



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Early L2 English Teaching in Iceland

*A literature review of possible L2 effects on L1
early literacy development*

Ritgerð til M.Paed.-prófs

Jóna Katrín Hilmarsdóttir

Febrúar 2010

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Abstract

This thesis examines what effects early English instruction as a foreign language instruction may have on early literacy development in the first language. English exposure is high in Iceland and in light of recent changes in the curriculum for Icelandic grammar schools, where English instruction begins at ever lower levels; several questions have been left unanswered. Although not much research has been conducted on the possible effects of early L2 instruction on L1 literacy development, a considerable amount of information is available on the interaction of literacy and bilingualism. An overview of available research in those fields will be presented with the goal of shedding light on the possible effects early English instruction may have on students' first language literacy development.

The essay is focused on examining the factors which influence first language literacy and second language development, in order to better understand what influence each has on the other. A critical aspect to the thesis is the question of whether empirical data confirms the claim that a sensitive period is present for second and foreign language learning and, if so, to find out at what age this period occurs. Even though a sensitive period may be present for second and foreign language learning, it does not seem a guarantee for success in L2 acquisition and, based on the decision of when to commence English teaching, the question is raised whether the first two years of schooling would be better spent developing first language literacy development.

Literacy is the foundation upon which all educational and academic endeavors are built and successful literacy development from the start is the most important educational investment. The general assumption has been made, usually on the basis of the Critical Period Hypothesis, that the younger the language learner, the better. This is not true in all cases, for in order for bilingualism and second language learning to become successful, social interaction must be actively practiced during the time of acquisition. Empirical data does not suggest that there is a difference in success between L2 learners who begin learning at the age of six or later when the learning is limited to a classroom situation. Studies and research results reviewed in this essay have revealed that success in L2 acquisition is governed more by social motivation than a sensitive period for acquisition. The conclusion is that it would be preferable to focus the first two years of school on developing first

language literacy skills and moving on to English lessons in the third grade. Enhanced or intact literacy skills would be gained, which would then support second language learning, according to results of the studies examined.

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1 Introduction

English is used as a medium of communication all over the world by people who do not have English as their first language. English is in active use throughout Europe; especially in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. Research has revealed that the input in Scandinavia and the Netherlands is different from the rest of Europe as American movies and TV programs are broadcast in the original language in these countries, instead of being dubbed as is usually the case in other European countries (Phillipsson, 2008). This difference has resulted in more input, which has resulted in increased English proficiency among the populations of those countries (Phillipsson, 2008). Input from televised material leads to passive knowledge of the language and the social interaction, which is needed for gaining productive proficiency in a foreign language, is often missing. This may in some cases lead to an overestimation of proficiency; learners may believe their proficiency to be higher than it actually is as listening and reading skills may be better than speaking and writing skills (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007).

Iceland is a fairly advanced, technological society with general access to television and the internet. As a result, Icelanders, especially Icelandic children, have had increased exposure to English, starting with television and moving on to computers, where the World Wide Web and computer games have been a substantial source of information and entertainment, input which is mostly in English. As a result of this, many Icelandic children are developing two languages at the same time. The potential effect this change in the linguistic environment in Iceland will have on literacy development has yet to be explored.

This shift in the linguistic situation in Iceland is detectable in the change which has been occurring in formal English instruction; for many years it began at the age of twelve but has been moved increasingly lower in past years and curriculum guidelines have now allowed English instruction to commence as early as in the first grade (National Curriculum Guidelines: Foreign Languages, 1999). Danish was, for many years, the first foreign language taught in Icelandic schools but English has slowly been taking over, and is now the first foreign language and Danish the second. But Danish has never been formally taught at such a young level to Icelandic students as English is today in many schools, so there is no previous tradition, and therefore no empirical data available, in Iceland for

beginning foreign language instruction at such a young age. It can be concluded that the changes being progressively made in English education in Iceland stems from the increasing proficiency of Icelandic students of English, as well as the emphasis placed on English within the community. However, the nature of said instruction is subject to debate, especially since the status of English in Iceland has not yet been defined and therefore, designing an effective approach to English instruction has been proved difficult. Furthermore, due to the changing status of English, a shift in the educational system has been called for. A change has been called for both in the curriculum as well as in instructional practice (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007).

With increased general exposure to English and formal instruction beginning in the first grade, the possibility is created that Icelandic children may develop a form of bilingualism. It is therefore important to look at factors which affect a bilingual language development, including the effect formal second language instruction in the early grades may have on the learners' first language and literacy development. A critical aspect of this situation is the fact that learners will now be commencing formal education in their second language before having fully developed literacy skills in their first language. Although it should be clearly stated that the formal goals of the curriculum guidelines say that English lessons in the first few grades of primary school should be casual; this still raises questions about the efficacy of such instruction and its effect on the development of literacy in young learners.

Learning to read generally takes two to three years and begins for most children around the age of six. Literacy is the cornerstone of education and therefore, early literacy development in children's first language is a crucial factor in their future success in modern society. A positive aspect of the importance of early literacy development is that practically anyone can learn to read within the window of the first two years of learning; therefore, effective literacy training in those first two years of development is vital. Learning to read properly in the first language (L1) is the foundation to all further learning, including foreign language learning. The natural response to this fact is to ask whether the introduction of a second language (L2) in a foreign language situation is beneficial or a detrimental to the important early period of L1 literacy development.

Numerous factors need to be taken into consideration when literacy develops in the context of the acquisition of two or more languages. The age of the learner is an important factor when a second language is introduced to a child in the process of learning to read in

their first language. It is important whether the language is a second language (where the second language is the language spoken in the environment), or a foreign language (where the first language is the language spoken in the environment), and if two languages are introduced simultaneously or one after the other. The younger the students are when they start learning a second language, the more likely they are to become bilingual. However, the amount of use and input are very important and poor literacy development in L1 can result in poor second language literacy, regardless of whether the period of acquisition is late or early.

Research on immigrant children has revealed that one of the most important factors in gaining control of a second or third language is having good literacy skills in the first language. There is a lot of research available on bilingualism and it is feasible to take the results of the extensive studies into account when deciding on a proper course of action with regards to English teaching in Iceland.

The goal of this thesis is to examine whether the literature and research available on second and foreign language learning reveals whether literacy development is affected when formal L2 instruction begins before early L1 literacy has developed. A particular focus of this thesis is the current situation of English in Iceland and how educational authorities have dealt with recent changes in the linguistic situation in Iceland. Various studies available on the Icelandic situation will be reviewed, as well as information on the situation of English in Scandinavia and other European countries. Since limited data is available on the status of English in Iceland in particular, and due to the special circumstances of English in Iceland, the Icelandic linguistic situation will be examined in light of research results on bilingualism. The main objective of this essay is to explore the empirical data available to compare it with the Icelandic situation in order to find out whether beginning L2 learning within the first two years of school will have a beneficial or detrimental effect on first language literacy development. From the answer to this question, a conclusion will be drawn on whether the first two years of school would be more productive if spent on English lessons or, on further development in first language literacy.

The first chapter deals with the situation of English in Iceland, as well as a global language of commerce and education. The nature of the situation in Iceland will be explored, in light of the changes which have been occurring with regards to the National Curriculum. The importance of input in foreign and second language acquisition will also

be covered near the end of the first chapter. The second chapter takes a look at literacy and the chapter begins with an explanation of literacy in general and moves on to defining social, cultural and cognitive aspects of literacy, in order to establish a general understanding of literacy in preparation for further coverage of literacy development and second language acquisition. The third chapter deals with literacy development and second language acquisition. Various aspects are introduced, such as the Critical Period Hypothesis, bilingualism and first language attrition. The fourth chapter goes over the possible effects second language learning can have when it occurs during first language literacy development. These effects will then be reviewed in light of results from a Swedish project which was conducted under similar conditions as are to be found in modern Iceland. In the fifth, and final, chapter a conclusion will be drawn which shall be based on the data reviewed in the essay. The question of whether early English teaching in Iceland is likely to have beneficial or detrimental effects on first language literacy development will be answered in light of these conclusions.

2 English In and Out of Iceland

2.1 The Impact of English as an International Language

Language boundaries are increasingly being crossed these days and new ones being set, as foreign language learning has become more accessible. English has become one of the fastest growing languages used throughout the world, with more speakers who use it as a second language than as a first (Bryson, 1990). A brief, historical explanation of why English has enjoyed this increase in numbers of speakers includes the strong position of the British Empire as well as the commercial and social importance of the United States since the Second World War. However, the main reason for the widespread use of English today is most likely computer technology and the internet, which were originally presented in English, aided by popular television programs and a prolific Hollywood movie industry. The increasing popularity of English has led to such an amazing number of people learning the language all over the globe that for example, “there are now more students of English in China than there are people in the United States” (Bryson, 1990, p. 3). The expansion the English speaking world has experienced has even left countries such as Iceland with the question of whether exposure to English has increased to a degree where English can no longer be considered a foreign language (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007).

English is used as a medium for communication in business, travel and higher education among many speakers for whom English is not a native language. The English exposure available to Europeans varies greatly between countries. In Europe, 70-80% of all televised material is originally American, but in many countries it is dubbed with the local language, but not everywhere; “these US products are transmitted with the original soundtrack in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which strengthens the learning of English” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 2). Due to the fact that the majority of input of this kind requires only passive participation of learners of English, the aim has been to enhance the communicative factor of English learning in the language classroom: “There has been a progressive shift to more communicatively oriented foreign language learning, and starting ever younger, though the traditional focus on literature often remains at the upper secondary and university levels” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 2). This general competence in English has lead many European universities to demanding a level of proficiency of English which draws

close to that of a native, but teacher training and education have not reflected this policy, as Phillipson (2008) explains when he states that “there is evidence from most parts of Europe that many teachers of foreign languages are under-qualified” (p. 3). With increasing amount of exposure to English, teachers have had to shift the focus of teaching from a foreign language situation to a situation which seems to be escalating into that of a second language.

