



Anna Katarzyna Woźniczka og Robert Berman

## **Home language environment of Polish children in Iceland and their second-language academic achievement**

The paper describes home language input of fifteen Polish immigrant children in the greater Reykjavík area and their academic achievement in Icelandic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, the children's Icelandic language grades and from a questionnaire completed by their parents detailing the home language environment and the children's academic achievement. Data were systematised, analysed and interpreted. Results indicated that Polish played a far more important role than Icelandic in parent-child home language interactions. However, it appeared that parents' attitude towards Icelandic did not deter their children from achieving L2 proficiency. On the other hand, parents' communication in Polish may have assisted their children develop language skills that transferred into Icelandic.

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### **Heimamálsumhverfi pólskra barna á Íslandi og árangur í öðru máli**

Greinin lýsir heimamálsáreiti fimmtán pólskra innflytjendabarna á höfuðborgarsvæðinu og námsárangri þeirra í íslensku. Gagna var aflað með hálfopnum viðtölum, athugun á einkunnum barnanna í íslensku og spurningakönnun þar sem foreldrar svöruðu til um heimamálsumhverfi og námsárangur barnanna. Gögnin voru flokkuð, greind og túlkuð. Niðurstöður benda til að pólska leiki miklu stærra hlutverk en íslenska í heimamálssamskiptum foreldra og barna. Aftur á móti virtist viðhorf foreldra til íslensku ekki draga úr því að börnin tileinkuðu sér íslenskuna sem annað mál. Jafnframt virtist sem tjáning foreldra á pólsku gæti hjálpað börnunum að þróa færni í máli sem þau yfirfæra á íslensku.

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## Introduction

Immigrant children's language environment is crucial to their learning and socialisation. This paper reports on an investigation in the quality of mother tongue (a first language, hereafter abbreviated in the text as *L1*) input of Polish children in Iceland and its impact on the children's academic achievement in Icelandic (hereafter abbreviated as *L2*, a second language), exemplified by their performance in Icelandic at school.

Examining the home language environment of immigrant children is particularly interesting in Iceland, a country which in recent decades has changed from being rather homogeneous to multicultural, and where the number of foreign citizens now oscillates at around 8% (Statistics Iceland, 2010).

Most immigrants in Iceland are Poles (Statistics Iceland, 2011a). Polish males, initially the dominant group among all foreign residents, had been attracted by employment prospects in the pre-2008 booming economy, mainly in construction and heavy industry (see e.g. Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2010). Whole-family migration of Poles had preceded the economic collapse of 2008, and although the latest data show that many men returned to Poland in the aftermath of the crisis, a large number of Polish families have remained. In fact, every year since 2005 an average of 25 children of Polish origin have obtained Icelandic citizenship (Statistics Iceland, 2010 and 2011b).

## Review of the literature

Research on bilingualism is relevant to the study of immigrant children, since the children need to become bilingual—i.e. to acquire a second language (*L2*) while retaining their *L1*. Although research confirms that one language usually predominates in bilinguals, bilingualism in children is increasingly seen as an asset (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009; Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1992). In fact, McLaughlin (1995) argues that it is the family's *duty* to use the mother tongue with children, for *not using the L1* may have negative effects, not only on the children, but on the family's communication in general, as also suggested by Wong Fillmore (1991).

Cummins (2001) found that children who enter school literate in their *L1* tend to develop stronger literacy skills in the *L2*. Moreover, parents or other caregivers may be a key to success if they spend time with their children effectively, for example on storytelling and discussions which help to develop both vocabulary and concepts in the mother tongue, for "children's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue they have learned in the home to the school language" (Cummins, 2001, p. ?; see also Beals & Snow, 2002; Snow & Beals, 2006).

However important *L1* literacy may be to the acquisition of *L2* literacy, it also seems clear that other aspects of the *L1* home language environment of children may affect their academic performance in the *L2* significantly, so that for example, not only reading, but also oral storytelling, rich discussions with parents, and watching educational television programmes in the mother tongue, may all have a positive impact on *L2* vocabulary and language acquisition of bilingual children (Leseman, Mayo & Scheele, 2009; Patterson, 2002). Taking it further, stories from the home country, the history of the family and customs and traditions constitute great sources of vocabulary and understanding, and enrich children's comprehension of their language and culture, as do visits to the home country and places of cultural and historical significance to the country (see e.g. Baker, 2000a). Interactions such as oral storytelling, fictional rather than factual narration, and reconstructing personal experiences and memories the way children see them, occurring naturally and on a regular basis, help children in expressing themselves and enrich their

vocabulary, because these activities reveal linguistic features that are similar to the academic language use (see e.g. Brice Heath, 1983; Scheele, 2010).

