

A Paper presented at the 10. Nordiske læreruddannelses kongres
21-24.05.08 in Reykjavík, Iceland

Samuel Lefever, Iceland University of Education

Preparing schools and teachers for teaching English to young learners

In recent years there has been a growing interest in offering English instruction to children at ever younger ages. In many countries in Europe English is taught from the beginning grades in schools. This trend has also taken hold in Iceland and an increasing number of schools and even some preschools are beginning to offer English at early ages. This paper discusses the findings of two recent surveys of English language teachers in Icelandic primary schools (grades 5-7) carried out in spring 2007. The objectives of the studies were to gather information about English teaching at the beginning level.

Considerable emphasis is on foreign language learning at both primary and secondary school levels in Iceland. English instruction currently begins at age 9 but schools have the option of introducing English in younger grades. The amount of English instruction at the compulsory level ranges from 2 lessons (40 min.) per week in grades 4-7 to 3-4 lessons in grades 8-10. Danish is also a required subject at compulsory school and instruction begins in grade 7. English and Danish instruction continues at the upper secondary level and many students also study a third and fourth foreign language at that level.

The National Curriculum for foreign language teaching at compulsory school levels was revised in 2005 and reflects the growing interest in English learning in the country. The National Curriculum objectives for language teaching at the primary and lower secondary levels are that:

- students can understand and use English for communicative purposes in authentic-like situations
- students gain insight into the culture and lifestyles of peoples in English language countries
- students become aware of language learning styles and strategies and can take responsibility for their own learning

Due to the growing interest in offering English instruction to children at ever younger ages, guidelines for introducing English in grades 1-3 were included in the revised curriculum. The main objectives for teaching English in grades 1-3 are to:

- instill a positive interest in learning English
- engage children in active learning
- increase children's self confidence
- increase their awareness of English in the environment

There is a general belief that the younger children begin to learn a new language the better. However, research does not conclusively support this belief. Age is only one of many factors of language learning; others are the amount of exposure to the language both in and outside the classroom, how much time is given to language instruction, and in particular, the quality of the instruction.

Language status is another deciding factor in language learning. English is quickly becoming an international language and the key to so many doors. Knowledge of English is advantageous for travel, future study and professional reasons. Parents want the best for their children's future and knowing more than one language, especially English, is seen as an asset. Children are also becoming increasingly aware of the value of knowing English. Most children are exposed to and interact with English in their daily lives; they are learning and using English for their own purposes, for leisure, entertainment and gaining information, and most of this is happening outside the classroom.

Although there is little evidence that indicates a measurable advantage to teaching English to very young children, many theorists and practitioners believe that there are some broader benefits of beginning to learn English at an early age:

- to encourage interest and motivation in language learning
- to develop general language awareness
- to develop a view of language as a means of communication and expression
- to learn about other cultures and promote tolerance
- to provide more opportunities for English learning at school

Language learning is a long term process. Young children are active learners; they are open to new experiences and are less inhibited than older learners. They are imaginative and explorative. They 'learn by doing', for example through play, movement, and interaction with others. It is natural for them to 'negotiate meaning' from language input in their surroundings. This holistic, natural way of learning languages is sometimes lost with older learners.

Surveys of English teachers

In order to get a better picture of the current situation regarding English teaching to young learners in Iceland, two surveys were conducted in 2007. One of them surveyed all the schools that were teaching English in the youngest grades (1-4), and the other looked at English teaching in grades 5-7. Teachers were asked to complete a written questionnaire consisting of questions about their background and education, their teaching methods and areas of emphasis, use of teaching materials, target language use, and assessment methods. Teachers were also surveyed about their attitudes towards National Curriculum objectives, learners' needs and abilities, teaching policy, in-service training, and areas for improvement.

Results

The outcomes of the survey in grades 1-4 showed that last year English was being taught in approximately 30% of the country's primary schools in the lowest grades. This is an increase from the year 2002 when a similar survey showed that 10% of primary schools were offering English before grade 5, the required grade level for beginning English instruction at the time. Many of the schools that participated in the study started English instruction in grade 1 while others introduced it in grades 3 or 4. In most cases the amount of teaching offered per week was $\frac{1}{2}$ - 1 lesson a week in grades 1 and 2 and two lessons a week in grades 3 and 4. In a few schools the instruction was broken down into shorter lessons, e.g. 15 minute lessons two or three times a week.