EU language policy and successes and failures in its implementation serve as an interesting example of the general attitude towards English becoming the language of communication, as well as providing an insight into the results of such a policy. The original EU policy stated that local languages should be preserved and a massive amount of translations is done for and by the union every year. German used to serve as a sort of *lingua franca* in many of the EU countries but this is “a role which English is progressively taking over” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 3). European countries have in the past taught two foreign languages at grammar school, Iceland for example begins with English and then Danish, and the EU has endorsed this policy, specifically since a fear is present “that English represents a threat to the languages and cultures of EU member states” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 3). The policy is therefore intended to support the local cultures and languages. The EU member countries receive implementation reports on the action plan, ironically the reports are almost always in English, “less often in French, and virtually never in any of the other 18 EU official languages” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 4). Many of the smaller member states of the EU rely increasingly more on their English skills in order to save money on translation, and the Union as a whole has not acted on this dilemma; opting for a somewhat *laissez faire* policy regarding minority languages within the European Union (Phillipson 2008, p.6). Most of the paperwork and reports regarding the union is conducted and published in English and large member countries such as France have resulted to not fighting this evolution, but have begun defending their own language from deterioration due to usage of English (Phillipson, 2008). This general uncertainty at the upper levels of EU administration results in the unsurprising fact that “laissez faire policies serve to strengthen the position of English” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 6). Even though the EU language policy makers set out with the agenda of preserving the local languages of Europe, the inhabitants have a tendency to opt for the quickest and cheapest mode of communication and use English as the language for conducting EU business.

Another aspect of the use of English in Europe is the demand that universities increase access to higher education across national and linguistic borders. When one language serves as a *lingua franca* in European higher education, more people are able to attend universities outside their home countries. This has turned universities in the United Kingdom into big business, and “according to a British Council study in 2004, the UK economy benefits by £11 billion p.a. directly, and a further £12 billion indirectly, from ‘international’ education” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 4). Add to this all the English courses taught throughout the whole of Europe every year. On the other hand, there are concerns about the quality of education when teachers all over Europe use English as a medium of instruction instead of their mother tongues (Phillipson, 2008). English is probably used most in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands (Phillipson, 2008, p. 5).

English has a particularly strong status in the Scandinavian countries, mostly due to access to English in the media and tourism. Scandinavian universities have taken up teaching in English “in order to attract foreign students” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 5). Most of the universities require considerable English proficiency of their students, but this, on its own, has not guaranteed increased English proficiency. Research conducted in Norway, for example, indicates “that reading skills in English of Norwegians entering higher education, when measured by the British-Australian IELTS tests, are not adequate for academic course books in English” (Cummins and Davison, 2007, p. 4). University administrators in Sweden, Denmark and Finland are being encouraged to counteract this lack of proficiency by formulating “explicit policies for multilingual universities” (Cummins and Davison, 2007, p. 5). The Swedes and the Danes have prompted a policy which encourages parallel proficiency in English on the one hand and Swedish or Danish on the other. Interestingly, it may be added that the documents regarding this policy making are published in English (Cummins and Davison, 2007, p. 5).

Languages such as Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Swedish share many similarities and linguistic situation in the Nordic countries does not only require use of English in communication with the majority of EU member states, but also “multilingual competence is assumed” between “Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, with or without English” (Phillipson, 2008, p. 3). A major part of the English used in Scandinavia refers to specific domains of language, many of the formal; connected to science, academic studies and other professional vocabulary. The massive increase in English learning and speaking has led the Nordic countries to counteract this evolution by launching studies which have looked at

whether there is indication of domain loss in the Nordic languages, and even though the studies are not conclusive the results indicate that “there is a strong possibility of domain loss in technology and natural sciences” (Cummins and Davison, 2007, p. 8). The concerns and actions taken by Nordic authorities indicate that the linguistic situation is faced with a challenge on a scale which has never before been encountered, making the results an unknown factor.

English has become increasingly popular as a global language, with vast numbers of students all over the world. The European Union has had its share of English, resulting in policy makers worrying about the survival of languages of linguistic minorities of their member states. The Nordic countries are no exception from this and have begun shaping policies intended to address the effects of English on their local languages. The situation of English in Iceland, in particular, is best comparable to the situation in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, especially due to the fact that movies and televised material is usually broadcast in English and not dubbed as is usually the case in other European countries. On the account of reasons such as these, the influence of English increases gradually throughout the world, leaving authorities worried in some places, but university students and teachers rather happy (Phillipsson, 2008).

2.2 English Exposure in Iceland and its Effects on Students’ English Proficiency

As is the case with other Nordic countries, Icelandic students are exposed to English through the media and consider themselves proficient speakers of English. Whether the actual proficiency is as good as the students consider has not been established yet. The exposure available to students of English in Iceland is apparent but it is unlikely that input alone is sufficient for making fluent speakers of English. The claim has been made that changes are needed in English instruction (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). The question is how the education system can take advantage of all the input available to students in order to enhance the level of English proficiency in Iceland.

The social factor, or interacting with others in the target language, is usually missing for Icelandic students of English. Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir, et al. (2006) point this out in their report on English teaching in Iceland, where it was revealed that students get little or no practice in using English verbally at school. Students are exposed to a lot of English in their everyday lives, for example, 86 percent of students in the 9th and 10th grade claim to watch

television material in English. However, only 12 percent of these students read books in English (Tungumálakönnun, 2001). Claims are being made to suggest that even though the English input available in Iceland is vast, it is often informal which may have lead Icelanders to overestimate their actual proficiency. The type of input available and how it is processed can have an immense impact on the actual outcome of the language learning process. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007, p. 54) mentions a similar topic when she says that “What is constant is that the overwhelming content of this exposure is a basic informal language register, and this has consequences for the uptake i.e. the type of language learners learn and consequently the purposes which it can be used”.

Icelandic students generally have access to large amounts of input in English, through the media, but this is not necessarily true for all students in the Icelandic school system. Immigrant students come from different backgrounds, enter the school system at various ages, and the English input they receive in Iceland might even be different from that of the Icelandic students. Elena Maltseva conducted a study on differences between immigrant children and Icelandic children learning English in the 10th grade in Iceland, and it revealed a proficiency gap between the two groups. According to Maltseva’s findings teachers usually employ the same strategies with both groups, although some had found strategies which specifically helped the foreign students (Maltseva, 2009). Maltseva’s results raise questions such as; ‘what is the actual degree of proficiency of Icelandic students when they enter the school system?’ and ‘what is the extent of the proficiency gap between immigrant and native children?’ The situation is therefore somewhat more intricate than perceived at first, with the added depth of various linguistic backgrounds playing a participatory role in the general student body of the Icelandic school system. There is an inherent difference between language acquisition in Icelandic students and foreign or immigrant students when it comes to English as a second language in Iceland. The Icelandic students are usually exposed to English as their second language from very early on and have usually established their literacy skills in their L1 when they begin formal English lessons in school. Immigrant students on the other hand are usually exposed to their L1 at home and then learn Icelandic within the school system. Some immigrant students may have to develop literacy in Icelandic, the language of the host culture. English is therefore usually the third or fourth language these student learn when they commence formal English lessons within the school system. The concern here must be what happens to the language development of children who experience situations such as these.

2.2.1 The National Curriculum Guidelines for Formal English Instruction

The curriculum for grammar schools in Iceland, which was published in 1999, states that in the 1st and up to the 8th grade the local school authorities are required to specify on their own how to spend 12% of students' time spent at school. This change has allowed headmasters and teachers to teach more of any obligatory subject of their choice.

According to the National Curriculum Guidelines from 1999 English teaching began in the fifth grade. A new version of the National Curriculum Guidelines for foreign languages was published in 2007, it stated that according to the General National Curriculum Guidelines published in 2006, English teaching should begin in the fourth grade, in addition to teaching being allowed to begin at lower levels, even as early as the first grade and "have the option of varying the minimum amount of time within each field between the years in each period, that is in 1.-4. grade, 5.-7. grade and 8.-10. grade. (National Curriculum Guidelines for Grammar Schools, 1999). English teaching in the first to third grade is therefore an option available to school authorities and general directions are offered in an appendix to the curriculum for foreign languages, as well as stating the general objectives of said changes: "Studying in the 1.-3. grade can be considered as an introduction to language learning. The goal is to build up interest and a positive attitude towards the language and to create circumstances which encourage the student to use the language in a simple manner. It is also important that they are secure and are aware that it is normal to make errors" (National Curriculum Guidelines for Grammar Schools, Foreign Languages, 2007 (translated by author, see appendix A for Icelandic version)). A further mention is also made of the fact that young children have a limited supply of concentration and stamina and that teaching should therefore be limited to short periods of time although not too much time should pass between each lesson (National Curriculum Guidelines for Grammar Schools, Foreign Languages, 2007).

The National Curriculum Guidelines give teachers a general description of how the teaching should be conducted. Further information is given on how to conduct teaching; listening is aimed at allowing students to hear the resonance of the English language and they should soon be able to follow simple instructions from the teacher; students shall practice talking in English, especially by playing games and repeating phrases and rhymes; reading and writing shall be kept very simple, preferably using words and pictures which are then linked together in addition to tying the English teaching to other parts of the

students' curriculum (National Curriculum Guidelines for Grammar Schools, 2007 (Translated by author, refer to appendix A for Icelandic version)).

An informal interview with a headmistress of a small elementary school in the south-western part of Iceland revealed a positive attitude towards this change in the curriculum. She claimed that there has generally been a positive interest in beginning English teaching early, and she explained that her students begin English lessons at the age of six or seven. The aim is to keep the teaching simple and mainly oral; very little literacy is emphasized in these early classes and students, parents and teachers seem to be generally pleased with these changes. According to the headmistress, the students are very enthusiastic about English and are well motivated and efficient in their learning. (Full description of this informal interview is available in Appendix B).

2.3 The Role of Input in Foreign vs. Second Language Acquisition

The situation for learning English as a second language in Iceland is complicated and research is not readily available. Second language learning is defined by the circumstances during the process of learning. Second language learning is when a language is learnt within the target culture (such as learning English in England or the U.S.) whereas a foreign language situation is when a language is learnt outside of the relevant social situation, such as in a language classroom, (such as learning English or Chinese in Iceland). However, learning Chinese in Iceland is decidedly not comparable to learning English in Iceland since the amount of input available in English is rich compared to virtually non-existent input in Chinese. It has been suggested that the situation in Iceland has become a blend of a foreign and second language situation: "this dual distinction is no longer adequate given the increased presence of English in countries such as Iceland where it is widely spoken but is not a native language" (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). Arnbjörnsdóttir goes on to say that this blurring of the situation in Iceland is due to the amount of input available to learners of English outside the classroom. (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007).