A number of studies have investigated particular kinds of discussions between parents and their children (see e.g. Beals & Snow, 2002; Snow & Beals, 2006) including storytelling, mealtime conversations and accounts of personal experiences and memories (Scheele, 2010). Other authors emphasise the importance of thematic discussions (see e.g. Li, 1999). Moreover, in addition to such crucial L1 background, “there must be continued interaction on “increasingly complex topics that go beyond household matters” (Ball, 2010, p.?). In fact, Ball goes further, advocating formal instruction in the mother tongue in order to develop L1 reading and writing skills, although this does not negate the importance of oral language for children.

In point of fact, Baker states that “for a language to live within the child, there needs to be active participation in the language” (2000a, p.?). Language has to be somehow useful to the child, as well as “enjoyable and pleasurable in a variety of events” (reference needed). Two such activities include singing and listening to music (Baker, 2000a), a view supported by Haworth, Cullen, Simmons, Schimanski, McGarva & Woodhead (2006) and Bodrova and Leong (1996). The argument seems to have merit, since language is a “distillation of the categories, concepts, and modes of thinking of a culture” (reference needed), and language input that includes singing, chanting or poetry would seem logically to “contribute to children’s growing knowledge of frequently occurring patterns and ideas related to the language(s) being used” (Haworth et al., 2006, p. 303).

Brice Heath (2010) explains the importance of “sustained language interactions with children and real pleasure in doing and being *with* children in all stages of development from infancy into young adulthood” (p. 33), and further argues that decreased activities and conversations and a lack of such commitment in the family may lead to a loss of linguistic patterns that support particular cognitive functions, such as self-monitoring. Moreover, immigrant parents often deem the new language to be essential, and consequently diminish L1 input, while older children may begin to be “less able and willing to talk with their parents, and opportunities for reading, talking, and thinking together around books, ideas, and projects” may seem “strange and impossible” (p. 24).

However, in families where the mother tongue was kept alive, Brice Heath (2010) discovered that the children

acquired not only the habits and values of literacy but also learned early in their lives to articulate explanations, narrate directions, and ask questions. Once their English reached even a modicum of fluency, these children could manage most academic requirements, such as homework and assigned projects, discussion in class, and questions about the content and the process of assignments (p. 24).

Finally, some authors relate the characteristics of language input to parents’ socioeconomic status (SES) and indicate that parents’ higher SES results in higher quality language input to children, and consequently in higher achievement in language acquisition (see e.g. Hart & Risley, 1995).

Although research has been undertaken on the acquisition of Icelandic among immigrant (including Polish) children in Iceland (see e.g. Sigríður Ólafsdóttir, 2010), as well as on mother tongue teaching and second language acquisition in other Nordic countries (see e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976), and on immigration at a sensitive age and its impact on school performance (see e.g. Böhlmark, 2009 for immigration to Sweden),

further in-depth research of the language environments of immigrant children, and the influence of those environments, is needed in Iceland. Specifically, the nature of mother tongue input, including reading and other child-parent language interactions, needs to be investigated to determine its relationship to children's academic achievement in school, particularly in the Icelandic language.

To that end, this paper presents research, conducted in Reykjavik, Iceland, on the language environment of young immigrants from Polish (non-mixed) families, and seeks to answer how the quality and quantity of mother tongue input, including reading and other child-parent language interactions, relates to the child's L2 proficiency as reflected in his or her academic achievement at school.

Quality of mother tongue input is understood in this study to be reflected in the diversity and frequency of parent-child interactions that provide expanded opportunities for language use and raise the child's interest in language and culture.

## Methodology

The aim of the study was to obtain rich information directly from Polish immigrant children and their parents in order to describe home language practices and school achievement. Prior to the main study, two pilot interviews took place with a boy of five. However, due largely to the limited achievement data available for children of that age, older children were interviewed for this study.

One set of data consisted of semi-structured interviews with fifteen 7- and 8-year old Polish children who were selected through maximal variation sampling, based on characteristics such as gender, socio-cultural background, proficiency in mother tongue and Icelandic, socio-economic situation (SES) of the family in Iceland, and the family's plans about staying in Iceland or returning to Poland. The children were asked a number of questions related to their language environment (*Appendix I*). In addition, their competence in communicating orally in Polish was noted.

The selected children represented both multiple perspectives and the complexity of the studied phenomena. Furthermore, all children represented examples of successive bilingualism, i.e. they all spoke Polish, and generally became acquainted with Icelandic only after they had begun primary school in Iceland. Few of them had had an Icelandic speaking babysitter, and all parents were Polish.

