



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

English as a Language of Learning at the University of Iceland

A Survey of Students' Perceived Proficiency

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Maddalena Tovazzi

Júni 2011

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Abstract

English is gaining more and attention for its role as a language of education. Scholars have been interested in the implication this fact might have for students. It is not yet clear how switching between two languages (one in the textbooks, the other in teaching) can influence students' ability to successfully complete their education. It is often reported in Iceland that the linguistic challenge students find at the commencement of their university career is something they were not prepared for. Nevertheless, many students seem to be very confident about their skills in English. This essay reports the finding of a small study conducted at the University of Iceland. Scholarly positions are also discussed, and some of the issues brought up by the results of the study are examined.

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Introduction

English is today's leading language for an ever growing number of people. Its primary role is evident in many fields: medicine, education, diplomacy, finance, and so on. It is the code that makes most communication possible between speakers of different languages.

The situation though used to be different; not too long ago, languages other than English served international purposes. As Fennel mentions, French was the language of international trade until after World War II (256-257). German was another important language at the time. Eventually, English became dominant on the wave of American supremacy and the spread of computers (Fennel 257).

What followed was that English came to play a major role in more and more aspects of everyday life for an ever growing number of people. Dovrig points out the role the media had in this process (7), and the fact that none of the lingua francas of the past has ever known the wide variety of use English has nowadays. The fact that it dominates virtually every aspect of international communications, the media, travelling, diplomacy and so on is what makes it a true "language without frontiers" (22-23).

What is of interest for our discussion is the role English has gained at higher educational levels in a number of countries. It is a well established fact that University curricula in many countries where English is not a native language employ a consistent number of textbooks and material in English (Hellekjær & Westergaard, cited in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 2). In Iceland, the great majority of university material is in English. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007, 62) cites the 2006 Curriculum Guidelines, which state how "[g]ood literacy skills in English are an important prerequisite for study at the University level in Iceland as the small size of the market makes it impractical to translate and publish instruction materials in Icelandic".

This fact has led to a number of studies and questions concerning what effects this situation might have. It has not always been possible to find exhaustive and satisfactory answers. Albrechtsen, Haastrup and Henriksen analyzed the situation in Denmark. They compared the proficiency of students at different levels of education, both in their first language (Danish) and in their second language (English), focusing on vocabulary and writing proficiency (5). Their findings indicate that students' proficiency is indeed greater

in their first language, but that individuals with higher grades in the L1 seem to do better than others in the L2 as well (178-180). The authors moreover explicitly state the need for a country as small as Denmark to actively function in English. It is a necessity in today globalized world (3).

Very little research has been carried out so far on situations where the language of assessment is a different one than the language of the textbooks (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 2). These authors have proposed the term *simultaneous parallel code use* to describe such situations. This is precisely what is experienced by students at the University of Iceland, where the vast majority of the material is in English but most of the teaching and assessment is in Icelandic.

The status of English in Iceland has not been subjected to much study so far (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 2). The country's sole official language is Icelandic, but English is widely perceived as something different than a foreign language. Traditional sociolinguistics differentiates between foreign and second languages. Some clarification of the two terms might prove useful to the discussion. English as a Foreign Language is usually employed to describe the use of English in a non-English speaking area. Hinkel defines it as "learned by people who already use at least one other language and who live in a community in which English is not normally used" (137). This last definition is interesting when compared to the situation in Iceland, where the speakers do use another language, but it can hardly be said that English is "not normally used". As a matter of fact, more and more slang based on English can be found in books or newspapers otherwise written in standard Icelandic. Examples of this use of slang are terms such as *kommon* (based on English *come on*) and verbs as *að meíka* (from *to make*).

English as a Second Language, on the other hand, is by definition learned in a country where it is a first or official language. The learner is a native speaker of a different language, but living in the host community provides him or her with a high level of input. The motivation behind second language acquisition is generally integration in the new community (Gardner 1).

Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir hypothesizes that the traditional distinction between foreign and second language might no longer be relevant for the Icelandic context (2007, 52). She points out how "the average Icelander is exposed to English almost every day through TV, music lyrics, computer games, the Internet, tourists, and travel" (55). Another emphasized fact is the nature of input in Iceland, which, though abundant, is mainly passive (54). An implication this has is that "Proficiency in receptive language skills may lead to an

overestimation on the part of teachers and, even more critically, of students themselves as to the level of their English skills” (59).

Perhaps the Icelandic situation is more in line with what Cobarrubias (cited in Wardhaugh 380), in his discussion on language planning, calls internationalization. This is defined as “the adoption of a non-indigenous language of wider communication either as an official language or for such purposes as education or trade”. Although the adoption of English is not part of Iceland’s language planning programs, it is true that some companies officially declare English to be their official language (Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir, unpublished study). As Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir report, students in particular fields find it hard to talk about their area of expertise without using English terms (12). These two facts seem to indicate that English is indeed playing an important role in Iceland, bigger than the role traditionally given to foreign languages.