The quality and amount of input is one of the most important factors for deciding success or failure in language learning; the quality and amount of input also defines the difference between the input situation of a foreign and second language setting. In a second language setting the input in the target is more frequent and varied than in a foreign language setting where the input may be limited to a classroom setting. According to Hauksdóttir (2007) input is all the language the learners are exposed to inside the classroom

as well as outside of it. This includes spoken language and written language in any type or form. English input in Iceland has stretched its reach outside the classroom and learners are exposed to English in amounts which reach beyond the level of foreign language. The increasing amount of input available in English has led to speculations of whether English teaching needs to be reviewed and improved according to the changes which have occurred in the linguistic situation (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007).

The proficiency of Icelandic learners is often overestimated since the vocabulary of Icelandic students' English proficiency often consists more of receptive than productive skills. But what is the meaning behind these terms? Crow (1986) offered the following definition of the terms with regards to vocabulary: "Productive knowledge of a word is traditionally defined as what one needs to know about a word in order to use it while speaking or writing (productive channels); receptive knowledge is what one needs to know in order to understand a word while reading or listening (receptive channels)." The cognitive functions behind the productive skills are more than what speakers use in receptive skills; the productive skills being the words and functions learners are able to use.

The social context of childhood L2 acquisition has also been shown to be an important factor, especially in Iceland where a considerable amount of input is available in English in a predominantly Icelandic society. Icelandic is the official language in Iceland so the Wong Fillmore (as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 71) found that social connections are extremely important for children's L2 acquisition; that is, interaction with others in the target language is an important factor of language acquisition. Hamers and Blanc state that children learn the L2 "by interpreting cues from the communication setting" and "the child begins to guess and understand the other speaker's language and to respond to it" (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 71). They go on to say that interaction within a social context is the means the child uses to obtain the syntax of the target language (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 71). However, these findings do not support the claim that Icelandic children are close to obtaining the proficiency of a bilingual speaker since the input is mostly supplied through passive listening and observing, through television and computerized material.

Birna suggests that even though many Icelandic students have acquired passive, colloquial vocabulary when they enter the school system, the levels of achievement and proficiency vary greatly between students, making it difficult to make assumptions about proficiency levels of the whole. The level of English proficiency in Icelandic students may

also have been overestimated (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007, p. 61). Birna talks about the level of teaching of English at university levels in Iceland and points out that the courses available have not been aimed at foreigners, but designed as courses which are designed for native speakers of English. “The shift in levels and type of English proficiency has resulted in an increased number of students who speak conversational English with some facility but have neither the oral nor written discourse skill necessary to pursue an academic program or study in English and therefore require remedial assistance” (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). The question remains whether these changes in academic competency of students within the Icelandic school system can be linked to a general decline in L1 literacy skills (Valgeirsdóttir, 1993).

3 Literacy

3.1 What is literacy?

Literacy is more than knowing how to read; it is interplay of cognitive and social functions, where reading proficiency is largely affected by society and its encouraging and discouraging factors to succeed. There are, in fact, several different factors which come into play, some of them being that the term itself signifies different abilities to people within different societies and the power it represents to those different social groups may also vary. Literacy studies is a fairly new field of research but has been growing fast in the last twenty years and include fields which look specifically at the development of bilingual literacy and the relationship between the development of first and second language literacy.

Literacy has developed from being accessible only by the upper classes to being virtually accessible to anyone, at least in theory (Barton, 1994). In most modern institutions of education an average student will have the opportunity to learn to read in his or her native language. Problems usually surface when learners are faced with having to learn how read in a language which is not their mother tongue and may result in attrition of the first language, an insufficient proficiency in the second language as well as general difficulty with literacy. Situations such as these have become more and more visible in modern societies, due to increasing cultural diversity. Bearing these facts in mind, it seems a daunting task to define the actual nature of literacy and the influence of society and attitude (motivation) towards literacy has an immense effect on the individual's success in reading and other literacy related skills.

UNESCO defined a literate person in 1962 as someone who “has acquired the essential knowledge and skill which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use those skills towards his own and the community's developments” (as cited in Baker, 2000). The realization of the importance of literacy within societies has become increasingly clear throughout the years, and nurturing early literacy development is the foundation of education and a key to becoming a functioning member of society. Riley (2006) says that “it is universally

recognized that a highly literate population is essential for an advanced society and that this is important for both humanitarian and economic reasons.

Efforts to define the term literacy, were not made until after 1940 (Barton, 1994, p. 21) and the birth of literacy studies as an academic field did not occur until after 1980. After the 1980s there was slow progress and several books were published on the subject of literacy but it was not until after 1990 that the field witnessed a surge in publications (Barton, 1994, p. 23). This is an interesting turn of events for a concept which was not officially defined in any dictionary until 1924 (Barton, 1994, p. 20). However, Barton claims that defining the term *literacy* may be an impossible task to complete since “the idea that complex concepts are susceptible to dictionary-like definitions is probably a myth.” Literacy is interconnected with reading and writing and the realization has dawned on researchers as well as educators that some sort of a definition of all these parts is needed.

Literacy means being able to “read, spell and to communicate through written language” (apraxia-kids.org), with many different factors deciding success and failure, such as motivation and various social factors. Snow (2006) mentions that essentially the same factors seem to influence literacy development for monolingual and bilingual readers. The first one being “societal/cultural factors related to literacy outcomes for both first- and second-language readers” which would include “supportive communities, stable economic prospects, effective schools, high educational standards, high teacher expectations for student performance, and good instruction”; which indicates that learners tend to respond in accordance to the expectations made to them. The second point Snow mentions are the “familial/cultural factors” which include socioeconomic status, “parental education and literacy levels, and home support for literacy development”; where the importance of a good and successful foundation in literacy is made clear. Thirdly, Snow mentions the individual factors which “include school readiness skills, phonological processing skills, oral language proficiency (including vocabulary), and use of comprehension strategies” (Snow, 2006); where the personal state of the learner and his or her innate abilities to learn and develop literacy skills come into play. The final conclusion is thus that literacy is the ability to read and write, where several societal and personal aspects influence learners’ success or failure.

3.2 Literacy Studies

3.3 Social and Cultural Aspects of Literacy

Barton (1994) mentions research conducted by Shirley Brice Heath on the social motivation for literacy development. Brice Heath spent over 10 years in Appalachian communities in the United States and began by exploring how families used reading and writing in their homes and then went on to examine how those family literacy traditions transfer to schools. She used ethnographic and sociolinguistics methods in her research and found that the term can mean various and different things. Furthermore, in her speculations about the meaning of literacy and its functions she divided literacy into two categories; first, what literacy is able to do for its users and second, what people can do with literacy. Heath's research and her definition of what individuals can do with literacy and what it means to them has been extremely influential in education and has caused educators to contemplate what kind of reading and writing is going on in their local communities (Barton, 1994, p. 26).

Heath (1986) looked at the social motivation behind children learning to read and write. Heath revealed that the majority of the society she studied did not use reading for aesthetic, organizational or recreational purposes. She was able to define seven different uses people had of literacy: "1. Instrumental (price tags, bills, advertisements, street signs, traffic signs, house numbers). 2. Social interactional (greeting cards, cartoons, bumper stickers, posters, letters, recipes). 3. News related (newspaper items, political flyers, messages from local city offices about incidents of vandalism, etc.). 4. Memory-supportive (messages written on calendars and in address and telephone books; inoculation records). 5. Substitutes for oral messages (messages left by parent for child coming home after parent left from work, notes explaining tardiness at school). 6. Provision of permanent record (birth certificates, loan notes, tax forms). 7. Confirmation (advertising brochures on cars, direction for putting items together, the Bible). The purpose of Heath's study was to find out what people use literacy for in their lives.

"Literacy is a social activity and can best be described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events" (Barton, 1994, p. 36). To explain further; literacy events are the events throughout the day where people encounter things which require them to use their literacy skills. Literacy practices, on the other hand, are the ways people use their literacy skills as a literacy practice, for this can differ from one person to the next since "people bring their cultural knowledge to an activity" (Barton, 1994, p. 37).

Literacy is therefore usually influenced by the individual's cultural background. However, the term literacy does not always signify the same thing in all venues of society or in different societies of the world. "People have different literacies which they make use of, associated with different domains of life. These differences are increased across different cultures or historical periods" (Barton, 1994, p. 38). There are in fact no simple or difficult types of literacy, only various kinds of literacy which serve multiple purposes, such the literacy used at home, at work, church, school, etc.

The level of support literacy receives from authorities is also very important and Barton (1994) explains that "people's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events, including the ways in which social institutions support particular literacies." (p. 42). People's social surroundings and cultural background may either hinder or enable literacy achievement and their "literacy practices do not reflect abilities in any straightforward way, but rather they are to do with what people feel is or is not appropriate" (Barton, 1994, p. 42). These standards of appropriateness also vary between locations in society, for example, literacy may mean a completely different thing at home than it does at school. Literacy is a social activity, but can also be representative of actual social status for parents who value education promote literacy and tend to represent it to their children as a form of entertainment partake in and promote more literacy activities in their homes than other parents. These actions are a representative of social class since middle-class parents are more likely to promote literacy as an entertainment than lower-class parents (Grabe, 2009).

3.3.1 Cognitive Aspects of Literacy

Literacy has been described as including all forms of communication, from reading to speaking, signing, listening and writing (State of Massachusetts official website, 2009). The process of learning how to read begins around the time children start to coo at their parents and to learn their first words. When a child is learning its mother tongue, it is laying a foundation for later literacy development. It is widely believed that "isolated skill instruction is rarely developmentally appropriate. Literacy develops in everyday activities" (State of Massachusetts official website, 2009). The cognitive functions inherent to the process of developing literacy are not activated at the point of starting school, but are developing alongside language skills almost since birth. Up until the age of two children are becoming interested in looking at and playing with books and even start scribbling.

From the ages of three to five, children will even start to write some letters and come to realize that the text of storybooks carries the meaning of the story and not the pictures. During this period children are acquiring vocabulary very rapidly; up to 50 new words per month, and have acquired around 400-900 words by the age of four. From the ages of five to eight, children are learning how to read, as well as increasing their vocabulary in leaps and bounds. They begin to understand the intricacies of written language and their “mastery of grammar and pronunciation improves” (State of Massachusetts official website, 2009). Mastering literacy is thus seen as an ongoing process which begins very early, with the age gap of five to eight years old, the start of formal schooling, an end point in a long developmental process.

