



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**English or Icelandic?  
A False Dichotomy in a Modern Global  
Society**

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Ólöf Ásdís Baldvinsdóttir**

**September 2011**

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## **Abstract**

This essay is a discussion regarding the effects that English, as the language of globalization, has on Icelandic society, culture and language. Iceland is a small country which strongly identifies itself with the Icelandic language therefore the pressure applied to the Icelandic society to improve in English and consider it a second language may generate an uncomfortable position of having to choose between maintaining preservation of the Icelandic language or increasing proficiency in English. However, for the benefit of Iceland's role in the modern global world and its preservation of the Icelandic language, this essay will recognize this situation as a false dichotomy. This essay will also combine summaries of recent literature on the topics of English in Iceland and Preservation of Icelandic in an attempt to suggest further simultaneous research and language planning for both of the languages.

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This essay is dedicated to my son: David Eugene Cross

“Diversity is the one true thing that we all have in common.  
Celebrate it every day”- Author Unknown

## Introduction

The modern world is in a paradigm shift with globalization changing the way societies identify themselves. We may actually be entering a time as *John Lennon* imagined; “Where the world can live as one” (Lennon). According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Economics*; globalization is defined as “The process by which the whole world becomes a single market. This means that goods and services, capital, and labor are traded on a worldwide basis, and information and the results of research flow readily between countries.” (“Globalization”) The forces that are driving globalization throughout the world are strong because they are economic forces and the language used in global communication is English. As McLachlan notes, “identity cannot exist in a vacuum, because people identify and communicate with each other for definite purposes, and it would personally seem that the main purpose is for the economic subsistence of the society.” (McLachlan 1:2) Therefore, it would appear that no language, society or culture would have a foundation upon which to exist without an economy to sustain it. In a small country such as Iceland which strongly identifies itself with the Icelandic language, this creates the question of how does the Icelandic nation improve its general English proficiency, hence their economic subsistence in the global world, while simultaneously maintaining the Icelandic identity? The possible answer is to develop a language policy where the two languages can coexist each for their own purpose in society – one as a language of identity and the other as a tool for participation in the global market. This essay will review literature in support of preserving Icelandic, on the one hand, and improving English proficiency, on the other.

## **English in Iceland**

### **1.1 Rise of International English**

English is a living language that is evolving around the world and is currently the language most used for international communication in an expanding global community. English has its history, and its history has always been rooted in change. These changes have produced variability to the English language, where there are several different varieties of the English language used by native speakers (NS) as well as growing clusters of varieties and accents by non-native speakers (NNS) around the world. To paraphrase briefly Crystal's explanation of the growth of the English language: By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, England was the world's leader in industry and trade. English was the language of this power, although it has never been an official language in Britain. By the end of that century the US population had grown to nearly 100 million and developed the most lucrative economies in the world thus becoming a world superpower. Crystal also describes how American globalization has spread economically: "Economics replaced politics as the chief driving force. And the language behind the US dollar was English." (10)

Crystal also explains how the English language is spreading and supported by powerful developments and technologies which are consistently growing through multinational organizations. Advertisements and multi-level marketing for expanding businesses and corporations in the English language have crossed all national boundaries throughout the world. Mass media and a large demand for English speaking entertainment has created an indulgence of media networks in English for all ages and academic support in science and technology has been demanding a higher command of English within international intellectual environments. (10)

The spread of the English language has been divided into three concentric circles which are outlined by Kachru. (see fig.1) These circles classify the universal use of the English language as it is spreading around the world. The English language is represented by these three circles for different regions of English usage which Kachru titles: the inner-circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. (Kachru 1985) The regions of the inner-circle are those areas where English is the primary language, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The outer circle regions involve those areas that had mostly non-native speakers of English before English was institutionalized as a result of long periods of colonization, such as India, Jamaica and the Philippines. The expanding circle regions are where English is used mostly for international communication such as; Holland, Italy, Japan, Brazil....Iceland.