The study reported here departs from these last points. The aims were to investigate university students’ self-evaluation of English language skills and how they believe they acquire them. The idea was not to provide a definite answer to the numerous issues debated by scholars, but rather to pin-point some interesting facts that would be worthy of further investigation on a larger scale.

The main research questions that structured the survey are:

1. How well do university students feel they are prepared in English, both from a general and an academic-specific perspective?
2. What do they consider to be most helpful in the learning of English?

1. The Survey

English is widely present at the University of Iceland. Not only are there an increasing number of foreign students either studying for a full degree or doing their exchange, but most of the material is in English. As Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2009, cited in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 2) reports, 90% of the curriculum is in English, a very high percentage. This is a significant fact for the implications that follow. The students find themselves needing to learn how to manage the transition back and forth between the language of instruction, usually Icelandic, and the language of the curriculum. Very little study has focused on this aspect, labelled simultaneous parallel code use (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 5). I am here going to focus my discussion on the perceived skills in English of university students.

1.1 Methods

In order to conduct my small research, I first thought of conducting a few interviews but upon further consideration a quantitative approach was preferred over a qualitative one. A survey was thought to be a useful tool to collect a significant amount of data in a short time (Neuman ch.10), which would then be elaborated in order to make projections to a larger population. Not only is a survey easier to manage, it would also prove a better way to gain access to information due to some case-specific details. Since my aim was to investigate the self-evaluation of University students and the ways they think they learned what they know, and this survey was ready in March, two aspects seemed important. First, the survey needed to be short. With the end of the term and the exams approaching, I considered it would be difficult to find students willing to answer a large number of questions. Second, an electronic format was deemed better than a paper version. This was decided for a practical reason, namely that it is easier to contact students via email than in person. Moreover, such a practice is common at the University, therefore students are acquainted with it. Every student is given an email address upon beginning his or her studies at the University of Iceland, so virtually everybody could be contacted to answer my survey. The possibility of some students not having access to the internet on a

daily basis was considered too small considered how widespread technology is in Iceland to invalidate the results collected.

The questions I formulated aim at discovering how well students think they are prepared in English. It was therefore deemed appropriate that the questions be in English. Nevertheless, the wording was deliberately kept as simple and clear as possible, so as to encourage students to take part in the survey. The survey was prepared in an electronic format, and an email was sent to a number of people randomly selected from the address book of the University of Iceland intranet *Ugla*. I decided to survey only one of the Icelandic universities because of my familiarity with the institution and the consequent easier access to information. A total of 126 answers were collected in a week, and the sample successfully consisted of a comparable number of males and females (respectively, 68 and 58, or 54% and 46%). Moreover, the respondents represented all the Schools of the University. A total of 730 emails were sent to students randomly selected; eight emails did not reach their recipient. 127 answers were registered, but one of these was excluded from the analysis for several of the questions were left blank. The response rate was roughly one email in five. Considering that the survey was open only for a week, no reminder was sent. The data were elaborated using Excel worksheets. A printed version of the survey can be seen in the Appendix.

1.2 The Questions

The broad research question was to discover what the current status of English among university students is. Considering the small scale of my study, I decided to focus on the analysis of students' self-evaluation. The questions were not restricted to English in an academic context, but asked in rather general terms how students would evaluate their preparation in the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). I furthermore made a distinction for the reading and writing categories between "general", or "everyday", English and academic English. The aim was to find out whether students perceive a difference between the language they find in University books and the one they might experience in a more informal context.

My first question divided the respondents into six age groups. Each of these includes a ten years gap, except for the first which includes ages 18 to 24. The last group is over 65. No data were collected for this age group. The reason behind grouping the data into age groups is to compare the results of both self-evaluation of English skills and of

how English was learned. The assumption here was that older generations would be likely to be less acquainted with computers and, perhaps, travel abroad than the younger people. It was also considered possible that a difference in age could result in a different perception of one's ability, though it was not predicted in what way. My personal opinion is that younger individuals tend to feel more prepared and to be more confident about their knowledge of English, a fact I expected to be confirmed in the survey findings. Whether they really are or not is another point; what here is interesting is to see how they evaluated their knowledge.

Students were asked to indicate their gender, in order to compare the response as given by females and males. A question asking the speaker's native language was added for the email distribution could include exchange or international students. Furthermore, it was considered important to see whether the respondents have or have not been brought up in Iceland. A difference in the preparation and level of English was hypothesized as a consequence of growing up in different environments. Only 7 respondents had been brought up outside of Iceland (two of them have Icelandic as their native language), too small a number to obtain significant data.

The following question asked the respondents to identify at what School they are studying. It was deemed relevant information in order to make comparison among the students in the sample. The hypothesis here was that a difference in the perceived preparation would be observed in students in different fields. While it is to be expected that students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages (included in the School of Humanities) probably consider their English to be good, it is true that faculties such as Medicine have a higher number of textbooks written in English (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafðís Ingvarsdóttir 13).