The cognitive functions of literacy development have puzzled researchers and raised several interesting questions regarding literacy development. The findings of Giuseppe Cossu (1999) are mentioned here as an interesting example; Cossu conducted research on the acquisition of Italian orthography and concluded that it comes as no surprise that some mentally handicapped children with low IQs are able to become efficient readers and writers. This leads him to claim that “general intelligence, verbal memory or psycho-motor skills are largely irrelevant factors for the acquisition of literacy” (Cossu, 1999, p. 30). These mentally handicapped readers are, on the other hand, usually not adept in metalinguistic tasks. What Cossu finds puzzling is “that some very bright children can deal successfully with a number of metalinguistic tasks and yet make little progress over the years in reading accuracy and speed” (Cossu, 1999, p. 31). This aspect of Cossu’s conclusion indicates how much is still to be learnt about literacy itself, and suggests that literacy acquisition “appears to be governed by highly selective, domain-specific, computational mechanisms, which have the functional properties of a modular system” (Cossu, 1999, p. 131).

Much as with the universality of grammar, children seem to innately understand language and literacy on a subconscious level (O’Grady et al. 1997). Usha Goswami has conducted literacy research focusing on accuracy in reading between orthographically and phonologically different languages. Her findings suggest that children develop phonology in the same sequence, despite growing up in environments which provide them with phonologically different input (Goswami, 1999, p. 153). However, Goswami goes on to say that little cross-linguistic research has been done of the kind she is referring to and that further research within the area may change this picture (Goswami, 1999, p. 153). Harris

and Hatano (1999, p. 6) emphasize this even further, when referring to Goswami's findings, saying that "even though the sequence of phonological development is similar across languages, the sub-syllabic units of which children become aware are likely to vary from language to language" (Harris and Hatano, 1999, p. 6). This leads to the conclusion that although there is evidence available from previous research on the matter, that phonological development is the same across languages, there has not been enough research done in the field to make a solid statement in that respect.

Ingvar Lundberg has conducted research on "phonemic awareness as a critical factor in reading acquisition" (Lundberg, 1999, p. 169), focusing specifically on Scandinavian languages. The Scandinavian languages have a type of orthography which makes it easier for the student to learn how to read since "there is a one-to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes" (Lundberg, 1999, p. 170). On the other hand, "the alphabet does *not* consistently represent the phonemes of spoken English" (Goswami, 1999, p. 143). This can be considered as a difference between the orthography of Scandinavian languages and English, which suggests that Icelandic children should acquire literacy skills quicker than their English peers. However, the accuracy of Lundberg's statements about Scandinavian languages should be researched further. There is little doubt about the difference between the phonemic accuracy in English on the one hand and Scandinavian languages on the other but the existence of a "one-to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes" (Lundberg, 1999) can surely be debated, especially by L2 learners of Scandinavian languages. Further research is needed in order to make a conclusive assessment of the difference between the orthographies of English and Scandinavian.

Literacy seems to develop in the same order between different children and languages. Reading skills and the understanding of the writing system are acquired gradually over a period of time, but the order in which it happens is the same for everyone, which suggests a systematical approach in the cognitive literacy functions. It is revealed in a study conducted by Bryant, Nunes and Aidinis (1999, p. 131), that children do not acquire morphological strategies in a single step, but acquire them in a process which takes up to two years. In the study, English and Greek orthographies are compared and the researchers found several similarities between the languages. Their findings lead them to conclude, on a broader level, that "learning to read and spell are intelligent activities and children must come to understand the 'logic' of the writing system if they are to master it truly" (Bryant, et al., 1999, p. 131). Dulay and Burt (1974) concluded from their research of the order of

children's acquisition of 11 morphemes that "the sequence of acquisition of 11 functors obtained for Spanish and Chinese children are virtually the same" and that "the same sequence of acquisition of 11 functors, obtained by three different methods, provides strong evidence that children exposed to natural L2 speech acquire certain structures in a universal order." The interesting part is that if this is true, that language is governed by a universal system which leads to a preset sequence of acquisition of different parts of the language; this should apply to all; regardless of age and background. Adult learners of a language should acquire systematic features of the language in the same order as a native speaking child, only slower.

Literacy is a system of symbols which we use to represent the world to ourselves as well as to others, and can be defined as any form of communication we use in daily life. A person's view of literacy defines him or her and the way in which, and how much, we use these tools is a social statement people are sending into society (Barton, 1994, p. 48). Literacy is a skill which people are continually perfecting throughout their lives and "our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon. We change and as children and adults are constantly learning about literacy" (Barton, 1994, p. 49). To conclude, educators claim that "literacy is most effectively achieved in the mother tongue" (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 320), and researchers of bilingualism usually claim that a solid foundation in literacy in the mother tongue is preferable in order to achieve success in foreign language learning (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 321).

4 Second Language Acquisition and Literacy Development

The effect second language learning has on the proficiency of the first language has long been a cause for concern and the same applies for literacy development. Considerable research has been focused on what kind of an effect L2 language learning will have on L1 literacy development, especially with regards to what sort of transfers could possibly take place between literacy development in the two languages. Research indicates (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003, as cited in Grabe, 2009) indicates that “L2 language skills are very highly related to L2 reading ability and the L1 language abilities are highly related to L1 reading abilities”; which indicates a strong correlation between reading skills and general language abilities but not an actual cross-effect between the two languages.

The research results mentioned above do not address the original question of what sort of a connection can be found between the L1 and L2 literacy development. Grabe (2009) claims that there are certain reading skills which are transferred from L1 to L2 but they are, interestingly, limited to certain cognitive functions such as phonological-awareness skills, word-decoding skills, reading strategies, metacognitive awareness, and pragmatic skills; that is, the skills learners have to hear phonological differences in sounds, the ability to connect words to the objects and ideas they refer to, metacognitive awareness is the ability to talk about the language and being able to understand it as a cognitive device, and pragmatic skills are the abilities a person has to use the language in practical, every-day situations. Reading skills which do not transfer are, on the other hand, vocabulary knowledge, morphosyntactic knowledge, listening comprehensions, and orthographic script-processing differences; these are, knowledge of the vocabulary of each language do not transfer from one language to the other, knowledge on morphology and skills in understanding spoken language do not transfer either, and neither does the ability to read and understand the alphabet and manner of writing of each language. On the surface, the transfer of these items seem to serve as aiding devices to the development of L2 literacy since metacognitive knowledge which is already present in the brain is transferred to the acquisition of the second language and should speed up the process, although it may cause some confusion when a considerable difference can be found between the two reading systems (Grabe, 2009).

These transferred effects should then be channeled into having a good influence on the L2 literacy development and Grabe (2009) claims that research should focus on how to come up with ways which do exactly that. Grabe points out that L2 readers are often not aware how texts in their second language are built up and that teachers should aid learners with deciphering how a text is put together. The L2 learner may be unaware how a text is interpreted in the L2 society and various interpretational aspects can be very important when it comes to understanding the embedded meaning of a text.

To sum up; influences and transfer between L1 and L2 reading are to be found, and research suggests that L1 language proficiency is a strong indicator of L1 literacy success, as L2 language proficiency indicates L2 literacy success. Certain features of literacy are transferred from the L1 to the L2 and the suggestion has been made that teachers should focus on ways to make those transfers operate as a positive effect on the L2 literacy development.

4.1 Critical Period Hypothesis

The main arguments behind teaching foreign languages to children have been supported by claims that there is a period in childhood when children are more sensitive to learning and acquiring a foreign language. The idea of a sensitive period originally stem from Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis, which addresses the claim that there is a certain period for acquiring certain skills and trying to acquire said skill after the period in question is in most cases strenuous or even impossible. The claim is controversial in the field of language acquisition research. However, Lenneberg's research showed that there are critical periods present for birds and also mammals and Lenneberg, (1967, p. 175), gives an example of chicks, which find a replacement to their mother, should she not be present at the time of their hatching, and are drawn to the next thing available in an inherent response, for "the response is established very rapidly and indiscriminately to essentially anything that moves at a given speed and is within certain limitations of size". The responses which are inherent to the bird are essential to its development and this certain behavior can only occur during a particular period in the chicks' lives, and cannot be taught later in life. Critical periods such as these also occur in mammals, especially between mother and infant, where there are certain age periods which are optimum for the learning of certain qualities and the claim has been made that this also applies to language acquisition (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 175).

However, Lenneberg states that although „there are critical periods for the acquisition of certain types of behavior among a number of species“ it „*does not imply* any phylogenetic relationship between them“ (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 176). Lenneberg (1967) also claims that the limitations which apply to language acquisition do not necessarily apply to other types of human behavior since there are various skills and tasks which can be much better learnt during late teenage years than in early childhood years and adds that a lot of learning has no specific age limit whatsoever; he does not endorse ‘the younger the better’ myth which some supporters of the CPH have proclaimed. The characteristics of language acquisition are complicated and difficult to define and Lenneberg names humans’ ability to learn foreign languages as an example of this. It is possible to learn to use a language at the age of forty but the components which block the ability to learn languages become increasingly frequent after puberty. Before and even during puberty learners are able to pick up foreign languages with simply enough exposure to the target language. This ability, as well as the capability of performing local accents, gradually recedes with increased age (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 176). Still, Lenneberg claims, “this does not trouble our basic hypothesis on age limitations because we may assume that the cerebral organization for language learning as such has taken place during childhood, and since natural languages tend to resemble one another in many fundamental aspects, the matrix for language skill is present” (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 176).

The *Critical Period Hypothesis* has been expanded and interpreted, and Cook (1996, p. 109) for example states that the critical period for first language acquisition is between the age of two and the teenage years. As mentioned before, Lenneberg’s hypothesis has become somewhat controversial and arguments and research results have been presented which either support or disagree with it (Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). There have been various arguments for why people lose the ability for language learning as they grow older, and Cook (1996, p. 109) refers to Lenneberg’s findings when saying that “physical factors such as the loss of ‘plasticity’ in the brain and ‘lateralization’ of the brain; social factors such as the different situations and relationships that children encounter compared to adults; and cognitive explanations such as the interference with natural language learning by the adult’s more abstract mode of thinking”; these are the main reasons Lenneberg stated as the main hindrances to foreign or second language learning. A bulk of the research conducted has lead to the conclusion that age is actually a beneficial factor in foreign language learning and that foreign languages may be best learnt during and around puberty (Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). On the other hand, there

are those who have found age being a hindrance in second language learning and Cook (1996) quotes work by Johnson and Newport (1989) on this matter where they studied “Chinese and Korean learners living in the United States and found that the earlier they had arrived there the better they were at detecting ungrammatical use of grammatical morphemes such as ‘the’ and plural’-s’ and other properties of English” (Cook, 1996, 110). Younger learners, children, are more likely to master accents than older learners and the claim has been made that the authentic accent of the host culture cannot be learnt if learning begins in the early teens or later (Cook, 1996, p. 110).