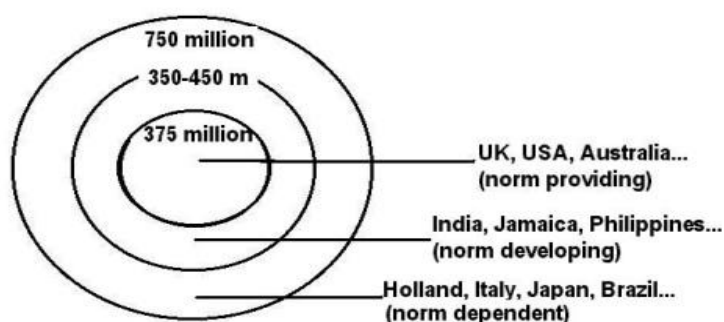


Fig. 1. Example of Kachru's Three Concentric Circles (image by R. White)



## 1.2 Standard and International English

Standard English (SE) is a term often used to describe the clear and proper use of the English language. However, Standard English according to Trudgill “is the variety of English normally used in writing, especially printing: it is the variety associated with the education system... and it is the variety taught to non-native learners” (117-128). Standard English may also be referred to as Standard Written English because it can be understood by all users of English regardless of the vocal differences in pronunciations or dialects. As specified by Melchers & Shaw “published written texts are generally similar, with almost identical grammar, spelling that varies in a few well-defined areas, and limited variation in lexis” (13). Currently, as also stated by Melchers & Shaw, the USA has the greatest number of native English speakers, and like Britain, they also do not declare English as an official language (79-80). Melchers & Shaw also quote a statement from Trudgill; “Standard English allows any pronunciation, and prescriptions on pronunciations are not widely enforced nowadays... The trend over the last 40 years has been to reduce or abandon standardized English pronunciation” (qtd. in Melchers & Shaw 33).

In regards to English as an International Language (EIL) in the expanding circle, there is not a set standard, and most likely people that are using, learning or teaching English internationally are referring to one or more native speaker varieties as a reference. Jenkins states that the problem with the current standard forms is that “they promote a unitary and essentially monolithic model based on idealized NS norm, with little scope for either NNS variation or NNS-led innovation at the international level” (17-18). However, Jenkins designates different meanings for these terms whereas English as an International Language is the term for the type of English that is used between speakers of different languages when a native speaker is present; and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is the term used for the English that is spoken only between Non-Native Speakers of English to other Non-Native

speakers (3). In regards to the future development of ELF; Jenkins quotes De Swann (2001) “Europeans might develop their own variety, the way Indians did, for example and that native speakers of other European languages trained in English at the language academies of the Union, could become authoritative editors and judges of style for an emerging European English (qtd. in Jenkins 6). Jenkins also mentions Widdowson’s approach to the situation that EIL is a distributed language variety with NS norms whereas ELF is more natural product of English spread which is not dependent on standard norms. (6) Jenkins then adds Widdowson’s perspective on a separate ELF variety, where he states that it is a process that is underway and as the English language spreads, it “gets adapted as the virtual language gets actualized in diverse ways, becomes subject to local constraints and controls.” (qtd. In Jenkins 6)

According to House “International English or English as a Lingua Franca is nothing more than a useful tool: it is a ‘language for communication’, a medium that is given substance with different national, regional, local and individual cultural identities its speakers bring to it.” (House 2001) Ideally, and as supported by Jenkins, separating the written use of English from the spoken use with the two terms of EIL and ELF could be the most beneficial for all users of English as it provides an opportunity for ELF to exist on its own term as an option to those in the expanding/outer areas to use their varieties of English amongst other NNSs. Nevertheless, EIL exists today, and the NS standards appear to be mostly for writing. Therefore, Icelandic pronunciation of English will not be considered incorrect as it may have been over 40 years ago. Plus EIL is already used for communication between all English users, NS and NNS alike. In regards to the situation in Iceland, and the reason Icelanders would want to improve on English proficiency in the first place may be because the use of the English language by Icelanders will probably be in an international context.