The next questions asked what the respondent's levels in the four skills are. Precisely, the individuals were asked what their level of proficiency is in spoken English, in listening comprehension, in writing informal English, in reading informal English, in writing academic papers and in reading University textbooks. The aim here was twofold. On one hand, it was considered important to ask about all the four skills separately. A question such as "How good is your English?" would not have provided relevant data, for it poses too general a question. Moreover, this could provide valuable information in mapping out the students' more common difficulties and strengths. The questions specifically related to the academic context were added with consideration for an ongoing

research at the Department of English. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir is currently heading a research group investigating the level and status of English in Iceland.

A further question asked the students to indicate what sort of experiences or tools they consider to have been relevant for their acquisition of English. The options presented ranged from work experiences abroad to the fact of having relatives living in a foreign country, and included a number of well-known media such as television, computer and so on. Moreover, students were asked to rate each of the options presents, assigning them one of three proposed values: “has helped me a lot”, “has helped me little”, or “has not helped me much”. Again, the aim was to discover what people believe to be the most successful ways to learn English. Moreover, comparison between different age groups could provide interesting data on how the learning methods have changed overtime. Education at both primary and secondary level was listed as a possibility, as well as television, travel, working experiences in Iceland and abroad, and so on. The data relative to this grid would provide an interesting insight into how people believe they do learn what they know. It is often stated that school is perceived to be an ever smaller component in one’s knowledge of English. This is true not only of the Icelandic context, but of many other countries as well. Further study is indeed required in order to understand better why this is so, and in what ways it would be possible to intervene to improve the influence of teaching. Computers and TV/movies were expected to score the highest among a sample of University students, and so was travel. As was mentioned above, a different result was hypothesized when crossing these data with those relative to age. A gender difference would perhaps result as well, though this was expected to account for a smaller difference.

The concluding questions were once again in line with the ongoing research of English at the university. First, respondents were asked whether they think they could improve their English. Here the expected outcome was that a relatively high number of individuals would say they do not. This was hypothesized because of Icelanders’ opinion of their English preparation. A recent study, which examined the perceived preparation of employees in Icelandic companies found high percentages of people who considered their level of English to be adequate and in no need for further improvement (Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir, unpublished study). An open question allowed students to indicate in what areas in particular they thought they need improvement.

Finally, students were asked whether they think the University of Iceland should offer a language support course, as many other institutions do. They were also asked whether they would take such a course, which would be free of charge. This specification

was made in an attempt to eliminate the possibility of student answering negatively because of an economic concern. By stating that the language support course would be free of charge, there is a higher probability that findings reflect the actual attitude of the sample.

1.3 The Informants

As mentioned above, the survey was sent to a number of e-mail addresses randomly selected. The aim was to gather satisfactory and varied information, so no particular criteria was used during the survey's distribution other than the recipients be students at the University of Iceland.

The total number of respondents was 126, composed of 68 males and 58 females. As it was expected, the great majority was in the age groups 18 to 24 (56 informants) and 25 to 34 (43). What was surprising was the relatively high number of mature people who took part in the survey. 27 informants were 35 or older, revealing that a significant number of people are still in pursuit of a university education well after they are past their twenties. The data might confirm a much discussed contemporary trend in Icelandic society: in times of crisis and uncertainty, people go back to university.

The year of study was not specified. From the answers to the open question, where one student declares to be in possession of a bachelor degree, it can be assumed that the data include both undergraduate and graduate students. It is also expected that a difference in perceived proficiency could be observed among students at different levels. The simple fact of having spent more than one year handling teaching material in English is thought to result in a greater confidence and easier approach to the instruction.

2. Results

Interesting findings emerged from the data collected. As it was expected, the age groups were not equally represented. This fact did not come as a surprise, for it can be easily noticed on campus that a majority of the students at the University of Iceland are in their twenties or thirties. According to these figures, the higher number of data was gathered for the age groups 18-24 and 25-34, which together accounted for 79% of the information (45% and 34% respectively).

The Schools were also unevenly represented, but it has to be kept in mind that the numbers of students in attendance differ between Faculties. The School of Social Sciences was the most represented with 39 responses (31%), followed by a tie between the School of Humanities and the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences with 25 responses each (20%). The School of Health Sciences provided 23 responses (18%), and finally the School of Education accounted for the smaller sample with 14 responses (11%). These figures are close to the percentages of students attending the different Schools, with slight differences. Table 1 shows the correlation between the number of students enrolled in every Schools as to a February 2011 statistic (see the references list) and the data gathered for this study.