However, several studies have been conducted which reveal that the situation for language acquisition even goes beyond the Critical Period Hypothesis, as is the case with Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle’s (1978) research results. They tested second language acquisition in five different age groups which ranged from 3-5 years, 6-7 years, 8-10 years, 12-15 years of age and finally adults. Tests were conducted on several different age groups of English speakers during their first year of residence in Holland and these tests revealed that the poorest progress in second language acquisition was made by the 3-5 year olds. The teenagers showed the most progress and were ahead of all other groups at all times, except on final testing of ‘Story Comprehension’ and ‘Spontaneous Speech Fluency’ where they were surpassed by the 6-10 year olds. According to Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle these results “are basis for rejecting the hypothesis that the period 2-12 years constitutes an optimal time for language acquisition” (Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978), and they reject the idea that younger children are better second language learner than older children and suggest that the results could also be explained by the fact that the older learners have a better understanding of their first language and can therefore transfer positive information into their second language; the teenagers have already gone through years of linguistic education and therefore a vast amount of meta-knowledge is already in place.

To explain further, the results imply that there is a critical period for first language acquisition which reaches up until the age of five, but slow second language acquisition in this age group may be explained by the fact that their cognitive functions are caught up in L1 learning; they may not be able to focus on developing a second language as fast as the first one if the input is not sufficient. The older learners already know a language and may benefit from that, or they may already have established specialization “of the dominant hemisphere for language facilities acquisition”; that is to say, they have already practiced and put to use the part of the brain which deals with learning languages (Snow and

Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Additionally, the age groups ranging from 6 to 15 years of age had achieved the proficiency level of a good bilingual by the end of the testing period; which consisted of three tests during the first year of the subjects' residency in Holland; their result suggest that the age group of 6 to 15 years of age is the optimum age for second and foreign language learning.

Another interesting study which pertains to the definition of a critical period for second language learning was conducted by Kenneth Hyltenstam and Niclas Abrahamsson and dealt with immigrant L2 proficiency in Sweden. It showed that neither those who learn their second language early nor those who learn it late are able to reach the proficiency level of a native speaker. Speakers who have learnt Swedish as adults, and are generally considered native speakers, showed competencies which, when closely examined, were revealed to being less than, or in some aspects different, from the proficiency of native speakers. Their results showed that those who begin L2 learning late and are considered having native proficiency, have previously been overestimated (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam, 2007, pp. 68-69). Their results for younger learners showed that beginning learning at a young age does not guarantee the proficiency level of a native speaker. The conclusion they draw from these results is that early L2 learners' proficiency should be reevaluated and that they could be categorized as 'near-native' or 'native-like'. From this they interpret that the 'sensitive period' in language learning is an illusion. Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam also argue that it is too soon to claim that those who begin L2 learning early are less proficient than natives and that further research should be aimed at native-like speakers who began L2 learning at a young age (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam, 2007, p. 69).

The problematic definition the critical period for second language learning has led to disputes regarding the optimal age for acquisition and instruction. For immigrants the goal is usually to become proficient in the language of the host culture in order to being able to function properly within the host society. For Icelandic learners of English the objective may be somewhat different since the language environment is predominantly Icelandic although the amount of input available in English suggests that the situation may start to resemble a second language context. Some researchers have tried to refute the claim that the younger the learners are, the better, and the research results of, for example, Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2007) support the claim that this is not so.

Hamers and Blanc also discuss the findings of the study by Johnson and Newport from 1989 (as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2000) where the conclusion was that children who began learning an L2 while three to seven years of age were generally considered having native-like proficiency, whereas children who began learning at the ages of eight to ten, were not (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 72). Hamers and Blanc ask the question; “why do older learners who are in similar contexts not reach native-like L2 competence?” (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 71). They go on to say that this question raises the issue of whether there is a ‘sensitive period’ in second language learning. However, the situation in Iceland is not comparable to the ones mentioned by Hamers and Blanc or Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam since the second or foreign language input is not of the same quantities as in the situations they are referring to.

The reality of the situation in Iceland is that English has the official status of a foreign language within a language community which is predominantly Icelandic but the increased input especially for young children may be changing that status (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2007). The definition of a critical period for second language learning is very important to this situation since the presence of English is apparent in the society, and a definition is preferable in order to being able to maximize the usefulness of English teaching. The research results discussed above refute the claim that the younger the language learner the better, and suggest some sort of a middle ground, that 6-10 year olds are the best foreign language learners, although the circumstances of these studies may not be directly applicable to the situation of English in Iceland.

4.2 Bilingualism

Bilingualism was once considered as having negative effects on individuals (Holmstrand, 1982), but those opinions have been transformed by later research. Researchers of bilingualism have explained that a bilingual mind deals with a more elaborate situation than the monolingual mind and “in the case of bilingual speakers, the lifespan variation in linguistic behavior is, of course, often quite spectacular” (Hyltenstam and Obler, 1989). Teachers of English as a foreign language, for example, usually label their students by what level they are at in English language studies or the type of English they are studying, such as “English as a Foreign Language” or “English as an Additional Language” (Sears, 1998). They rarely use the term “bilingual” and Sears suggests that if teachers of English as a foreign language were to become acquainted with the term, they would benefit as much

from it as their students, since an understanding of the condition is inherent to an understanding of the term. It is safe to conclude that an understanding of the nature of bilingualism would enable teachers to further aid their students in gaining general language proficiency.

Defining the term “bilingual” has been proven rather problematic. It has been described as having “native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield, 1953: 56), but this statement lacks a definition of what is inherent in the term ‘native-like’ with regards to language proficiency. Other definitions have been suggested; some broader, others much more specific. As an example of this, one of these definitions claims that bilingualism is a person’s ability to speak a second language while following the structure of the foreign language and not paraphrasing from the first language (Titone, 1972; as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2000). There are continuous problems with definitions such as these, for it remains to be defined how it is possible to decide whether a speaker is paraphrasing from his or her first language, or not. This is difficult to decipher, unless the two different languages are structurally very different (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 7). Various questions remain unanswered on a final definition of what sort of a speaker can be defined as a bilingual speaker of a language, but there is more or less an agreement about the vague statement that a bilingual person is anyone who has mastered two languages. Further definitions of questions such as what sort of proficiency qualifies as that of a native speaker are subjects for further debate and remain unanswered as of yet.

But how two, or more, different languages work together as multi-competence remains an unanswered question. This is perhaps one of the most important aspect of bilingualism; defining how the two languages are governed and how the mind operates the two different entities. Research implies that the L2 is guided by the L2 system (Dulay and Burt, 1974) but even though the L1 and the L2 may form two different systems within the human mind, the “two grammars may form an inter-related system” (Cook, 1991, p. 115). The bilingual mind is therefore likely operating one system which contains two grammars or languages, or what Cook (1991, p. 115) names ‘wholistic multicompetence’. Numerous studies have been conducted on bilingualism which have shown that the L2 is likely to be governed by the L2 system and not the L1 language system. The beneficial effects of L2 language learning are “brain-training”, more complex sentences produced are produced by people who have learnt second languages and bilingual children have overall better metalinguistic skills than their monolingual peers (Cook, 2003). Cook additionally mentions that it has

generally been regarded as a positive thing; having successfully acquired more than one language.

Dulay and Burt's (1974) research on Chinese and Spanish children learning English within an English speaking school system can be put forth as an example of this. They tested eleven different morphemes and the sequence of their acquisition in both groups using the Bilingual Syntax Measure; a method of experimenting which Dulay and Burt invented themselves which allows the experimenter to use a row of questions to get answers from the subjects as a response to picture stimuli. Linguistically the two languages tested are very different and therefore provided good contrast to each other. Dulay and Burt's research was also different from many others since they used a cross-sectional approach, where they tested many subjects at one point in time, instead of doing a longitudinal study where a few subjects are tested over a long period of time. Their results showed that "the sequences of 11 functors obtained for Spanish and Chinese children are virtually the same" and "the same sequence of acquisition of 11 functors, obtained by three different methods, provides strong evidence that children exposed to natural L2 speech acquire certain structures in a universal order" (Dulay and Burt, 1974).

It is therefore safe to conclude that if the L2 acquisition by children is guided by the L2 system, not the L1, the quality and amount of input are paramount if the language acquisition is to be successful. What has long confused researchers and teachers is the bilingual person's control over the two languages and the ability to code-switch (using both languages at the same time, usually inserting words from one language into sentences of the other language) which would make bilingual utterance unintelligible to most monolingual speakers. A question for debate was thus whether bilingual speakers are able to differentiate between the two systems they are operating; which seems to be the case. Meisel (1989) explains his study of young children who grew up in bilingual circumstances and he concluded that they seem to be able to do so. He says that bilingual speakers can differentiate between different grammatical systems and that a fusion of the systems in use does not necessarily occur. He adds that a mixing of the two language systems may occur and that code switching is a firmly established strategy which is used by the bilingual as a part of their pragmatic competence.

On the other hand, the mixing of grammatical rules between languages has been measured, especially in young children. Seliger explains this as a redundancy reduction

principle where the child comes across rules in the two languages which are fairly similar and chooses the simpler and more encompassing rule of the two and applies it to both languages; “if both languages contain a rule which serves the same semantic function, that version of the rule which is formally less complex and has a wider linguistic distribution (i.e. can be used in a greater variety of linguistic environments) will replace the more complex more narrowly distributed rule” (Seliger, 1989, p. 173). Seliger (1989) explains this as a part of language attrition.

The result of bilinguals not maintaining both (or all languages) in many cases causes language attrition, which means that the less used language or languages become lost or integrated with the dominant language, which is in many cases the L2. It may even occur in a multilingual speaker that the “general language effort (or lack of motivation, or both, for instance)” becomes too little and as a result the speaker will return to a monolingual system where the two systems will be merged into one and “this will result in systems displacement” (Jessner, 2000, p. 242). First language attrition as a result of second language learning shall be explained further in the following chapter.

Bilingualism is, according to the above, the ability to use two different languages and can have a positive effect on cognitive development. Previous opinions of bilingualism were molded by a misconception and a lack of understanding of the complexities of bilingual features such as code-switching. Bilinguals are capable of differentiating between the two grammatical systems they operate and do not mix them together into one system, although the simpler, more general grammatical rules may take over for both languages, especially for children, when the rules for both languages are similar to begin with and there is not enough input.