The teachers were asked to describe their teaching and their answers showed a range of approaches and areas of emphasis. Over 60% of the teachers said they used conventional whole group instruction for teaching English. Some teachers used other approaches such as rotating centers or stations, theme teaching, or integrating English with other subjects. Most teachers said they focused primarily on spoken English and the use of songs and games. Others placed emphasis on vocabulary and listening to English.

The teachers' answers in regard to teaching materials were also varied. There are no locally produced materials for grades 1-4 so most teachers said they looked for materials on the Internet or from other sources. Some teachers used the materials previously intended for grade 5 for younger learners, while others used materials from other countries and children's books

in English. Many teachers collected ideas and materials from various resource books and handbooks for English teaching and produced their own worksheets and exercises. The most common topics that teachers worked with were colors, numbers, body parts, food, animals, household objects, things in the environment, personal descriptions and holidays. A few teachers said they taught grammar items such as synonyms, opposites, singular and plural forms, verbs and pronouns.

Teachers were also asked to describe how they assessed the children's English learning. The majority did not use formal assessment; instead they reported using on-going assessment or portfolios. Many of them based their assessment on the children's participation and their work over the course of the winter. Some teachers gave written comments on children's report cards rather than letter or number grades. Only a small minority of teachers in grades 1-4 said they used written tests to assess the children's learning.

Similar results were found in the survey of teachers in grades 5-7. Most teachers said they emphasized vocabulary and reading in their teaching, followed by listening and speaking. Writing and grammar teaching received less emphasis. Traditional teaching methods were most commonly used, such as reading and listening to English materials and doing workbook activities. Teaching methods that focus on spoken language and activating students in creative or authentic-like language use, such as theme work, role play, video and computer activities, received very little emphasis according to the teachers' responses. Likewise, fewer than half the teachers (45%) said they put some emphasis on games and a similar percentage said they put little emphasis on using songs in their English teaching.

A majority of the teachers used designated materials from the State Materials Commission consisting of coursebooks, graded readers, and grammar booklets. Many teachers said the materials were lacking in reading texts so they used supplementary materials for additional reading and grammar exercises. Only a few teachers said they used supplementary materials for listening, videos, songs and games – materials that children enjoy!

The National Curriculum recommends informal, ongoing assessment methods for grades 5-7 and introducing pupils to self-assessment, for example by using the European Language Portfolio. However, a large majority of the teachers (85%) said they used written tests to

assess the pupils. Many teachers used a combination of assessment approaches and continuous assessment. Few teachers said they used portfolio or self assessment methods.

The teachers in grades 5-7 were asked what they would like to change in their teaching. Most commonly teachers said they would like to use:

- more diverse teaching methods, e.g. pair work, role play, speaking activities
- more active teaching methods, e.g. songs and games
- more theme teaching and use of own materials
- more English in teaching and encourage pupils to use more English
- less emphasis on tests

Using English in the classroom can be challenging for teachers, especially those who have not been specially trained as English teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers in both surveys recognized the importance of speaking English in the classroom but used it in varying amounts. According to their responses (Figure 1), teachers in grades 5-7 used English more often in the classroom than the teachers in grades 1-4. Well over half the teachers in grades 5-7 said they used English from 20% - 60% of the time during lessons, whereas more than half of the teachers in grades 1-4 (55%) said they used English less than 40% of the time during lessons.