### 1.3 English and Icelandic Co-Existing in the Modern World

The English language is spreading as the global language and it can be adopted by all nations to coexist with other languages, if positive attitudes about bilingualism and increased awareness of the local language and culture are taught simultaneously. In *English as a Global language* Crystal states:

“Arguments about the need for national or cultural identity are often seen as being opposed to those about the need for mutual intelligibility. But this is misleading. It is perfectly possible to develop a situation in which intelligibility and identity happily co-exist. This situation is the familiar one of bilingualism” (22).

The issue that may prevent harmony between International English and Icelandic is the subject of language purism. The idea of language purism was addressed at the Centre for Small State Studies Conference at the Nordic House in Reykjavík in September 2004. Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir stated “The purity movement, as opposed to simple preservation, began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has evocations of racism” (qtd. in Corgan). This demonstrates that language preservation in Iceland is separate from the purist effort. If the purity movement and language preservation were one and the same that would indicate a rejection of diversity hence international growth for Iceland and could subject Iceland to possible international alienation. Corgan adds that the main idea behind her speech was an appeal to Icelanders to reconsider if language purity really defines being an Icelandic (Corgan). However, purist’s sentiments aside, language preservation of the Icelandic language is more effective in promoting awareness of not only language, but of all other aspects of Icelandic culture and heritage as well as supporting diversity in Iceland.

As mentioned in 1:1 Iceland is probably considered in the expanding circle of English usage; this means that most of the time and in most of the local interactions by

Icelanders, the language used is Icelandic. Furthermore, due to strong preservation policies by the Icelandic Language Council (ILC) and an over-all language and cultural awareness, there does not appear to be an immediate indication that Iceland would ever join the inner-circle region of English. Additionally, as the English used in Iceland may flow variously between the outer-circle and the expanding circle, the Icelandic language and culture should still be quite safe. For example, as explained by De Swaan; when looking at the outer circle regions where English has been accepted, there is more of an “accepted diglossia...English has spread, but not as a mother-tongue, or the language for every day, private, intimate use. English, people say in the tropics, is the language of the office during working hours, not of the home at leisure time.” (185)

In Iceland, an illustration of a somewhat current situation can be seen in an editorial which was published for an on-line English language newspaper in 2008, which was written by columnist Zoe Robert. Robert reports that a week prior, one of Iceland’s universities, Bifröst, would become the first to offer undergraduate degrees in business, taught entirely in English. The report claims that Bifröst’s reason for doing this is a response to the needs of Icelandic students to improve upon International English for the global labor market. It is also stated that in 2006, the Chamber of Commerce had announced a “Future Commission Report- which called for better instruction in English within the Icelandic educational system, i.e. that parts of the school curriculum be taught in English by 2015, as well as suggesting that Iceland should aim towards bilingualism”. (Robert) The current actions being taken by some of those responsible for education in Iceland indicates that there does appear to be an awareness of the importance in improving proficiency of the English language, and that may be a sign that Iceland intends to move forward as participants in the global world. However, this may also indicate the need for other methods of preserving the Icelandic language.

## Preserving Icelandic

### 2.1 Language Diversity in Iceland

In Iceland, the Icelandic language is traditionally considered a symbol of national pride and sovereignty as it is an important identifier and unifier for the Icelandic society and their status in the world. The Icelandic society, according to Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson, was considered to be one of the most homogenous societies in the world. However, as he adds, Iceland and other countries in Europe are becoming increasingly more diverse and multicultural. (199)