	Number of students enrolled	Number of respondents	Percentage of students enrolled	Percentage of respondents
School of Social Sciences	4.768	39	34%	31%
School of Humanities	2.731	25	19%	20%
School of Education	2.387	14	17%	11%
School of Engineering and Natural Sciences	2.213	25	16%	20%
School of Health Sciences	2.043	23	14%	18%
TOT	14.142	126	100%	100%

Table 1 Numbers of students at the University of Iceland compared to the data gathered for this study.

The first relevant question asked students to rate their level of proficiency in the four language skills. The whole sample proved to be rather confident, with the great majority of the students rating their knowledge as “Good” or “Very good”. Going more into detail, 99 informants consider their spoken English to be “Good” (56) or “Very good” (43). Translated into percentages, this means the 78% of the total sample rates their skills at the high end. Only 27 would rate their skills as “Basic” (7) or “Intermediate” (20), and no one considers their level to be poor. The figures show an even greater confidence when it comes to understanding spoken English: 118 respondents say their listening comprehension is “Good” (50) or “Very good” (68), a figure corresponding to the 94% of the total sample. Here as well, no one considers their level to be poor; only two informants rate their proficiency as “Basic”, and six consider it “Intermediate”.

Also writing informal English seems to pose no problem to the majority of students. 95 students rate their level as “Good” (43) or “Very good” (52). 12 respondents, a larger figure than those found so far, rate their proficiency as “Poor” (3) or “Basic” (9); finally, 19 consider their skills as “Intermediate”.

Informal English is perceived as mastered also when it is read. 115 students (91% of the whole sample) say their comprehension is “Good” (45) or “Very good” (70). A poor comprehension is recognized by only one informant.

Things change when we move on to the academic specific proficiency. It seems that a smaller number of students feel confident about their ability to write formal language. This time the majority rated their level as “Intermediate” (35) or “Good” (44). A smaller percentage considered themselves to be “Very good” in writing academic English (25), and more students feel they have a “Basic” (13) or “Poor” (9) level. It is clear that a difference is perceived between an individual’s ability in everyday language as opposed to academic and formal language.

The reading of University textbooks is less problematic. 50 students say their level is “Good”, and 48 say it is “Very good”. Once more, only a small group feels their level to be “Poor” (2) or “Basic” (5).

These results show a perceived difference in competence between general and academic specific English. The passive competences (listening and reading) are perceived by the students as less problematic, and consequently the proficiency is considered higher. On the other hand, students seem more self-conscious about their abilities when it comes to the active competences (speaking and writing). Table 2 illustrates the data relative to the various questions. Figure 1 illustrates the same data in a chart.

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	7	20	56	43
Listening	0	2	6	50	68
Writing (gen.)	3	9	19	43	52
Reading (gen.)	1	3	7	45	70
Writing (acad.)	9	13	35	44	25
Reading (acad.)	2	5	21	50	48

Table 2 Ratings of perceived proficiency in English relative to the whole sample.

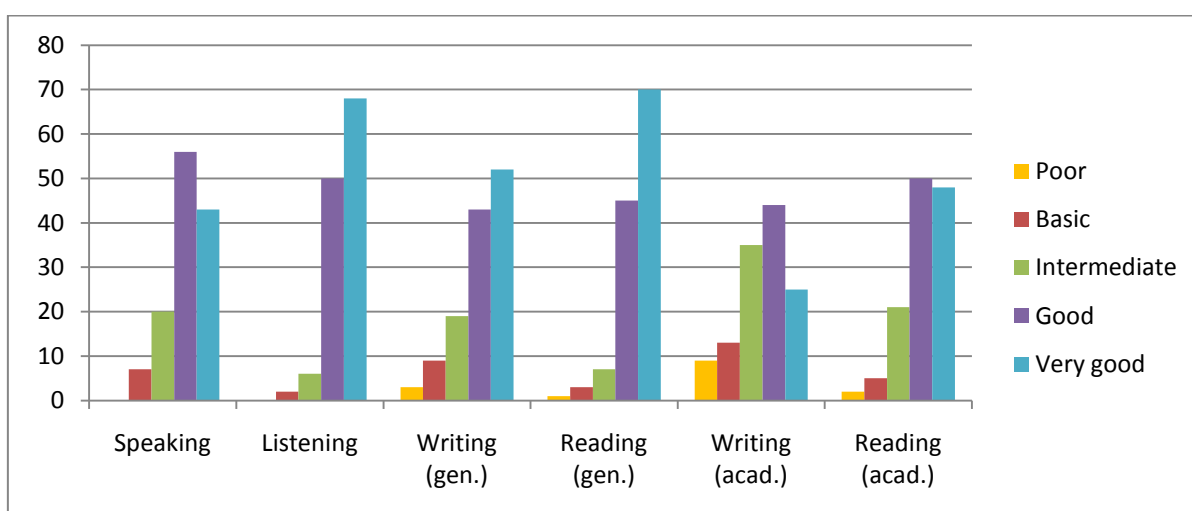


Figure 1 Distribution of students' answers.

The next question asked students to identify what has been most useful to them in learning English, and to what extent. The aim was to gain an insight into learning processes.