Of the fifteen children, six were girls: Agnieszka (age 7); Ewa (8); Hania (8); Joasia (8); Magda (7); and Zosia (7). Nine were boys: Artur (7); Jacek (7); Krzysiek (8); Marek (8); Michał (8); Piotrek (8); Przemek (7); Tomek (7); and Wojtek (7). While the names are pseudonyms, age and gender are authentic. Most of the children arrived in Iceland several years previously, although a few were born in Iceland. Although age of arrival is considered to be a crucial factor in studies of academic achievement in L2, in the case of these 15 children, the pattern of language use was rather similar: those who arrived several years ago, at the age of 2, 3 or 4, basically became acquainted with Icelandic at the same age as Polish children who were born here and had remained with their parents for the first two years.

In order to eliminate the possibility of identification, actual dates of arrival are not revealed. For the same reason, whether a child was enrolled in the Polish school has been withheld.

A questionnaire (*Appendix II*) was also given to parents, who were asked to rate how frequently their child took part in certain activities related to language development.

Activities were categorised according to a previous study (Scheele et al., 2010) into five scales, representing five types of language interactions: reading; storytelling; conversations; singing; and watching television, which were previously investigated and considered as crucial in language development (see e.g. Grosjean, 2010; Beals & Snow, 2002; Snow & Beals, 2006; Haworth et al, 2006).

Next, parents were asked to complete a statement on how well their child was doing in school. In addition, they rated their child's achievement in both Polish and Icelandic. In this group of questions, the scale that parents could choose from was: unsatisfactory; satisfactory; good; very good; excellent.

Parents were also asked about their education and their past position in Poland, as well as in Iceland. In addition, they were asked to rate their SES in Iceland as bad, average, good or very good (direct translation from Polish, where status can be determined from "bad to good" or from "low to high"). In this question, a Likert 4-point scale was used in order to avoid a neutral answer, which would be less helpful in investigating the possible relation between parents' SES and their children's achievements. The last question asked whether the family planned to stay in Iceland or return to Poland. This was asked in order to explore whether imminent plans to leave may impact children's motivation to acquire Icelandic.

Additionally, in order to increase the credibility and validity of the results, parents were asked to provide their child's actual Icelandic language grades. Since Icelandic schools have different measures for grades, marks were standardised into: very high (8,5 to 10); high (6,5 to 8); satisfactory (4 to 6); and needing improvement (0 to 3,5). This was done in order to establish whether there was any relationship between the children's L1 input from their home environment and their performance in Icelandic at school.

The results of children's interviews, parents' questionnaires and pupils' achievement in Icelandic were systematised, categorised, interrelated and interpreted.

## Findings and Discussion

### Polish Proficiency

The interviewing process, carried out in Polish and through transcription of the children's speech, indicated that in general the fifteen children's oral Polish proficiency was similar to the proficiency one would expect from children of the same age in Poland, although some of the children had slight problems with syntax that one would not encounter quite so frequently in Poland. An oft-repeated example was the misuse of the personal pronouns "ja" [I] and "mi" [(to) me] or the misuse of personal pronouns in cases when they could be omitted. There were also examples of some children occasionally missing certain vocabulary items, especially related to school matters, as well as code-switching. This may account for some of the parents' estimations that their children's Polish was less proficient than their Icelandic (*Appendix III*).

### Reading

Parent-child reading is considered in the literature to be one of the most influential language development activities. When answering the question "How often do your parents read to you?" children usually answered "sometimes" or "usually". However, Michał and Marek said that their parents did not read to them at all.

Most parents said that they read in Polish sometimes (six parents), often (four parents) or seldom (four parents). No parents said that they read every day. However, Michał's father

admitted that he never read to his child. Interestingly, all four reports of seldom reading to their child in Polish were from the parents of boys (*Appendix IV*).

Reading to a child in Icelandic was much less frequently reported. Eight parents claimed that they never read in Icelandic to their child. Two parents stated that they seldom did so, and three parents that they did so sometimes. On the other hand, Krzysiek's mother reported reading to him in Icelandic several times per week and Zosia's mother reported doing so every day.

As the literature shows, no language development activity is successful without the positive attitude of those involved. These children's attitudes towards reading ranged from very positive to very negative.

Wojtek had already planned the book reading for the evening, and seemed excited about it. He reported, "... when I go to sleep, Mom will read about a man that fixes cars. About the car mechanic. Because I have a book like that. and many stories in it. And I have one more, a fat one, with even more stories in it." (All interview excerpts are translations from Polish carried out by the first author and checked by a speaker of Polish and English.)