4.3 First Language Attrition

Research has been conducted on attrition of one of the languages in bilingual development. It is generally accepted that loss of control over the L1 may occur when access to the L1 is limited in some manner (Jarvis, 2003; Hamers and Blanc, 2000). Hamers and Blanc (2000) suggest that a bilingual person forms separate systems in their mind for each language he or she speaks and is thus able to successfully separate grammar, vocabulary, etc., which defines each language. The characteristic problem of speakers who show signs of attrition is a loss of the separation of those systems which cause the languages to fuse together into one undifferentiated system. Seliger (1989) put forth a principle regarding this fusion of

language systems in children which he named the “Redundancy Reduction Principle”, where he explains that it is probable they do differentiate between the two language systems, but when it comes to similar rules in both languages they tend to choose the more widely distributed one and apply it to both languages. So, limited access to L1 may not always be a direct indicator of attrition in L1, it may also be caused by certain generalization forged in the brain, such as Seliger describes.

Seliger (1996, as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2000) talked of L1 attrition where certain aspects of the L1 are lost due to usage and acquisition of an L2. He claims that the three deciding factors in L1 attrition are “the degree of acculturation, the level of literacy in L1, and the functions served by L1” (Seliger, 1996, as cited in Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 78). The importance Seliger places on L1 literacy is noteworthy, especially in situations where children learn to read in their second language. With regards to Seliger’s arguments, teachers and students might benefit from looking into strengthening the aspects of language learning which support L2 acquisition; such as L1 literacy development.

Jessner (2000) suggests that language maintenance is a crucial factor in keeping away the influences of language attrition, that “it can be stated that the equilibrium of the system is dependent on the requirements of language maintenance; the system is bound to erode if insufficient energy and time is invested in maintaining its stability”. Attrition is, in other words, the natural result of a lack of sufficient language maintenance. The L2 causes attrition in the L1, which is usually the case when the L1 becomes increasingly less used and the L2 gradually takes over as the dominant language (Cook, 2003, p. 12). Language attrition takes place both with adults and children (Hamers and Blanc, 2000). Seliger (as quoted in Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 78) claims that attrition depends on many factors such as “the degree of acculturation, the level of literacy in L1, and the functions served by L1, as well as on L1 group characteristics” and he offers three stages of L1 attrition: “in the first stage the bilingual maintains autonomy for each language, and in the case of code-mixing constraints indigenous to each language are maintained; in stage 2, because of the inaccessibility of L1 data, L2 becomes the source of evidence affecting L1 grammar; and in stage 3 similar rules in L1 and L2 are fused in the direction of that which is less marked”. It is therefore essential for the maintenance of both languages that the input remains rich and meaningful, as well making sure that L1 literacy, at least, is successfully conducted. A lack of input and poor literacy skills in the L1 may cause attrition which gradually leads to the grammatical dominance of the L2.

Additionally, a part of the negative views of bilingual speakers in the past was their ability to code-switch, a phenomenon that was not well understood. According to Jessner (2000, p. 23) the effects of code switching in bilinguals have been regarded as negative as a result of the contact of two or more languages, also, interference and transfer in second language learners. Code-switching is a complex phenomenon which takes place in communication between bilinguals, for they “can make simultaneous use of the resources of each of their languages while using the other (loan words) or by developing mixed or switched codes which are governed by their own specific rules” (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 41). Jessner goes on to say that “the maintenance of two or more language systems at similar proficiency levels can be seen as more than twice as strenuous as the maintenance of a monolingual system because the multilingual brain is constantly involved in processes of matching and differentiation of two or more language systems” (p. 241). Thus, the multilingual mind has to cope with a situation which is more complex than the situation of a monolingual. Furthermore, code-switching in bilinguals has often been misconceived of as interference but bilinguals control a complicated language system and Hamers and Blanc (2000, p. 41) say that “the bilingual’s total repertoire can be fully exploited by him only in situations in which he can call upon the resources of his two languages and use strategies specific to language contact.”

There are various factors which directly or indirectly affect second language learning, attrition being one of the symptoms of it. Coreen Sears divides these factors into three broad categories: “First are the factors which are centered in the learners themselves. These include personality, ability, aptitude, and motivation. Second are those external to the learner. These include the quantity and nature of exposure to the target language. A third category includes such factors as the optimum age for learning a second language, and the length of time it takes to reach competence” (Sears, 1998, p. 45). The learner himself can have a huge impact on his own learning, the amount and nature of input the learner receives is also a huge factor, and being exposed to the second language at what can be defined as a *critical period* for language learning is also one of the important factors of second language learning. Attrition plays into these different aspects and is usually the result of insufficient access to the L1; leading to detrimental effects of the L2 on the first language.

4.4 Bilingualism and Early Literacy Development

The first two years of schooling are very important to the development of literacy skills (Riley, 2006, p. 2). After the first two years almost all children have learnt how to read and have therefore laid a foundation for further learning. The same applies to bilingual learners, and specific care is needed in order to ensure successful literacy development in one or both languages.

Language acquisition is an ongoing process which operates in several stages and around the age of five there are a lot of changes taking place in the brain which seem to enhance the aspects which enable literacy development and increases language proficiency and understanding (Verhoeven, 2005). This age is very important in language acquisition and it is also the time when most children begin literacy development. This age period is so powerful that “bilingual children in collaboration with parents or older peers are able to acquire literacy skill spontaneously” (Verhoeven, 2005). Bilingual children who learn one language at home and then another in the community and at school, are exposed to input in both languages in different settings. Often the L2, which is learnt in a school environment, is also the language in which literacy is developed.

Verhoeven (2005) conducted a study where children from language minority groups, who belonged to social groups which usually were also minority groups, and the major impediment in the subjects’ literacy development was the lack of the parents’ desire for and knowledge of literacy. In other words, parents did not have the resources necessary to encourage literacy development. Shirley Brice Heath’s study (1986) displayed similar results where it was revealed that the situation and language use at home usually predicted the level of achievement which would then present itself in the students. Heath performed a longitudinal study where she compared motivation for literacy development to success in literacy. Her study was based on sociology and revealed that different types of literacy exist between different social classes; ranging from enjoying the reading of literature to reading which is limited to occupational and/or commercially related material. According to Heath, the social background is an immensely important factor in literacy development and literacy achievement.

Monolingual children’s word decoding skills gradually go from “accessing word representations via their phonic representations to accessing the word representations directly” (Verhoeven, 2005). There is also strong evidence which indicates that during

early literacy development there is a connection between the ability to recognize words and reading abilities. Verhoeven (2005) therefore claims that it is natural that the “networks of connections between the various graphemic, phonological, and semantic nodes needed to read in L2 will be weaker than for first language readers”. It is without doubt a hindrance for students having to acquire their early literacy skills in their second language and Verhoeven (2005) claims that “limited exposure to the second language may lead to qualitatively weaker word representations and thereby both slower and less accurate reading.” Verhoeven’s (2000) research on Dutch speaking children as L1 and L2 users showed that students who spoke Dutch as a second language were less efficient than the monolingual students in reading comprehension and word spelling. Verhoeven suggest that what educators can do to remedy this is to match reading instruction to the knowledge that “children learning to read in a second language should be helped to build their lexical knowledge” (Verhoeven, 2005, 449). Research on second language reading has revealed that early literacy development is very important and that it should preferably take place in the first language.

Furthermore, it is important when addressing bilingualism, especially at the early stages of literacy development, that each individual is defined by the different languages he or she speaks. It is for example not feasible to define a bilingual Icelandic-Thai speaker by the same criteria as an Icelandic-English speaker, due to the difference between the alphabets in Thai on the one hand and English and Icelandic on the other. Susan Rickard Liow (1999) asserts that “models of *bilingual reading* development must accommodate the importance of the child’s pre-literate language proficiencies and their influence on subsequent written language processing, and models of *bilinguals biscriptal reading* development must take account of the relationship between the two scripts, and the likelihood of strategy transfer” (Liow, 1999, p. 209). Learning to read in a language which is not the L1 can have a large impact on children’s awareness of language and their metalinguistic skills. “This awareness implies the ability to focus attention on language, and reflect upon its nature, structure and functions and plays an important role in the development of literacy” (Verhoeven, 2005, p. 440). But, being bilingual allegedly has a positive effect on the learners’ development of metalinguistic skills, since they are coping with and developing more complex language systems than their monolingual peers (Cook, 2003) and it is more than likely that the same can be said about biliteracy. Bialystok, Luk and Kwan (2005) conducted a study which revealed the advantages of biliteracy. The study was focused on four groups of children in

the first grade, where three of the groups consisted of bilingual children who all used different languages and writing systems, and the fourth group consisted of monolingual children. During the period of testing the bilingual children showed progress in reading ability but the children who were learning two different alphabetic systems held a greater advantage. The results revealed that “bilinguals transferred literacy skills across languages only when both languages were written in the same system” and they therefore concluded that “the extent of the bilingual facilitation for early reading depends on the relation between the two languages and writing systems” (Bialystok, Luk and Kwan, 2005, p. 43). Similar alphabets benefit bilingual learners in positive transference between the two languages and learners can enhance their literacy development and boost their advancement into literacy, whereas very different alphabets may aid the children in distinguishing between the two languages when it comes to literacy. Finally, Bialystok et al. (2005) mention that the bilingual children of their study showed advantage over the monolingual subjects in understanding the overall workings of language and writing systems, having been exposed to more than one.

It is therefore safe to conclude that there are several advantages to be had from bilinguality and biliteracy can have a good influence on general literacy development, especially under positive circumstances where, for instance, sufficient input is present for both languages. Finally, there is a lot for learners to gain from developing biliteracy in similar alphabetical systems since knowledge of one language can be used for the second one, but there is also a lot to be gained, even though the biliteracy is based on two different systems, in metacognitive knowledge and understanding of language and literacy.