The most help is identified as provided by TV and movies (106 students claimed it has helped them a lot to learn English). Literature comes in second place, with 89 informants saying it significantly helped them. Travel (80) and computers (79) are following. Primary school is not considered to be very relevant by over two thirds of the respondents, and family is also not perceived as providing much input for the learning of English. It would be interesting here to see whether this is because a majority of the students only have Icelandic relatives, or if this is because the contacts with family members in other countries are limited. It is interesting how working experiences in

Iceland and abroad are rated similarly: 25 respondents find work in Iceland as helpful in learning English, and 32 says the same of working abroad. This is a rather interesting figure, suggesting that the presence of English in working environments in Iceland is not only widely perceived, but it is also considered as having an educational role. Table 3 shows the detailed data for each answer. Figure 2 represents the data in a graph.

	Has helped me a lot	Has helped me a little	Has not helped me much
Primary school	37	42	47
Secondary school	55	52	19
TV/movies	106	16	4
Travel	80	28	18
Family in Iceland	8	41	77
Family abroad	10	23	93
Work in Iceland	25	33	68
Work abroad	32	19	75
Computers	79	38	9
Music	57	49	20
Literature	89	26	11

Table 3 Ratings of the importance of various factors in learning English.

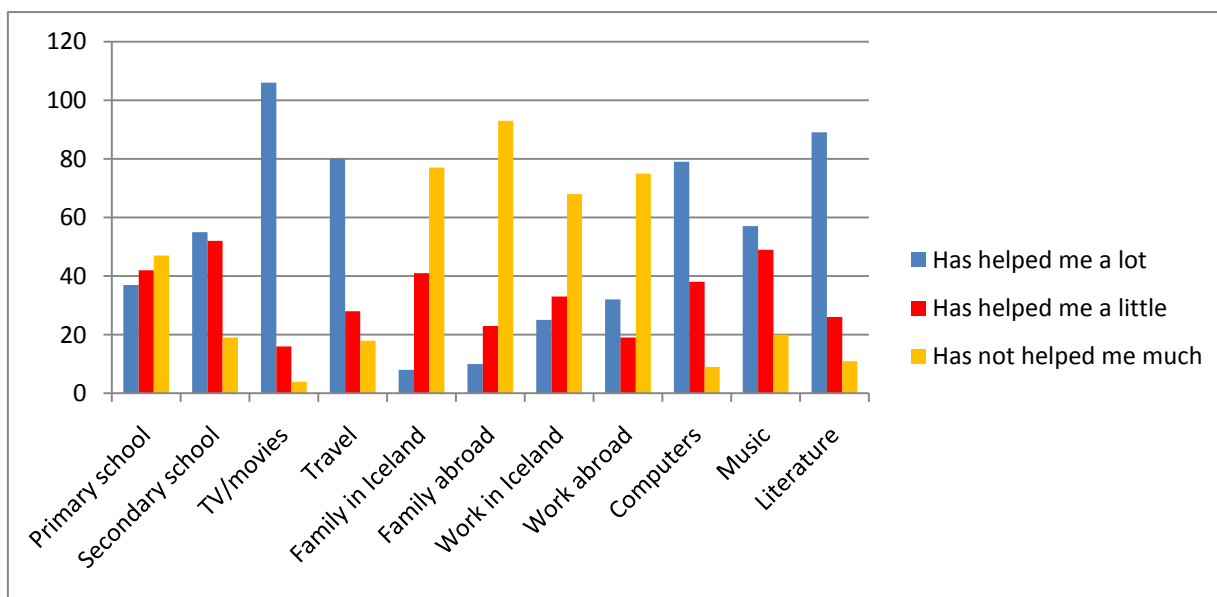


Figure 2 Perceived importance of various factors to the respondents' acquisition of English.

Asked whether they think they need to improve their English, 108 students admit they do, and 18 say they do not. In addition, an open question follows asking the respondents to identify the areas they think they could improve in. 94 students answered,

and among them a majority clearly feels they need to improve their vocabulary (both general and field-specific), their written expression and their pronunciation. This seems quite odd, considering how in the self-evaluation section 78% of the respondents state they are good or very good at speaking. Of those who do not deem it necessary to improve their English, one respondent stated that he feels that way for he never encountered any problem with the proficiency he has, and another one said that having completed a BA in English he does not need further formal education in the language. The other 16 students did not provide a reason for their answer in the negative.

The University of Iceland does not offer English support courses; students are expected to master the necessary skills upon enrollment (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2007, 52). I asked the students whether they felt it would be useful to introduce such a language course, which is present at most universities where students are non-native speakers of English who are expected to work through said language. 116 respondents agree that an English language support course would be a useful addition to the University of Iceland's educational offer (92% of the surveyed sample). However, when asked if they would take part in said course, only 86 answered affirmatively. These figures nevertheless suggest that there is a perceived need for language support. It would definitely be advisable that the University authorities look further into this matter. Figure 3 represents the distribution of answers in a chart.