Przemek experienced reading differently, enjoying the warmth of the experience but being somewhat less positive about the reading itself:

Przemek: Well, I like to read, because my mom is always by my side and she looks whether I read correctly. But sometimes my parents forget, so then I go on Play Station.

I: And when they forget, do you ask them to read to you? Or do they suggest you read a book?

Przemek: Well, they do that rather than me.

I: In which language do they read to you?

Przemek: In Polish. Well, most about numbers and letters.

On the other hand, a couple of children gave reasons for disliking book reading.

Marek: My parents don't read very often to me. Because my dad can't read in Icelandic, and I have a lot of Icelandic books. Because I don't have many Polish books, and the ones I have, they are so boring.

I: Why do you think they are boring?

Marek: Well, because they are so old already.

Two children reported that, given a choice, they would prefer to play outside (Jacek) or a computer game (Michał) than be read to.

On the other hand, Magda, who obviously enjoyed reading, answered sadly that her mother used to read to her, but she didn't anymore.

Such answers, in which children excused their parents for having insufficient time for reading activities, occurred several times, even though they considered them important and positive experiences.

## **Other language interactions with parents**

### **Stories from Poland, culture and tradition sharing**

When asked about stories from Poland, Magda, participating in a group interview, said, "My mother used to tell me stories when I was little, but I don't remember much about them."



Only Krzysiek reacted to her answer, responding:

I like such stories a lot. My mom tells me how this, how grandpa had tractors back then, and what kind of horses he had... Cause he had those horses and then he sold them. And then my sister wanted those horses so my grandpa bought two for us. Here, in Poland.

Wojtek added, "They tell me such stories. They tell me that I was born in Poland, and things like that."

Asked whether he liked such stories, Wojtek replied, "Yes, to hear that I was born in Poland, and how it was back then..."

Hania commented, "there are photos from when I was little. My mother told me how it was when I was little. And about my brother, when he was small."

Only one child, Przemek, mentioned the history of Poland in his answer: "I have a book, an old one, where there are Polish kings, and they want to kill one."

While all children were rather positive or neutral about the idea of story-sharing, one boy, Marek, stated, "I don't like to listen stories like that. I'm too old for that."

Parents' answers generally affirmed that they told their children stories from Poland, talked about Polish culture, and discussed their past. Nine parents stated that they shared Polish history and culture several times per month, while three said several times per week. The rest engaged in such sharing less than once a month (*Appendix V*).

Answers received from parents on culture sharing are particularly interesting when linked with the child interviews, for they indicate that maintaining their cultural and historical heritage is important to most adults and children.

### **Questions about schools, friendship and feelings**

All of the children said that their parents were interested in how they were doing at school, who they played with and how they felt. Usually such conversations took place when the parents were just back from work, and did not last for long.

Agnieszka said, "My father, when he comes home from work, he asks me how it went at school, what I ate."

Przemek mentioned, "My mother sometimes asks who my best friends are. And then I tell her who they are and what we do. And she sometimes lets me go to visit them, when I don't have to study for school."

Ewa stated that she talks with her mother about her girlfriends, adding, "Sometimes, when my friend is in my room my mother comes in... and she asks us...what we are doing, and how it's going at school."

Similar results were obtained from the parents' questionnaires, with parents reporting talking with their children in Polish about their experiences, friendships and feelings at least several times per week.

### **Singing and listening to music**

Overall, the children were not used to singing with their parents. But where singing was found to be a shared activity, it was usually mothers who participated, although Wojtek

mentioned that he had sung carols with both parents last Christmas. In fact, in Wojtek's case, music input was rich and extended.

When the children were asked what language they sang in, Zosia answered, "I sing with my mother. But my mother doesn't sing in Icelandic, because my mom doesn't really know Icelandic. But sometimes she sings in English." Agnieszka, too, listened to English songs and sometimes sang them.

Magda mentioned nostalgically that she did not remember any Polish songs, but that her grandmother used to sing them to her.

Questionnaire data from parents corroborate the fact that shared music activities tended to be infrequent.

### Watching television

While "television is essentially a passive medium... The child is the recipient of the language rather than the producer of the language" (Baker, 2000a, p. 16), it may, nevertheless, be a useful tool for increasing vocabulary. Moreover, as Baker states, "The cultural elements in television broadcasts and videos are as important as the language content in conveying the status of a language community to the child" (p. 56). However, parents seem to have limited control concerning children's programme choice. It is rather the child who 'holds the remote'.

In general, children were very enthusiastic when asked about TV. Possessing decoders offering various Polish channels is particularly popular among the Polish community in Iceland. This often means reduced time for Icelandic television, a fact that was noticeable in children's responses.