5 The Possible Effects of L2 Learning During Early L1 Literacy Development

The effects of L2 on L1 are usually considered beneficial by bilingual researchers. L1 literacy development has not been shown to being harmed by L2 learning in a foreign language situation, similar to the situation in Iceland. This chapter will take a look at some of the research results available in order to shed some light on the current situation in Iceland. Learning an L2 is usually considered positive and numerous researchers have found positive evidence of effects on L1 sentence structure, etc. (Cook, 2003, p. 11). Not much empirical evidence is available today on the effects of the second language on the first, but what is available has shown that there is a significant effect to be found. Whether said effect is beneficial or detrimental as well as what its general specifics are, awaits further research. Cook (2003) mentions two studies; one of which (Kecskes, 1998) found positive influences of L2 on L1 and the other one (Balcom, 1995) found a notable difference between subjects who did or did not speak English as a second language, as opposed to not speaking a second language at all. Cook mentions an experiment conducted by himself where the clear conclusion was that: “L2 users do not process the sentences of their first language in the same way as monolingual native speakers do” (Cook, 2003, p. 212). The beneficial effects of L2 language learning are “brain-training”; more complex sentences are produced by people who have learnt second languages and bilingual children have overall better metalinguistic skills than their monolingual peers (Cook, 2003). Cook additionally mentions that it has generally been regarded as a positive thing; having successfully acquired more than one language.

Iceland is a monolingual society where varied access to English is found in various forms of entertainment such as television programs. There are various elements which need to be considered in order to shed light on the situation which has arisen here and when it is best to commence English instruction. To begin with, there is the question of whether or not Icelandic students should learn English at an early age; an age which would move Icelandic society more towards having an active lingua franca. It is clear that students are up for the challenge of adapting to a second language situation, but the input must be comprehensible and meaningful in order for the learning to become successful. It is sometimes seen as a remarkable talent to know more than one language and “an English

person finds it remarkable that someone can use more than one language in their everyday life” though others may not agree, for example “a person from the Cameroon may use four or five languages during the course of a day, taken from the two official languages French and English, the four *lingua francas*, or the 285 native languages” (Cook, 1991, p. 113). However, in all likelihood knowing more than one language is more common than knowing only one since there are a lot more languages in the world than there are countries to fit them into (Cook, 1991). It is therefore likely that the situation in Iceland is similar to various lingua franca situations around the world, although ‘monocompetence’ is generally perceived as the norm (Cook, 1991). Furthermore, specific care may also be needed when teaching a second or a third language to Icelandic children on the one hand and immigrant children on the other; instructors may need to realize the type of knowledge each group brings to the table, and this would most likely require each learner to be approached on an individual level, at least regarding the expected outcome as well as the methods used during language instruction. Although there is not much data available on the actual situation in Iceland, a comparison of several studies may create a sufficient view of the situation.

Although researchers who study bilingualism have revealed the positive aspects of learning two languages, there are several factors which have been considered detrimental. According to Jessner (2000, p. 23) the effects which have been regarded as negative as a result of the contact of two or more languages are code-switching in bilinguals, in addition to interference and transfer in second language learners. Code-switching is a complex phenomenon which takes place in communication between bilinguals, for they “can make simultaneous use of the resources of each of their languages while using the other, loan words, or by developing mixed or switched codes which are governed by their own specific rules” (Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 41). Jessner goes on to say that “the maintenance of two or more language systems at similar proficiency levels can be seen as more than twice as strenuous as the maintenance of a monolingual system because the multilingual brain is constantly involved in processes of matching and differentiation of two or more language systems” (2000, p. 241). Thus, the multilingual mind has to cope with a situation which is more complex than the situation of a monolingual. Furthermore, code-switching in bilinguals has often been misconceived of as interference but bilinguals control a complicated language system and Hamers and Blanc (2000, p. 41) say that “the bilingual’s total repertoire can be fully exploited by him only in situations in which he can call upon the resources of his two languages and use strategies specific to language contact.”

However, it is true that the result of bilinguals not maintaining both (or all languages) in many cases causes language attrition, which means that the less used language or languages become lost or integrated with the dominant language, which is in many cases the L2. It may even occur in a multilingual speaker that the “general language effort (or lack of motivation, or both, for instance)” becomes too little and as a result the speaker will return to a monolingual system where the two or more systems will be merged into one and “this will result in systems displacement” (Jessner, 2000, p. 242).

There various factors which motivate learners of foreign languages which can range from societal influences to peer pressure and parental support. The last of these has been shown to be very important to literacy development and general academic success. Vivian Cook (2003) quotes research by Yelland *et al.* (1993) where it is concluded that English children who have received lessons in Italian for one hour a week, read English better than their peers who did not receive Italian lessons. This suggests that English teaching in limited form at a young age should have beneficial effects on L1 literacy development in Icelandic children. However, these findings also indicate that there might be a difference between the groups in question. The parents of the students who are learning Italian might be more inclined towards encouraging their children’s education than the parents of the group of children who do not learn Italian. Learning a foreign language on its own is not likely to being the cause for successful literacy development, the social motivation stemming from the parents are more likely to have a significant influence on the development of children’s literacy.

Finding the perfect age for commencing second and foreign language learning is very important because of the affects this may have on L1 development. Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle’s (1978) research showed that only the age group of 3-5 years of age showed attrition in the first language or a preference for speaking the second language rather than the first, with the exception of one seven-year-old girl. The most progress showed was in the age group 6-15 years of age, where all of the subjects could be considered bilingual after one year. The findings of their research reveal the complexity of the situation. Lenneberg (1967) put forth and referred to as the Critical Period Hypothesis, and in addition, it supports second language learning from the age of six. However, the second language situation in Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle’s research, where the subjects were English immigrants in Holland, is not comparable to the foreign language situation in Iceland;

where the society is Icelandic with considerable amount of input available in the second language.

There is also the question of the language system or the individual's sense of grammar becoming damaged or influenced in some way. Dulay and Burt (1974) found that Chinese and Spanish speaking children learning English acquire eleven different morphemes in the same order, which suggests that the L2 system is governed by the L2 system and not the L1. Although the results of this research does not apply directly to literacy development, it should be safe to conclude that students of English in Iceland will acquire their second language in the same way as monolingual learners of English, although the situation is different from that of immigrant students in an English speaking society. However, the question which remains unanswered is the one on the effects the L2 learning will have on L1 literacy development, as well as L1 development in general, since the students are living in a predominantly Icelandic society. If the input available to students is limited to the contents of a class held once a week, the quality of that input will be very important. Motivation from parents and their general level of education play a crucial role in success in literacy and second language learning and finding the perfect age for commencing learning may not be as important. Developing an understanding of how second language learning takes place and what governs it can serve as good method for understanding its function and mechanical aspects.

The merging of two different systems of literacy needs further exploration and it is important to view information available on the possible effects second language learning is likely to have on literacy, especially in light of the fact that English teaching in Iceland will possibly intersect early literacy development in the first language. Bialystok (2007, p. 45), refers to research by Bialystok, Luk and Kwan (2005), when she states that there are two very important points which have been discovered about the literacy development of bilingual children. The first being that "some aspects of reading ability, notably phonological awareness, are rooted in general cognitive mechanisms and transfer easily across languages, whereas others, such as decoding, are more language dependent and language-specific and need to be relearned with each new writing system." The second part of her argument is that "writing systems and the differences between them have a greater impact on children's acquisition of literacy than previously believed" (Bialystok, 2007, p. 45). It can therefore be concluded that the effect of the alphabet itself may cause minimal problems, since Icelandic and English rely mostly on the same alphabet.

This becomes an added concern as the general literacy development of Icelandic students does not seem to be on par with their European peers' literacy skills (Ragnarsdóttir, 2007) and English academic reading skills at university level seem insufficient and may be the result of a general lack of literacy skills in any language (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). The effects of differences in phonology might on the other hand cause some difficulty, and finally, the extent to which the differences between the two writing systems will affect the learners in Iceland is an interesting point, awaiting further exploration.

Ludo Verhoeven (2005, p. 446), on the other hand, points out that when bilingual children operate within two languages which make use of the same alphabet, the results can be native-like literacy in both languages. But, when the alphabets are very different, the results are not as good. Conclusively, Verhoeven claims that there is a connection between literacy skills in one language and another, so that bilingual reading development can actually result in a positive connection between the two languages which causes deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency. "In other words: although surface aspects of linguistic proficiency, such as orthographic skills, fluency, etc. develop separately, an underlying proficiency is presupposed which is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency is said to facilitate the transfer of cognitive/academic skills such as literacy-related skills across languages (Verhoeven, 2005, p. 446). These claims suggest that there can be a positive outcome of learning to read in two languages at the same time, although it must be kept in mind that this does not apply in every detail to the Icelandic situation, since it does not include direct literacy teaching in both languages, but an oral introduction to a second language during early literacy development in the first language in a predominantly monolingual situation.

There are various factors which influence foreign language learning and it, in turn, influences literacy development in various ways. There is information available which suggests certain detrimental effects on L1 development, such as attrition, but these effects can be eliminated by focusing teaching on providing ample samples of meaningful input. Furthermore, there is increasing information and data which suggests that bilingual speakers have more to gain than lose by dealing with two language systems at a time. Various cognitive functions such as meta-cognitive knowledge have been proven to becoming increased, leaving the language speaker enriched by having to deal with a more complex language situation than that of the monolingual speaker. The situation in Iceland is, additionally, supported by the fact that the two alphabetical systems in question are very

similar and input is readily available, although it is in some instances limited to television and the internet. An overview of the aforementioned research and data has revealed that L2 learning is more likely to have a positive influence on L1 language development, than not.

5.1 The Swedish EPÅL Project

The countries of Scandinavia are most easily comparable for several different reasons and, therefore, it is interesting to compare the current situation in Iceland to the research results of the EPÅL project in Sweden, which dealt with English teaching as a second language and the possible effects this might have on the development and Swedish and general literacy development.

The origins of the EPÅL project in Sweden can be traced back to the 1940's, when it was officially decided that English should be taught at elementary schools. English was chosen as the second language in Sweden as a direct result of the Second World War, which had contributed immensely towards making English the language of international trade and commerce. By the 1950s the Swedish educational authorities had decided to commence English teaching at the age of nine and the EPÅL project can be seen as a direct result of that decision, where the beneficial and detrimental effects of commencing English teaching even earlier were explored. The dissertation this summary is based on (Holmstrand, 1982), served as a summary of these research results, the research itself reached over decades. As regards the scope of the research, it "signified first and foremost that long as well as short term effects would be studied, and that both effects on English and possible positive or negative effects on other subjects must be surveyed" (Holmstrand, 1982, p. 16). The project can thus be described as a longitudinal research which explored possible positive and negative effects of commencing English language teaching as early as in the first grade, at the age of six.