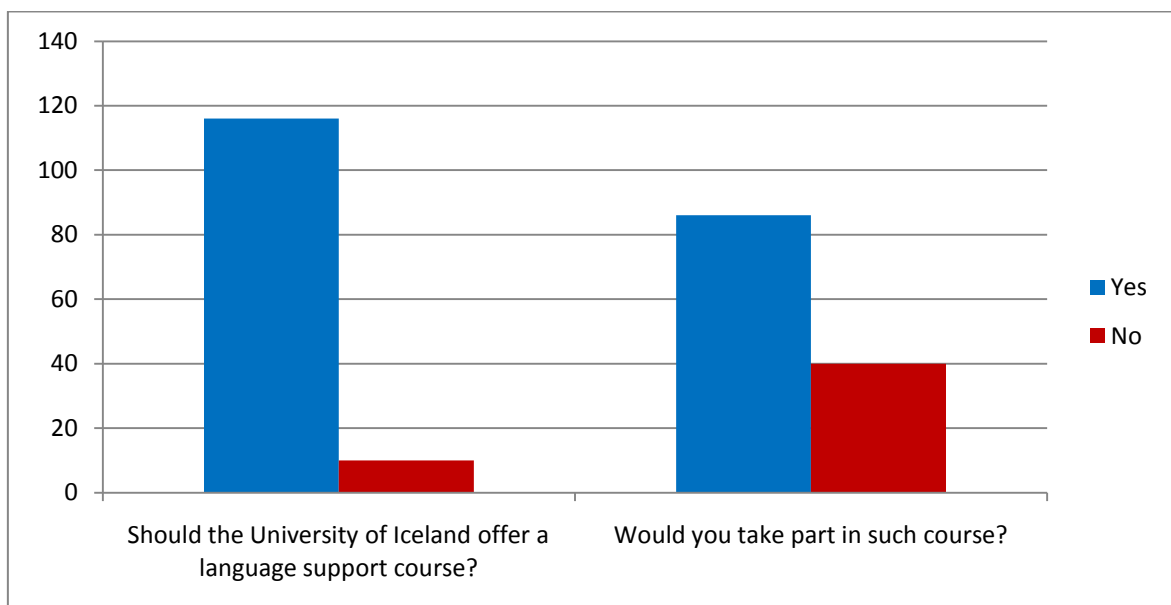


Figure 3 Students' opinion regarding the possibility of a language support course.

2.1 Comparison between Schools

While preparing this report, it was deemed valuable to consider the results for each School separately, and compare them to find out possible common aspects. While the results are overall in line with the entire sample, some data are interesting.

The School of Social Sciences represented the biggest group with 39 respondents. Informants were of every age group included, with a majority of the sample in the 25 to 34 group (17 respondents). The second biggest age group was 18 to 24 (10 respondents). What is immediately noticeable from the results is that a vast majority of the students at the School of Social Sciences are extremely confident about their English skills. No one considers their spoken English to be poor, and the same is believed of their listening and reading comprehension (both general and academic specific). However, it seems that fewer students rate their listening as “Good” than in the whole sample. Writing is considered by few students to be problematic, with 2 respondents rating it as “Poor”. Once more, the most noticeable differences with the reference sample are in the higher categories. A higher number of students, in proportion, consider their writing to be “Good”, and 13 say it is “Very good”. The differences however are not as clear when considering the data in percentages, for the total of “Good” and “Very good” answers at writing informal English for the School of Social Sciences is 77% and the total for the whole sample is 75%. Apart from these differences, the results are noticeably in line with the data relative to the whole of the students at the University of Iceland. Table 4 illustrates the detailed data for the Faculty of Social Sciences. Figure 4 represents the data in a chart, which can be used for comparison with the one relative to the whole sample (see figure 1 on page 9).

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	3	6	15	15
Listening	0	2	2	12	23
Writing (gen.)	2	2	5	17	13
Reading (gen.)	0	2	2	12	23
Writing (acad.)	3	5	8	14	9
Reading (acad.)	0	4	5	16	14

Table 4 Data collected for the School of Social Sciences.