Piotrek and Basia watched a lot of cartoons on Polish television, including, in Basia's case, "a cool cartoon that teaches children... to cook, count..."

When asked whether the children knew any *Polish* cartoons, two boys responded positively. Wojtek said, "I love 'Three little cats' [a Disney cartoon], and 'Reksio' [a Polish cartoon]."

Agnieszka stated that she loved to watch *Hanna Montana* in Polish.

Artur said, "I like DVDs with 'Bolek i Lolek'. Because I have those DVDs."

Other children couldn't answer the question unless the titles were named. However, Marek said, "I don't like Polish cartoons." When asked why, he responded, "Because they are boring, really boring and not cool."

Ewa said, "I don't like them, because they are, they are so, so for babies only."

Krzysiek said that he watched television over 5 hours a day. When asked what language he watched, he replied:

In Polish, because I have Polish TV... But once, once I wanted to switch the channel and something bad happened, and I pressed something wrong and the TV turned on, and it was all in Icelandic. And my father had to call the technician. And then it was again in Polish and it was fine.

Zosia, when asked whether she liked to watch cartoons in Icelandic, answered that she certainly did not, because there were so many words that she did not know, like "blable-bliblubla."



Artur, who previously mentioned that he enjoyed watching Polish DVDs, when asked about watching television, said that his father “turned off” Icelandic TV “because he doesn’t like Icelandic.”

Parents’ responses indicated that to some extent TV watching was a shared activity. However, there were discrepancies between parents’ and children’s statements on the frequency of this activity. This could have been a consequence of different understandings of the term “educational TV.”

### **Parents’ and children’s attitude towards Icelandic**

Zurer Pearson (2008) argues that children’s attitude towards a foreign language, especially for children in preschool or early elementary school, may very often be a result of their parents’, siblings’ or closest community members’ attitude, while in the case of teenagers it is often related to peers’ attitudes.

Children tended to mention Icelandic frequently during interviews, and as a result they were asked, “Do you like to speak Icelandic?”

Participants of the group interview responded loudly together: “Noooo.”

Only Przemek said, “I like it. I like it in my school.” Then Zosia, who first said “No” added: “I like it. But I don’t really like to talk. Because I can’t do it well yet.”

Children usually gave the possibility of communication with Icelandic friends as a reason for liking Icelandic. Joasia stated, “I like it when I talk to my girlfriends. So then I understand what they say to me. And they can understand what I say to them.”

Krzysiek, who had been in Iceland for three years, said that he liked speaking Icelandic “because after school I go to my friend’s, who lives very close to me. And he is Icelandic and he is in the same school.” On the other hand, he did not speak Icelandic with his parents “because my mom and dad don’t understand it at all.”

Ewa, when asked whether she sometimes spoke Icelandic with her parents, said that she did not “because they don’t understand it really.”

The interesting point is that children very often referred in their answers to their parents’ knowledge and abilities in Icelandic. Usually children complained that their parents did not speak Icelandic, or not very well.

On the other hand, Hania said proudly, “My mom goes to school, and she learns Icelandic there.” Jacek said, “Sometimes I teach my father Icelandic.”

Although parents were not asked directly about their view of Icelandic, their answers indicate that generally they were not used to using Icelandic in home situations.

### **Parents’ background and family plans**

The parents of five children mentioned that they were planning to return to Poland—three of them in the next 4 or 5 years. Three children’s parents said that they would stay in Iceland and one parent was unsure, but said that she and her family would rather stay in Iceland. The parents of six children were not sure of their future at all.

Looking at the data (*Appendix VI*) in relation to parents’ self-reported SES in Iceland, only two rated themselves as below average, while seven of the parents stated that their SES in Iceland was average, and five said it was “good”. One person did not answer the question.

On the other hand, the parents of two children whose situation was below average were either willing to leave Iceland or still uncertain about their future, apparently hoping for positive changes in the Icelandic economy.

In terms of parents' education, five had finished vocational school and four secondary school. Three of the children's parents had postsecondary education, two of them having a university degree. One parent did not state her level of education.

### **Children's grades in Icelandic**

Looking at children's Icelandic grades from the previous academic year (*Appendix VII*), five obtained "very high" grades both in reading and writing, while six received marks of "high." Two were "high" in reading and "satisfactory" in writing; one was "satisfactory" in reading, but "high" in writing; and one obtained "satisfactory" marks in both areas. There was no example of a child whose Icelandic was deemed deficient.

### **Mother tongue input and proficiency**

Collected data indicate that the quality of mother tongue input at home varied among the fifteen children. However, Polish played the central role in parent-child home language interactions, with many parents concentrating on systematic reading. Polish language television in many cases occupied hours of the children's time every day. Parents regularly asked their children about school, their friends and their well being. Generally, singing was not a major element of the home environment, but stories of the homeland and historical and cultural references were not uncommon. Many parents planned to return to Poland in the future.