According to *Statistics Iceland*, the Icelandic population development report claims that the total population as of January 1, 2011 was 318,452. Also the report states that immigrants in Iceland are now calculated as 25,693 as of Jan 1 2011 which is approximately 8.1 percent of the total population and people that are born with both parents being immigrants calculated at 42, 230 or 13 percent of the total population. Therefore, the total amount of foreign people in Iceland and people with a foreign background is 42,230 or 13.3 percent of the total population. (16) In such a small country, these figures can describe the potential presence of another language besides Icelandic as the first language of quite a few residents in Iceland and the increased chance of second or foreign language contact. Also as Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson mentions, the increase in Icelandic people being born or raised outside of the country has also proposed a challenge to the traditional identity marker of being Icelandic.<sup>1</sup> (199) Diversity in Iceland has been on the rise, and this has brought the issue of Icelandic nationalism and identity to the surface. Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson quotes the former Icelandic minister of social affairs, Páll Pétursson, from a speech he gave in 1994 for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Icelandic republic. “What is it that makes Icelanders a nation? ... It is, above all, the language... the language unites us and makes us a

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<sup>1</sup> I, myself am an Icelandic who was raised in the U.S. for 35 years. I have always identified my own nationality as an Icelandic because of my heritage and certain cultural traits; such as my name, and my family background. However, I do not speak Icelandic as a first language.

particular group in international society.” (qtd. in Hálfðanarsson 193) According to this speech, it appears that this form of political discourse reflects how language and national identity has been generated politically as a trait of nationalism. In the *Collins English Dictionary* the term ‘Nationalism’ is defined as a sentiment based on common cultural characteristics that bind a population and often produces a policy of national independence or separatism.<sup>2</sup> (“Nationalism”)

On the other hand, according to Baker and Jones, “Language is not essential to either nationalism or political independence.” (331) This implies that nations that realize and support other aspects of their society’s heritage and culture are most likely not to be threatened by bilingualism and can accept bilingualism as a new part of their culture, for their benefit in this new global world. Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson’s conclusion is that. “The essence of nationality is not the homogeneous nature of the national group, but the will to live together in spite of internal diversity and cultural differences. (200)

Diversity in Iceland and Iceland’s role in the global world is not a question of nationalism, or nationality. The separation that is inherent in these concepts is the opposite of what Iceland may be actually attempting to do, as a partner in the wider world. As expressed by Guðmundur Hálfðanarsson, the essential element for diversity in a nation is an acceptance of all races, all languages and all nationalities for a common goal of survival in the global world.

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<sup>2</sup> "nationalism." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. 02 Sep. 2011. <[Dictionary.comhttp://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nationalism](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nationalism)>.

## 2.2 Icelandic Language Policy and Protection

*We can not change the globalization and the information technology, there is no one that earnestly suggests that, and we have to accept the fact that English will be dominating as an international language of communication in the nearest future. – Guðrún Kvaran*

The Icelandic Language Policy was discussed at the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL) conference in Stockholm by Guðrun Kvaran, Director of the Icelandic Language Council. (ILC). According to Kvaran, most people falsely assume that there is an official authority that handles the preservation of the Icelandic language, but she explains that that is not the case. Kvaran states “No resolutions are to be found about an official Icelandic language policy, and the authorities deal less directly with the preservation of the language than many think.” (Kvaran) However, she does explain that the purpose of the ILC is to protect the Icelandic language by creating rules when there is potential danger to the language. Kvaran admits that the Icelandic language faces growing challenges as a result of “globalization and rapid development of information technology where the English language is dominating, and often the only language which can be used.”(Kvaran)

It was also described by Kvaran that in 2002 a committee was formed to manage the ILC and decide on which domains of language they would focus on over a course of 4 years. The results of the ILC’s reports were that English was not an immediate threat within the school system, mass media or in teaching and research at the University. The report added a concern from the ILC however, which was that a “the negative stand against English in some firms is changing” (Kvaran) Following this report, the ILC suggested that the best Icelandic must be taught and in a positive way as a desired language for Icelanders to express themselves in. Also, an increase of knowledge regarding Icelandic language, history

and culture taught in order to strengthen the Icelandic identity. In regards to teaching Icelandic, Kvaran suggests also that “one should not use all strength on correcting morphological errors, instead it is important to practice reading, creative writing, and the understanding of the language (Kvaran).