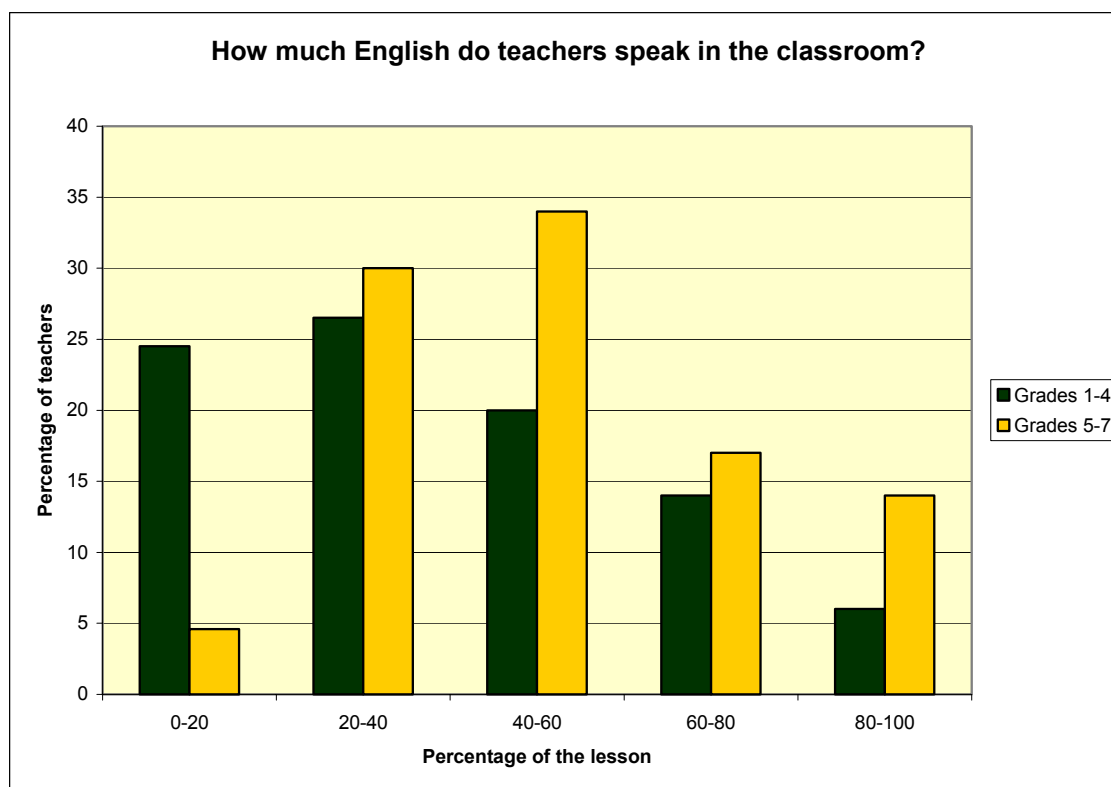


Figure 1.

An important finding of the surveys was the lack of training of the teachers. Approximately 2/3 of the teachers who participated in the 2 surveys had no special training in teaching English (Figure 2). Even though English is a required subject in grades 5-7, the teachers who are teaching English at that level are not better trained than those who are teaching in the youngest grades, where English instruction is optional. Only about 1/4 of the teachers who were surveyed had a BA degree in English or a B Ed degree with English as their chosen subject. A few of the teachers had some training in language teaching pedagogy, for example in teaching other foreign languages, and some of the teachers had taken a few university level English courses.