At the end of the study the researchers claimed to have been unable to find sufficient evidence to support or refute the existence of critical period for language learning. Additionally, they found that there was no significant difference regarding the attitudes found towards English, the proficiency in it or the knowledge of it when it came to the two control groups, one started English lessons at the age of six and the other at the age of nine. These results suggest that there is, indeed, little difference between the final competence between learners who begin English lessons at the age of nine or those who begin at the age of six.

The interesting aspects of the EPÅL project are the claims they put forth as erroneous, which they claim to do on the basis that they lack empirical support. “The theoretical implications of this scrutiny are that two common beliefs associated with early commencement of foreign language instruction should be rejected on the grounds of erroneous theoretical premises and the absence of empirical support. This applies to the beliefs that early introduction of foreign language tuition would have a disruptive influence on the mother tongue, and that there is an early optimal age for foreign language learning. In view of the fact that these two conceptions lack both theoretical and empirical support they may be described as myths” (Holmstrand, 1982, p. 77). These conclusions are very interesting, especially in light of the situation in Iceland.

When the results of the EPÅL project are compared to the situation in Iceland, the debate of whether to begin English lessons at the age of nine or six, are proven to begin a futile dispute and only suggests that beginning English lessons in the first grade will not be detrimental; at worst it could be viewed as time wasted since no direct gain can be proven. Furthermore, these results emphasize the question of whether time spent on English teaching at this level could be better spent on developing L1 literacy skills. The results also imply that there are no negative effects to be found on the mother tongue and that there is no optimal age for second language learning suggest that the situation and surrounding for language learning is more of a deciding factor for success than the learners’ age. In other words, it is important to ensure high quality input and a fertile environment to ensure successful L2 learning, rather than to focus only on beginning teaching at an increasingly early age.

Conclusion

Acquiring a second language comes easy to some but proves much more difficult to others. Lenneberg and other researchers have suggested that this may be explained, in part, by the existence of a sensitive period, a period where learners are more sensitive to acquiring a second language than in other periods of their lives. Usually the assumption has been made that the younger the learner, the better. This assumption is far from being agreed upon by all researchers in the field, and studies have suggested that there may indeed be some sort of critical period where acquisition is facilitated, but does not necessarily mean that it occurs at a very early age for all aspects of foreign language learning. Even though children who begin to learn their second language very young, or even two languages simultaneously, the input available in both languages must remain sufficient for the acquisition to be successful. Researchers have furthermore concluded that the best way to ensure successful literacy development would be to acquire a solid foundation in the L1.

In this essay, considerable data and research have been reviewed in order to conclude whether early English teaching in Iceland will have beneficial or detrimental effects on first language literacy development. Several theories and aspects have been introduced to enable a proper overview of the known, influential factors. The empirical data drawn from in this essay have revealed that there is no specific age during childhood which is better or worse than others regarding foreign or second language learning. There is no empirical data available which supports the notion that the younger the learners, the better. Moreover, there does not seem to be less, final success with the foreign language whether the learners begin at the age of six, or at the age of eleven. The factors which hinder progress in foreign language learning and literacy development seem to stem from the social surroundings and the general interest parents have in learning; the motivation children receive from home. That is, social factors are more important with regards to success than the age of the individual when actual lessons begin.

The conclusion is thus that the first two years of school in Iceland, from the age of six to eight, would yield more productivity if spent in first language literacy development. Empirical data does not suggest that starting general second language lessons at the age of six ensures further success than if the learner begins at the age of nine or ten. It is safe to

conclude that since this change will not lead to any considerable improvement in English learning for the students, that this period would be better spent in nurturing and expanding first language literacy. Further and deeper understanding of first language literacy might even enhance the learners' response to English lessons when they begin at the age of nine. Further research should be aimed at the actual level of students when they enter grammar schools, in order to design a curriculum which better meets the needs of the learners.

The change in the curriculum of grammar schools in Iceland seems to be viewed as positive. Students' positive attitude towards English may result in increased motivation, but the motivation has not been the main concern here, the effects these changes in the curriculum have on L1 literacy development is. It is cause for further uncertainties about the situation that studies indicate that Icelandic students are worse off than their foreign peers regarding L1 literacy. The importance of the social context and social interaction, have furthermore been established in L2 research and this is lacking from the Icelandic situation. The input available in Iceland has become a hybrid between a second language and a foreign language, without the social interaction needed to achieve native competencies. The nature of motivation learners receive at home will very likely reveal the nature of success behind both first language literacy and second language learning.

Literacy has been described as the cornerstone of education. Without a solid foundation in literacy there is little hope for any sort of academic success for the individual. The cognitive abilities needed in order to acquire literacy are immensely complicated and multifaceted, and the cultural background people come from has an enormous effect on motivation and potential success with literacy development. Cultural and social factors can have a big impact on the development of literacy skills and further research is needed on literacy and literacy development in Iceland in order to better understand the overall development and skills of Icelandic students. Defining the level of learners' general level of literacy is essential in order to decide whether a shift needs to be taken towards enhancing literacy skills in Icelandic grammar schools. Both these areas would be very interesting for further research.

Bilingualism as a term is rather difficult to define precisely but there is a general concession that a bilingual forms two different systems and operates the two languages separately. Studies have revealed that the L2 system is governed by the L2 system and not with the same system as the L1. Bilinguality is the coexistence of two languages within one

mind. The main dilemma with defining bilingualism is the debate on to what extent the bilingual is able to wield the two languages. A popular definition is claiming that both languages are used at native-like capacity, but this leaves us with the problem of defining what native-like proficiency is. The bilingual speaker may often be better at one language than the other and this is often due to L1 attrition which can occur when there is insufficient maintenance of the first language. Due to the amount of input available in English to Icelandic learners of English, it is difficult to define the language situation in Iceland and the relationship which has evolved between Icelandic and English. There is little evidence available which supports the claim that the situation in Iceland is bilingual, it resembles more a *lingua franca*, and considering the cultural interaction Icelandic children partake in, there is not much likelihood of the school system on its own being able to turn the Icelandic situation to a bilingual one. Further understanding of the situation may lead to a specific definition of the situation and further research is needed in order to do so. Understanding the actual proficiency level of learners of English is needed in order to procure a better understanding of the situation.

Literacy is the solid foundation which education and successful academic pursuits are based on. Researchers of bilingualism agree that in order to achieve success with bilingualism and bilingual reading, a solid foundation in first language literacy is needed. For bilingualism to become successful, ample input is needed in both languages and lack of maintenance of the first language can often result in first language attrition. It can therefore be concluded that even though Icelandic students may benefit from beginning English lessons at six, there is no evidence available to support the claim that the benefits would be less if the instruction were to begin after the first stages of literacy development, say at eight or nine years of age. Even though the critical period may suggest that children will benefit from early language lessons and maybe reap the benefits of bilingualism, the circumstances in Iceland do not ensure enough input in the form of social interaction. According to the research which has been reviewed here, the optimum choice would be to focus the first two years of school on developing literacy skills and commencing the English lessons in the third or fourth year, since the benefits of such lessons are not likely to be much affected if delayed, in fact, children seem to be even better equipped cognitively at that age than at the beginning of their schooling.

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Appendix A

Directions for English teaching in 1.-3. grade

Viðauki

Nám í ensku í 1.-3. bekk sem valkostur

Samkvæmt almennum hluta aðalnámskrár grunnskóla er gert ráð fyrir að nám í ensku hefjist í 4. bekk. Skólar hafa svigrúm til að skipta lágmarkstímum á hverju námssviði á milli ára innan hvers tímabils, þ.e. í 1.-4. bekk, 5.-7. bekk og 8.-10. bekk.

Eftirfarandi leiðbeiningar eru settar fram um aðfararnám kjósi skóli að hefja enskukennslu fyrr en í 4. bekk.

Líta má á nám í 1.-3. bekk sem inngang að tungumálanámi. Markmiðið er að byggja upp áhuga og jákvætt viðhorf til tungumálsins og skapa aðstæður sem örva nemendur til að nota málið á einfaldan hátt. Þá er mikilvægt að þeir séu öruggir og viti að það er eðlilegt að gera villur.

Úthald og einbeiting ungra barna er takmörkuð og þess vegna er æskilegt að kennslan standi yfir í stuttan tíma í senn. Á móti kemur að ekki má líða langur tími á milli kennslustunda.

Hlustun: Mikilvægt er fyrir unga nemendur að hlusta eftir hvernig enskt mál hljómar.

Skilningurinn kemur með endurtekningum og kennarinn getur einnig notað myndefni og látbragð. Nemendur eiga snemma að geta farið að fylgja einföldum fyrirmælum kennarans.

Talað mál: Smám saman þarf að hvetja nemendur til að spreyta sig á að segja eitthvað á ensku. Það er hægt að byrja á því að láta nemendur syngja og þylja saman barnagælur. Það er góð leið til að æfa framburð, áherslur og ítónun. Síðan koma alls konar tungumálaleikir, hreyfileikir og skapandi vinna til sögunnar. Æskilegt er að mál og athöfn fari saman eftir því sem við verður komið.

Lestur og ritun: Í upphafi er við hæfi að kenna nemendum að nota algeng samskiptaorð. Börn á þessum aldri hafa gaman af orðum og það er hægt að láta þau leika sér með orð, tengja orð við myndir og í tengslum við það taka fyrir stafrófið. Það má jafnvel láta nemendur útbúa einfaldar myndaorðabækur. Það á vel við að tengja enskunámið við það sem nemendur eru að fást við í öðrum þáttum námsins.

Appendix B

Informal interview with Kristín Sigurðardóttir, headmaster of Flóaskóli; grammar school for the first to seventh grades in the south-western part of Iceland. The topic was English teaching in the first, second or third grades. Author's personal contact.

Kristín says that the decision has been taken to begin English teaching in Flóaskóli as soon as possible and the school has hired a specific English teacher for the job. It differs whether English teaching in Flóaskóli begins in the second or the third grade, due to the fact that the first two grades are usually taught in the same classroom and attend the same English lessons. English teaching therefore begins either in the second or the third grade and these students get one English lesson a week and Kristín states that the school is more than fulfilling the compulsory amount of English teaching for the younger levels of students, the 1.-4. grades.

The headmaster is proud of being able to provide English teaching for her students at such a young level and states that the students are very happy about the arrangement as well. Students are usually enthusiastic about learning English and that the classes evolve around enhancing that enthusiasm, in a light and fun manner.

The English lessons in the second and third grade are informal and are aimed at allowing the students to have fun with the language, singing songs and playing games which are connected to the language. The headmaster states that the aim is for the students to experience the English language in a playful manner.