The issue of English spreading into Iceland was further detailed during the conference and issues such as the choice of company names and advertisements were discussed. Kvaran states that “Large chain stores have discovered a market in Iceland, and started new branches there” (Kvaran). However, despite this the ILC maintains that the Icelandic language has been upheld in advertisement of Icelandic businesses in the daily newspapers, television and radio because of the regulations that are in place within these media domains. Kvaran explains that an attempt made by the ILC to encourage companies to use Icelandic names for their businesses has been to have contact with the advertising agencies that award annual prizes for the best Icelandic firm name. These prizes are awarded during a national day dedicated to the Icelandic language. The opinion of the ILC is that they are emphasizing what is positive about Icelandic, by attempting to dissuade the belief that English names and foreign titles are better than Icelandic ones. (Kvaran)

The ILC claims that the Icelandic language is safe in other domains such as banking, politics and law as new Icelandic words are quickly produced from foreign words when needed. However, in some companies, immigrant groups are actually in the majority, and most are using another language or English between themselves if they do not share a common language, and in speaking with Icelanders. In conclusion the main concern over the spread of English as a dominant language persists in the domain of information technology. The fear is that people will prefer to use English over Icelandic resulting in English eventually spreading to other domains. (Kvaran)



### 2.3 Language Attrition in Iceland

David Crystal, author of *Language Death*, explains many of the factors that pertain to the potential loss of a language. The first cause for concern would be of cultural assimilation. In this situation, the culture behind the dominating language becomes preferred by people and eventually begins to lose its own characteristics (77). Crystal explains that there are three stages in cultural assimilation.

The first is immense pressure on the people to speak the dominant language...stage two is a period of emerging bilingualism, as people become increasingly efficient in their new language while still retaining competence in their old. Then, often too quickly, this bilingualism starts to decline, with the old language giving way to the new. This leads to the third stage, in which the younger generation becomes increasingly more proficient in the new language, identifying more with it, and finding their first language less relevant to their new needs. (Crystal 79)

In regards to the situation of Iceland and globalization, the country has already been faced with the pressure to use English in certain domains; therefore it would be difficult to influence the factors of the first stage without also risking Iceland's economic growth potential. The third stage is potentially a time where it could be considered too late for any protection efforts to be effective. Crystal states that it is "the second stage -the stage of emergent bilingualism- where there is a real chance to make progress." (79) In Iceland this stage can be addressed proactively by the ILC as well as those responsible for the teaching of English and Icelandic. The importance is in teaching the distinctions between the two languages and what it identifies to the speakers. Crystal also claims that the term "domination" must be removed and a healthy attitude about bilingualism be supported in which both languages coexist as positive aspects to the culture. (81)

The ILC which was previously discussed in 2.1 has been active in preserving the Icelandic language in most domains while the pressure to use English globally has grown. According to Kvaran, the ILC realizes that the media plays a very important role in exposing Icelandic children to English. She comments that it is also important to work with producers of television programs and mass media, as well as the companies that support them and in the opinion of this writer, to perhaps increase access to Icelandic entertainment for children. According to Kvaran;

“Today, there are three reasons why the languages of small nations now have less changes [sic] than ever to survive. The first one is the Internet and the World Wide Web. In Iceland most homes have an internet connection, and the younger generation has got used to the computerized world of information technology” (Kvaran).