In terms of language proficiency, the children's Polish was similar to the proficiency one would expect from children of their age living in Poland, yet exhibited some grammatical errors that would be less frequently found among their peers in Poland. Some parents even thought their children's Icelandic language proficiency was better than their Polish. And while the children's Icelandic language grades at school all ranged from satisfactory to very high, the children themselves often said that Icelandic was still sometimes problematic for them.

### **The importance of mother tongue in Icelandic proficiency**

Every child who received a "very high" grade in Icelandic, with the exception of Michał (i.e. Ewa, Joasia, Krzysiek and Wojtek) also participated frequently in Polish language reading activities, as well as in other parent-child interactions. Moreover, these were also the children with positive attitudes and who expressed interest in such interactions.

Both the parents and the children who participated in the study indicated that they had to, or were willing to, focus on Polish more, especially when it came to home language interactions. This is of course understandable, since the mother tongue is the natural choice when communicating one's experiences and feelings.

On the other hand, many parents did not see the Icelandic language as an asset for the future. To encapsulate these issues, it is useful to consider the stories of illustrative individuals and their interactions with their parents.

#### **Artur**

Artur's parents never read to him because, as he explained, "My dad is almost never at home... And my mother is so busy." He was also one of the children who seldom heard stories about Poland and its culture and never participated in any music activities with his parents.

He claimed that he did not watch Icelandic TV, mainly because his father turned it off because “he doesn’t like Icelandic,” and unlike the other boys in the study, did not mention Icelandic as a useful tool for communicating with friends.

Artur seems to illustrate the case of the child who experiences infrequent L1 interactions with his parents—parents who moreover seem to hold negative attitudes towards the local language.

As for Artur’s achievement in Icelandic, he was not doing as well as his peers, with a “satisfactory” grade in reading and writing. This is all despite the fact that Artur’s family reported planning to stay in Iceland.

### **Zosia**

On the other hand, Zosia is an example of a child with a rich home language environment. However, even though Zosia’s mother reads to her every day in Icelandic and often in Polish, she did not receive high marks in Icelandic. Her case is exceptionally intriguing, because, as Zosia mentioned, “I sing with my mother. But my mother doesn’t sing in Icelandic, because my mom doesn’t really know Icelandic ...”

Zosia’s mother, despite her good intentions, may have defeated the purpose of reading in Icelandic. Without sufficient proficiency in the language herself, she may not have helped her daughter’s Icelandic development. Of course, Zosia may have exaggerated her mother’s poor Icelandic proficiency.

### **Krzysiek**

Some parents thought of Icelandic as a strange language, if not an “intruder” in their homes (recall Krzysiek’s problems with the television) and generally children were not encouraged to listen to or use the language at home.

Krzysiek demarcated the areas where Icelandic was welcomed and not welcomed. Interactions with parents were situations where Icelandic was an infrequent guest, while schooling and meeting with peers were contexts where Icelandic use was acceptable and enjoyable.

Nevertheless, he was especially confused about where he belonged. (While recounting a family story from Poland he added several times, “Here in Poland.”) He experienced a rich Polish language environment at home, with stories, readings, and hours of television. However, his attitude towards Icelandic was positive, and his results in Icelandic were among the best in the group. He was reconciled with the situation that his parents did not know Icelandic, but, at the same time, he saw the language as a means to new opportunities.

### **Hania and Magda**

Hania’s and Magda’s parents both held university degrees and both had relatively high SES in Iceland. The girls were doing fine in school, but were not among the top achievers in the group.

These observations contrast with the results obtained by Hart and Risley (1995). It is conceivable that their parents’ plans to leave Iceland did have an impact. Or perhaps their educational results reflected the limited time their parents had available to spend with them. We cannot know. The main point is that SES does not outweigh other variables here.

## Conclusions

This study assessed the language environment of fifteen Polish immigrant children in Reykjavík in an attempt to help explain their second-language academic achievement. The results indicate that, overall, Polish played a much more important role than Icelandic in parent-child home language interactions, and that parents who concentrated on activities in Polish, particularly on systematic reading, may have unintentionally helped their children to develop language skills that transferred to Icelandic.

On the other hand, it seems that parents' attitudes towards Icelandic were not crucial in impacting on their children's achievement in that language. Moreover, children who mentioned peer interactions as an important aspect of their leisure time obtained high grades at school as well, even despite a rather weak home language environment.