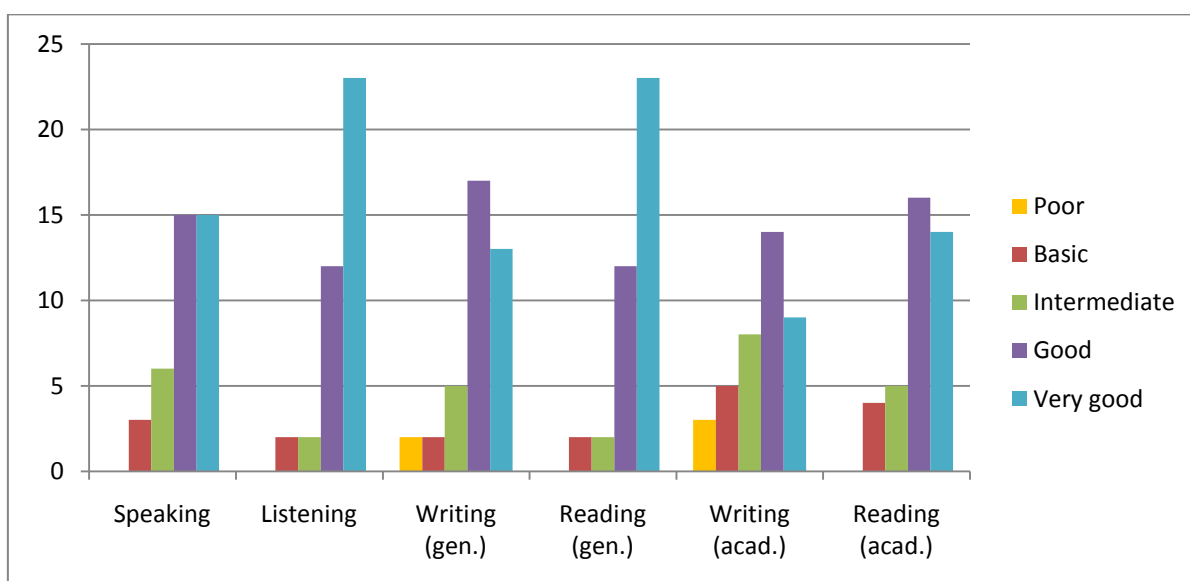


Figure 4 Distributions of students' answers for the School of Social Sciences.

The School of Humanities was represented by 25 respondents. Once again, all the age groups were represented, though in different numbers. 80% of the sample was in the first two age groups (10 respondents were in the age group 18 to 24, and 10 were also the informants in the age group 25 to 34). There are no striking differences between how students at the School of Humanities rate their speaking skills and the data relative to the whole sample. Things are a little different in listening comprehension. All the respondents rated their proficiency as either “Good” or “Very good”. Interestingly, more students seem to rate their skills as “Good” than the general sample, but less consider it to be “Very good”. Nevertheless, this is not a dramatic difference when compared in proportion, and it might be related to the different perception students have of the terms “Good” and “Very good”. More students admit a “Poor” level of writing academic language (4), but less would rate it as “Basic” (only one respondent). Moreover, a greater portion of the students consider their understanding of academic texts as “Intermediate”, and a smaller number rated it as “Good” than in the whole sample. Table 5 shows the data for the School of Humanities. Figure 5 illustrates the data in a chart for comparison.

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	1	4	12	8
Listening	0	0	0	15	10
Writing (gen.)	1	2	6	5	11
Reading (gen.)	1	0	2	10	12
Writing (acad.)	4	1	6	7	7
Reading (acad.)	1	0	9	4	11

Table 5 Data collected for the School of Humanities.

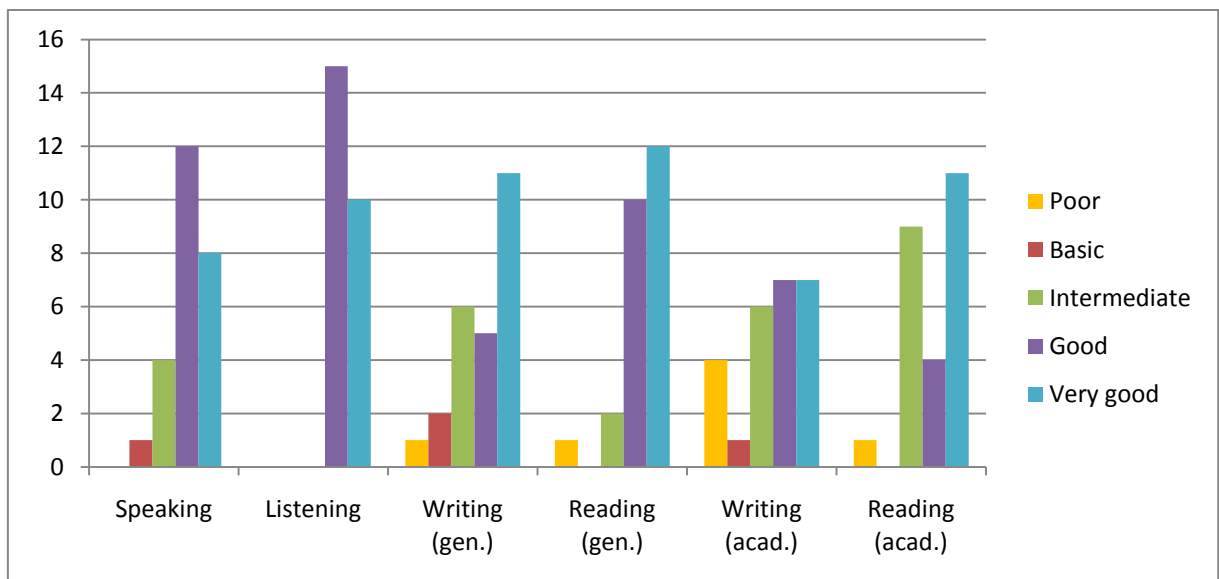


Figure 5 Distribution of students' answers for the School of Humanities.