Kvaran adds that schools frequently direct students to the internet for research and various other tasks, besides the amount of time they spend on the internet during their free time playing games, or watching internet programs. Information found on the internet is mostly in English, and as a consequence, the reading of Icelandic decreases. The second is television, and the availability for cable and satellite television has increased the amount of time listening and watching programs in another language. Kvaran also states that “the programmes that are usually chosen to look at and listen to are in English” (Kvaran). The third reason is the inexpensive cost and easy access to English on CD-ROM. Kvaran explains that many English language computer games are popular by children of all ages, and the “younger generation use these three factors every day. They sit in front of their computers looking for information, at school as well as at home, play games on CD-ROM, and use the rest of their spare time looking at television or playing English or American pop music on CDs” (Kvaran).

Kvaran also explains a situation that was once a concern regarding Icelandic artists. For a time, there was a negative attitude developing about using the Icelandic language in music. However Icelandic musicians who have become known abroad with songs in English texts such as Björk and Sigur-Rós, have not only sung in English, but have often sung in Icelandic which may have caused other Icelandic artists to change their view and start to see Icelandic lyrics in a more positive light. This example also signifies that Icelandic artists do not have to sacrifice their native language to become popular in the global world as these artists appear to have been successful by utilizing both languages according to the audience base in which they were trying to reach. In other words, they used English to reach outside of Iceland, yet maintained Icelandic as their identity. Also, by doing this, they allowed Icelandic voices to be heard internationally and increased their popularity significantly.

As previously mentioned, the most important area of concern for the ILC, according to Kvaran, is in information technology. An example of an issue can be seen in the battle between Iceland and Microsoft. As explained by Corgan; Microsoft had refused to translate Windows into Icelandic. He describes that in 1999, the working group of the Minister of Education fought to have the Icelandic language “be included at the very inception of any computer programming” (Corgan).<sup>3</sup> The end result was that in 2004, Microsoft produced the Icelandic version of Windows XP and Office Packet. This willingness to fight for the Icelandic language demonstrates the support the ILC has procured within Icelandic education and business domains, and as Corgan states “In the battle against English language globalization, Iceland continues to do “extraordinarily well” (Corgan).

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<sup>3</sup> Corgan, Michael. “Language as Identity: Icelandic Confronts Globalization.” *Centre for Small States Studies Conference*. Reykjavík 16-18 September 2004. |

## **English Language Proficiency**

### **3.1 English Aptitude in Iceland**

In discussing the issue of English proficiency in Iceland, research was conducted at the University of Iceland by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir. In their research report analyzing the perspective of English proficiency by Icelandic students, Birna and Hafdís concluded that “at least a third of university students in Iceland have some difficulty in comprehending English academic texts.” (13) However, the students that participated in the study felt that they were sufficiently competent in English and that they were prepared for the English required in the University. They did nevertheless; acknowledge that working in English caused a significant increase to their workload as they had to invest time in translation and/or other methods of studying. For example, according to the study, “The vast majority say that they use dictionaries and one third of the respondents write summaries of the English content in Icelandic.”(13) Furthermore, it appears that Icelandic students have a perception of their English aptitude which is often over estimated and may be a cause of the high dropout rate. (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2007, 53).

Also, according to an article written by Berman regarding the issue of English at the University; “Perhaps we have been lulled into behaving as if English is virtually a second language in Iceland, by doing things like assigning academic English reading in University courses, based on the prevalence of English in the environment and on Icelanders’ obvious ability to chat in English.” (15) This misperception of English proficiency occurs not only in Iceland, as Berman introduces information from other Scandinavian countries. For example, Phillipson from Denmark states that “Danes suffer from the delusion inherent in the common myth that Danes are good at English” (qtd. in Berman 15) Also in Norway, Hellekjær asserts that “while most Norwegians may seem orally proficient in everyday situations... this does not mean that they have developed the cognitive academic language

proficiency (CALP) English needed for higher education or for occupational purposes” (Hellekjær, 2009, p.198, quoted in Berman 15). Research shows that the requirement for English proficiency in higher education appears not to match the actual proficiency by Icelandic students. Berman also raises another question of whether this is an “English reading problem here, or a reading problem” (17) This seems to demonstrate that not only are English proficiency skills for academic literacy lower than students may perceive, but it is also evident that there may be issues regarding literacy skills in Icelandic as well.<sup>4</sup> The other part of Berman’s discussion is that English is more than a foreign language in Iceland as well as in other countries and the requirements for higher English proficiency is “crucial in university studies.” (17) Additionally, Berman had previously noted that English held “a status more closely associated with – though not matching- a second language, in terms of its commercial, professional and social value” (Berman, 1995, p. 20; quoted in Berman p 15).