Although the parents of all fifteen children practised more language interactions in Polish than in Icelandic, some children nevertheless performed very well in Icelandic despite the fact that they were not among the most competent speakers of Polish. This may be explained by previous studies (Goldberg, Paradis, & Crago, 2008; Páez, Tabors, & López, 2007; Uccelli & Páez, 2007; Uchikoshi, 2006), which suggest that bilingual children's "first language (L1) develops at a slower rate than their second (L2) language ... at least from about 3 to about 7 years of age, a period in which most children enter kindergarten and primary school and experience increased L2 and reduced L1" (as cited in Scheele, 2010, p. 71).

It seems that parents' plans for a future relocation do not necessarily de-motivate their children from making the best of their current situation. In fact, the children, unlike some of the parents, often did not consider themselves to be temporary migrants. Although the majority of questioned parents were uncertain about their future or wanted to leave Iceland in a few years, the children in general were satisfied about living in Iceland. When most mentioned Poland, they talked about it in the past tense, or considered it as a place of summer holidays. Parents' future plans seem unrelated to their children's school achievement; such plans may not have affected their children's L2 achievement.

The study suffered from several limitations. First, the measures of type and frequency of language input were based on parents' reports, which may have been biased and leaning towards socially desirable answers. Second, the questionnaire data did not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the actual quality of parent-child language interactions. Third, the study was of a cross-sectional design and therefore could not provide an insight into children's dual language development and changes over time. Finally, the research covered only a group of fifteen Polish children residing in the capital area of Iceland.

Further research with the use of a longitudinal design is needed to follow Polish children over a longer period of time in order to describe and examine changes. In the case of children who move back to Poland, it would be interesting to investigate the impact of that resettlement; whether and to what extent they maintain their Icelandic; whether their L2 skill is useful in other language acquisition; and whether they reintegrate into Polish culture and education with ease.

Moreover, future studies could examine whether the home language environments of other immigrant communities in Iceland, including Polish migrant children living in more remote areas of the country, can be characterised by similar patterns.

Finally, there is a need for research on other types of interactions and language input, for example, that provided by siblings, peers or/and teachers, since previous studies have

indicated that such interactions play an important role in language acquisition as well (see e.g. Duursma, Pan, & Raikes, 2008; Obied, 2009).

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present study offered an insight into how the home language environment of Polish migrant children in Iceland influences their academic L2 achievements and what changes might help in motivating immigrant children to dual language learning and higher academic achievement.

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## Appendix I: Sample questions for children

(Translated from Polish)

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been in Iceland?
3. What language do you use with your parents?
4. Do you have siblings?
5. What language do you use with your siblings?
6. Do your parents read to you (e.g. when you go to sleep)?  
How often? Do you like it?
7. Who reads to you?
8. What language do they read in?
9. Can you name any Polish books?
10. Do you have any Icelandic books?
11. What kind of books do you like?
12. Do your parents tell you stories about Poland, its history, culture, etc.?  
How often? Do you like it?
13. Do you know any Polish traditions, eg. Lany Poniedziałek, Andrzejki?
14. Do your parents discuss with you your experiences, e.g. your day at school?  
How often and when do they do that?
15. Do you sing with your parents? How often? Do you like it?
16. What language do you sing in?
17. Do you sometimes listen to the music with your parents?
18. What language is the music that you listen to?
19. Do you watch TV? How often? What programmes?
20. Do you watch TV with your parents? How often? What programmes?
21. What language do you prefer when watching TV? Why?
22. Do you ever watch TV in Icelandic?
23. Do you like Icelandic?
24. Do your parents like Icelandic?
25. How do you like living in Iceland?
26. Do you miss Poland?
27. Do you think that you are going to stay in Iceland?

## Appendix II: Parents' Questionnaire

(Translated from Polish)

Dear Parents,

Would you be so kind to fill out this short questionnaire, which is anonymous and will help in learning more about home language environment of your child.

Please mark the right answer with a cross.

	Never	Seldom*	Sometimes**	Often***	Everyday
1. How often do you read to your child in Polish?					
2. How often do you read to your child in Icelandic?					
3. How often do you tell your child about history of Poland, your family, etc.?					
4. How often do you discuss with your child his/her experiences at school, with friends, etc?					
5. How often do you sing with your child in Polish?					
6. How often do you sing with your child in Icelandic?					
7. How often do you listen to Polish music with your child?					
8. How often do you watch educational TV with your child?					

