must be used in interpreting the results of the other tasks. Answers on the reading test were widely distributed and many items in tasks 3 and 4 (which were more difficult) were left blank. In addition, it is likely that some of the children were not yet proficient readers in their mother tongue, due to their young age. Nevertheless, the average score of 76% on the first reading task and an overall average test score of 50% is a

English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

strong indication that children are beginning to develop early literacy skills in English without formal instruction.

The findings of the oral communication part of the study show that just over half of the children could successfully participate in a simple conversation in English. The levels of communicative competence evidenced in the interviews with the children corresponded to levels A1–A2 on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). This framework is a guideline developed by the Council of Europe to uniformly assess language abilities of learners. It consists of six levels of competence and five skill areas: listening, reading, writing, spoken production and spoken interaction. Although the framework was not designed for young learners, the language used by the children matched well with the descriptors of Basic user proficiency in listening and speaking.

The communicative strategies used by children in the interviews (fillers, backchanneling and code-switching) enabled them to successfully participate in a conversation in English. The strategies helped them gain time to formulate their thoughts, find words and keep the conversation going. The use of these strategies illustrates a level of communicative competence that is surprising for such young children who have not yet received any instruction in the language.

An important finding of this part of the study is the clear difference between boys' and girls' oral production of English. Very few girls were capable of producing multiple word answers and responding without hesitation in English even though they could understand the task instructions and questions from the researcher. A similar gender difference was found in a Polish study of oral communication skills of 11 year old children. Out of thirty five children who took part in a communicative task with a native English speaker, twelve boys could communicate in English at sentence level, but only one girl (Szulc-Kurpaska, 2000).

More research is needed about possible reasons for this difference in oral production. The parent interviews revealed conditions in the children's home environments which play an important role in their English learning: easy access to English through a variety of media, positive attitudes towards learning English and motivation to use English for their own purposes. This study did not provide evidence of a gender difference in amount and type of exposure to English but other studies have shown that boys tend to use English for Internet use and computer games more than girls (Auður Torfadóttir, 1994; Kuppens, 2010; Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir, Laufey Bjarnadóttir & Samúel Lefever, 2006). Other possible gender-related factors could involve social and personality characteristics such as confidence, shyness and fear of making mistakes. Certainly, this possible gender difference needs to be given attention and addressed if it is found in other studies.

The results of the study provide valuable information about the English skills of young learners in Iceland. The ability to understand spoken English seems to be a general skill among young children and begins to develop at an early age. Being able to communicate in English is not as common, although many young children are capable of expressing themselves and interacting with others in English. These skills seem to be influenced by the type and amount of language input children are exposed to in a naturalistic environment. Above all, the study substantiates that children are learning English on their own and demonstrating that they are active and autonomous learners. Thus, schools are faced with a challenging responsibility: that they recognize and build on the knowledge of English that children bring with them and encourage their development as 'life-long language learners'.

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English skills of young learners in Iceland: "I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me."

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