There appears to be an interesting dynamic occurring regarding English aptitude in Iceland as well as other countries in Europe. Icelandic children seem to begin formal English education with a higher level of proficiency because of daily exposure to the language, yet as adult learners they are less apt to be as proficient at the level required for university. This inconsistency indicates that there is reason to research further into the issue and attempt to create a more consistent plan of teaching International English according to the actual needs of the learners in Iceland.

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<sup>4</sup> Even though there has been research conducted regarding Icelandic reading skills, and Berman makes a good argument towards further research and possible revisions to the curricula, this essay will not discuss L1 proficiency at this time.

### **3.1 English as a Second Language**

As described by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, The determining factor of whether a language is a second or foreign language is the context in which it is taught and learned. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between these contexts to determine the amount of attention placed on the language and its usefulness in the society in which it is being taught (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). The situation in Iceland is that this new form of English is not a foreign language anymore nor is it a second language, in the same sense, as it is for NNS of English in inner-circle regions. International English is a form of its own, somewhere in the middle, which may be causing many countries to rethink strategies for teaching and learning. As Phillipson also claims, “English can no longer be considered a foreign language in many countries in Europe” (Phillipson qtd, in Birna, 2007). In teaching and language planning, there are distinct methods between these two contexts of English language learning whereas if an Icelandic speaker was learning a language that he/she would not be using in their everyday lives, such as learning French in Iceland then the procedures for teaching French would be as a basic foreign language. However, if that same Icelandic speaker was learning a language that they are using in their lives, such as International English, then it would be necessary to learn that language according to its usefulness in Icelandic society.

The issue of English in Iceland is that many Icelandic people will feel confident in their knowledge of English until they are met with the challenges of academic English in the Universities or in employment on the global market (Berman, 15). This confidence compared to the reality of the situation may not mean that Icelandic people have insufficient proficiency in English; it may suggest that the current context of teaching English as a foreign language does not meet the actual proficiency of the Icelandic people at the start of formal English learning. In other words, Icelandic people may be more prepared to learn in

the context of English as a second language versus learning English as a foreign language because of their previous exposure to the language through the global multi-media and connections to the global world market and other English speakers. The context of learning English as a second language is already demonstrated as useful to Icelandic society in terms of its role on the global market and International economic relations. Also, learning English as a second language allows a choice of teaching methods that learning English as a foreign language does not allow.

A recent field study by Samuel Lefever demonstrates that many young Icelandic children by the age of 4 years old believe that they are good in English (Lefever). Icelandic children are actually more equipped to learn English as a second language when they reach the age of official school learning versus learning it as a foreign language because they have already been passively exposed to the language in their everyday lives through the global multimedia. To learn English as a second language may not mean that they need to learn it earlier, but adjustments to the curriculum and working with students' actual English level proficiency at the start of formal instruction should create a more improved level of proficiency in English by the time the student reaches University. Another consideration is the location of the students that are learning English. In the capital region of Reykjavík and other large towns in the South, the exposure to English may be higher than in smaller farming communities or where tourism is not as popular. Therefore adjustments made to the curriculum may need further testing and research on current English language proficiency in different areas of Iceland in order to find out the right curriculum to begin formal teaching relative to students' abilities. The opinion of this writer is that perhaps maintaining a distinction between the two terms, second or foreign language teaching can help create methods in testing and teaching that are relative to the actual exposure in all Icelandic communities.