Explanations:

\* Never – less than once in a month

\*\* Sometimes – several times per month

\*\*\* Often – several times per week

	Unsatisfactory	Quite good	Good	Very good	Excellent
I consider my child's achievement in the Polish School in Iceland* to be:					
I consider my child's achievement in Icelandic grammar school to be:					
I consider my child's level of Polish to be:					
I consider my child's level of Icelandic to be:					

\* Omit if it does not apply

I would also be grateful if you would fill out the gaps below:

	Mom	Dad	Both parents
This questionnaire was filled out by			

**Mom:**

	Primary	Vocational	Secondary	Post-secondary	University
Education					

Last profession in Poland: .....

Last profession in Iceland: .....

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	Bad	Average	Good	Very good
I consider my socio-economic status in Iceland to be:				

**Dad:**

	Primary	Vocational	Secondary	Post-secondary	University
Education					

Last profession in Poland: .....

Last profession in Iceland: .....

In the future I am planning to: stay in Iceland .....

Return to Poland (state when, if possible): .....

Thank you very much for filling out this questionnaire. In case of any further questions or doubts don't hesitate to contact me through my phone: 8679789 or e-mail: [akw1@hi.is](mailto:akw1@hi.is)

## Appendix III: Parental evaluation of the child's Polish and Icelandic proficiency

Child	Polish of the child	Icelandic of the child	Achievement in Icelandic school
Piotrek (b)	satisfactory	very good	excellent
Joasia (g)	very good	excellent	very good
Krzysiek (b)	good	very good	very good
Wojtek (b)	satisfactory	very good	very good
Zosia (g)	very good	good	very good
Agnieszka (g)	satisfactory	good	good
Artur (b)	good	good	good
Ewa (g)	satisfactory	good	good
Jacek (b)	very good	good	good
Magda (g)	good	very good	good
Marek (b)	satisfactory	excellent	good
Michał (b)	good	good	good
Przemek (b)	good	good	good
Tomek (b)	good	good	good
Hania (g)	good	satisfactory	satisfactory



## Appendix IV: Frequency of reading

Child	Reading in Polish	Reading in Icelandic	Person who completed the questionnaire
Hania (g)	Often	Seldom	Mother
Joasia (g)	Often	Never	Mother and Father
Wojtek (b)	Often	Sometimes	Mother
Zosia (g)	Often	Every day	Mother
Agnieszka (g)	Sometimes	Sometimes	Mother
Ewa (g)	Sometimes	Sometimes	Mother and Father
Jacek (b)	Sometimes	Never	Mother
Krysiak (b)	Sometimes	Often	Mother
Magda (g)	Sometimes	Seldom	Mother
Przemek (b)	Sometimes	Never	Mother
Artur (b)	Seldom	Never	Mother
Marek (b)	Seldom	Never	Mother
Piotrek (b)	Seldom	Never	Mother and Father
Tomek (b)	Seldom	Never	Mother
Michał (b)	Never	Never	Father

(g) – girl

(b) – boy

## Appendix V: Sharing Polish history and culture

Frequency of sharing	Child
Often	Ewa (g) Piotrek (b) (Przemek) (b)
Sometimes	Agnieszka (g) Hania (g) Jacek (b) Joasia (g) Krzysiek (b) Magda (g) Tomek (b) Wojtek (b) Zosia (g)
Seldom	Artur (b) Marek (b) Michał (b)

## Appendix VI: Parents' background and residency plans

Child	Parents' plans	Reported SES in Iceland	Education
Michał (b)	leaving	below average	vocational
Piotrek (b)	leaving	average	vocational
Joasia (g)	leave in 5 years	good	secondary
Marek (b)	leave in 5 years	average	secondary
Hania (g)	leave in 4 years	good	university
Ewa (g)	not sure	average	vocational
Jacek (b)	not sure	average	secondary
Magda (g)	not sure	good	university
Tomek (b)	not sure	below average	vocational
Wojtek (b)	not sure	average	postsecondary
Zosia (g)	not sure	no data	no data
Agnieszka (g)	probably stay	average	postsecondary
Artur (b)	stay	good	secondary
Krzysiek (b)	stay	good	postsecondary
Przemek (b)	stay	average	vocational

## Appendix VII: Children's grades in Icelandic

Child	Icelandic Reading Grade	Icelandic Writing Grade
Ewa (g)	very high	very high
Joasia (g)	very high	very high
Krzysiek (b)	very high	very high
Michał (b)	very high	very high
Wojtek (b)	very high	very high
Agnieszka (g)	high	high
Hania (g)	high	high
Jacek (b)	high	high
Magda (g)	high	high
Marek (b)	high	high
Tomek (b)	high	high
Piotrek (b)*	high	satisfactory
Przemek (b)	high	satisfactory
Zosia (g)	satisfactory	high
Artur (b)	satisfactory	satisfactory

\* Grade from winter semester 2010/2011