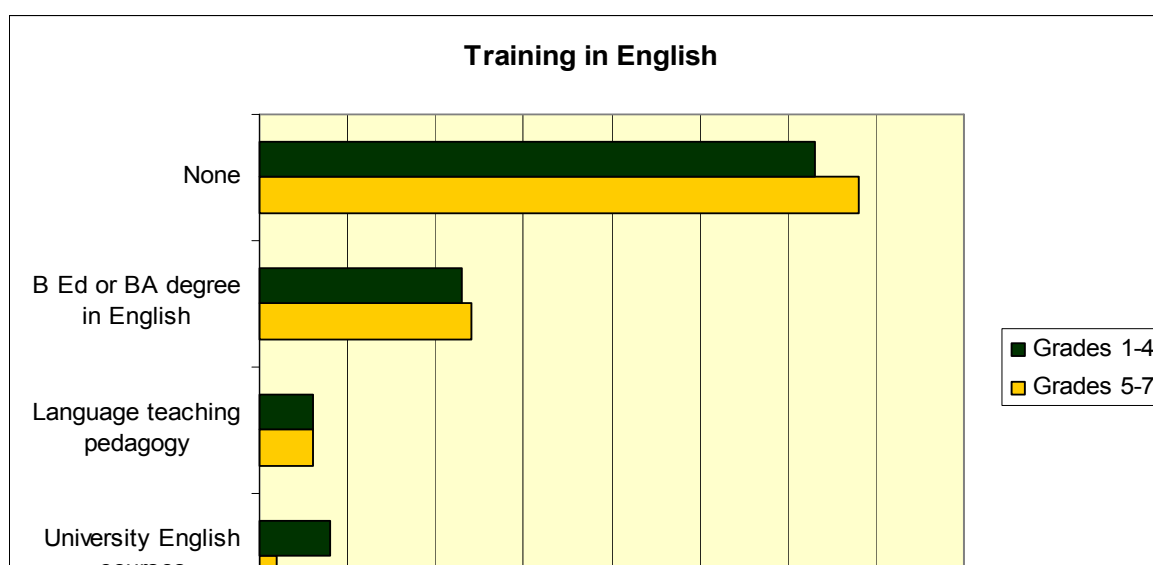


Figure 2.

Most of the teachers in grades 5-7 were fairly young – 61% were 40 years old or younger. Almost half of them had only limited experience of teaching English - 42% had taught English two years or less, and in grades 1-4 more than half (60%) were in their first or second year of teaching English. This lack of training and experience in English teaching can be partly explained by the fact that teaching English in grades 1-4 is a new development and at both of these grade levels it is common for the classroom teacher to take on the English teaching for her class. There are certain advantages with this arrangement; the teacher knows the pupils well and is likely to have more flexibility in fitting English into the daily teaching and integrating it with other subjects. However, the arrangement is most beneficial if the teachers have the skills and training necessary for teaching English to young learners.

The teachers in both surveys were asked what kind of training would help them to be better English teachers. They most frequently mentioned training in language teaching methods and the use of teaching materials, information about supplementary materials, and training to improve their own English skills. The teachers expressed the need for learning how to use various approaches that best suit young learners such as songs, games and stories in English. They also wanted to know what should be emphasized in English teaching at these age levels. Many of them wanted the opportunity to learn from other teachers and to share their own experiences.

Conclusions

The results of the study highlight several challenges faced by English teachers. They find it difficult to incorporate diverse teaching methods and materials into their lessons, especially methods that activate students in creative and authentic language use. They often feel like they don't have time to try out new approaches in the classroom and feel bound by the

curriculum or the book. Teachers in the youngest grades must deal with the shortage of teaching materials and spend precious time on finding and creating their own materials.

Teachers also find it difficult to adopt new assessment methods recommended by the National Curriculum such as portfolio and self-assessment and methods which focus on learner autonomy. Teaching groups of students with diverse needs and varying skills levels is also challenging for teachers. Finally, many teachers lack the necessary language skills in order to feel confident enough to use English in the classroom.

Even though the trend is to lower the beginning age of English instruction in schools in Iceland, there seems to be a lack of understanding on the part of school policy makers in regard to the special needs of young learners and English teaching. The results of these surveys indicate that more emphasis needs to be placed on preparing teachers for the challenges of today's English classrooms.

Teachers need more encouragement and opportunities for in-service training in language teaching methodology. Although some in-service training is offered by the University of Education and teachers have access to a variety of training courses in Europe, very few practicing teachers take advantage of these offers. It is also a question whether basic language teaching methodology for young learners should become part of the core instruction in teacher training programs in Iceland. As it is, only the University of Education provides specific language teaching training for compulsory level teachers and it is offered as an area of specialization, which means that only a small number of teachers graduate each year with special training in teaching English to young learners. In addition, almost all of the teachers who participated in the surveys said they wanted to improve their English skills and their self confidence in using English in the classroom, so more opportunities for doing this are needed. Finally, it is important that schools give more attention to program development and new developments in language teaching. Schools need to be more innovative and flexible in regard to integrating English learning with other subjects.

There seems to be a general misconception that it is acceptable for less qualified teachers to teach the youngest learners, although most language teaching theorists think the opposite. It is hugely important that children's first years of English instruction are positive and successful and teachers play a key role in their pupil's learning. They set the groundwork for future

language learning and help motivate the learners to build on their own knowledge. So it is essential that teachers are well-trained in language teaching methodology, have access to suitable materials, and feel confident about using English in the classroom. If children are to reap the gains of receiving an early start in English and continue to progress throughout their school careers, schools in Iceland must foster and support English language teaching more than is currently the case.

Samuel Lefever is an assistant professor at University of Iceland - School of Education