### **3.2 Improving English in Iceland**

Suggestions made on improving proficiency in English as an International language in a country such as Iceland, where the language will most likely be used by the higher levels of academia and business, could be generalized as just making modifications to the current status of English as a Foreign Language curriculum. However, the scope of this essay cannot actually propose methodologies for teaching English. This chapter will be a short review of the literature regarding three issues; teaching, language planning and diglossia.

Melchers and Shaw present the question of “what kind of English should be taught by schools in the expanding circle” (191). They claim that this question is actually divisible into three parts: “what exposure should we give learners, what production model should we choose and what production target should we aim for” (191). The current exposure to English in Iceland should be considered, as it would describe the actual contact that is experienced. For example, most Icelandic people are exposed to American English through multi-media, but may also have formal exposure to British English. The production model selected by teachers can be one of these two or another variety, or since it is an International English, perhaps a combination of varieties is the most effective. The target that is being aimed for is international English proficiency as suggested by Melchers and Shaw: “International English learning has the goal of teaching learners to be able to communicate across cultures and language boundaries.... It also provides the learner of International English the maximum scope of proficiency” (192).

Another approach to increasing proficiency in English as well as preserving Icelandic may be in language planning where actualizing international English as a second language of Iceland versus a foreign language could benefit the learning outcomes of both languages. The main factor in this type of planning is called internationalization and



Wardhaugh states that “Internationalization is the adoption of a non-indigenous language of wider communication either as an official language or for such purposes as education or trade” (380). He also explains that making a language official does not mean that it must be recognized constitutionally and that two or more languages can actually share official status. (380) The planning of teaching International English as a second language in Iceland could also help the ILC better protect Icelandic from hegemony by being active in the decision making and planning process.

An additional important factor, however, may be in the concepts of diglossia and code-switching between international English, and Icelandic. In a diglossic situation, International English is not just learned as a second language, but as a separate functional code in Icelandic society as this form of English will be considered a functional language for international communication relative to academic, business, science and other domains where code-switching between these domains is perceived as an effective communication strategy. Wardhaugh uses an example of a multilingual country, Singapore, where there are four official languages, which are used in different functions and the speaker’s native language is yet another variety of Chinese. He explains that the Chinese children in Singapore are most likely able to code-switch between the languages fluently and he states “The linguistic situation in Singapore offers those who live there a wide choice among languages, with the actual choice made on a particular occasion” (99). As defined by Wardhaugh, “A diglossic situation exists in a society when it has two distinct codes which show clear functional separation; that is, one code is employed in one set of circumstances and the other in an entirely different set” (85).

## **Conclusion**

The advancement of Iceland as a nation may be to accept the reality of the situation in which the country is now faced. The pressure from globalization to accept the English language that drives it is equally as important as preserving the cultural identity of the Icelandic language. The issue of a smaller nation accepting a language for wider usage can be alarming and controversial to those who tend to define their identity on language more than other aspects of their culture. This feeling of fear is created from the false dichotomy that exists based upon aspects of language contact and cultural assimilation. However, the kind of English which is spreading is more of an international function English than it is a language that replaces the identity of other nations. For example, even in native speaking countries, the English language is so various that one variety does not dominate another variety, and even though many varieties will use the same standards for mutual written intelligibility it does not mean any standard is better. In order to promote equality between NNSs, the fear of a Standard English norm may be a crucial element in the future development of ELF standard cores for communication between nonnative English speakers. Nevertheless, as Crystal suggests it is important that the term “dominating” be removed as it does not have to be a dichotomy in modern global societies to have two languages where one language serves the identity factor and the other serves an international purpose. (81)

The development of all-inclusive language policies and teaching plans which promotes diglossia and provides support to both languages will imply to the Icelandic society as well as the global community that Iceland does support the many other aspects to its culture and does not fear losing its identity. After all, just because Icelanders can speak, read and write English does not make them Americans, Englishmen or Australians. They are still and will always be Icelanders.

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