The School of Engineering and Natural Sciences was represented by an equal number of informants, of ages between 18 and 54 (no data were collected relative to the oldest age group). 15 informants were in the 18 to 24 group, and 7 in the 25 to 34 group. No relevant differences were observed among the ratings of speaking ability. Relative to listening skills, however, the whole group of respondents declares to be “Good” (7 informants) or “Very good” (18), a result quite distant from what found in the whole sample (where a smaller portion rated their skills as such). Students also feel they are decidedly “Good” in both writing and reading academic English.

In general, it can be said that the students at the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences rate their ability towards the high end of the scale, and do so in greater

percentages than the whole of University students. What seems particularly interesting for this School is the difference between reading and academic writing. It is true that a significant portion of the writing students do in tests consists of formulas and tables, which translate into a smaller requirement for essays and papers. Table 6 shows the detailed results for the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences. Figure 6 represents the data in a chart.

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	0	4	11	10
Listening	0	0	0	7	18
Writing (gen.)	0	1	2	9	13
Reading (gen.)	0	0	1	7	17
Writing (acad.)	0	2	7	13	3
Reading (acad.)	0	0	1	15	9

Table 6 Data collected for the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences.

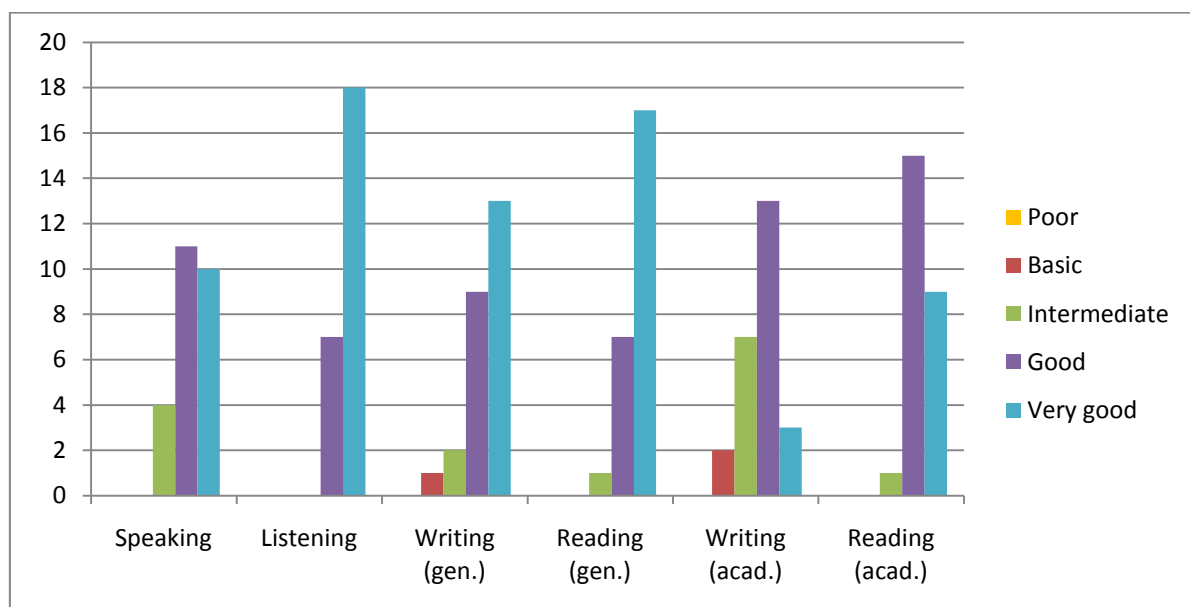


Figure 6 Distribution of students' answers for the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences.

The School of Health Sciences was the fourth biggest group in this study with 23 respondents. The majority of the students were of age 18 to 24 (15 informants). This

School is the most in line with the reference sample. Interesting differences in perceived ability can be observed only in the ratings of writing academic texts. A bigger portion of the students consider themselves to be “Intermediate” than in the whole sample, and a smaller number say they are “Good”. In general, students at the School of Health Sciences seem more willing than students of other School to recognize a lower level of English. Table 7 illustrates the detailed results. Figure 7 represents the data in a chart.

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	2	4	10	7
Listening	0	0	2	10	11
Writing (gen.)	0	2	2	9	10
Reading (gen.)	0	0	1	9	13
Writing (acad.)	1	4	8	6	4
Reading (acad.)	0	1	2	10	10

Table 7 Data collected for the School of Health Sciences.

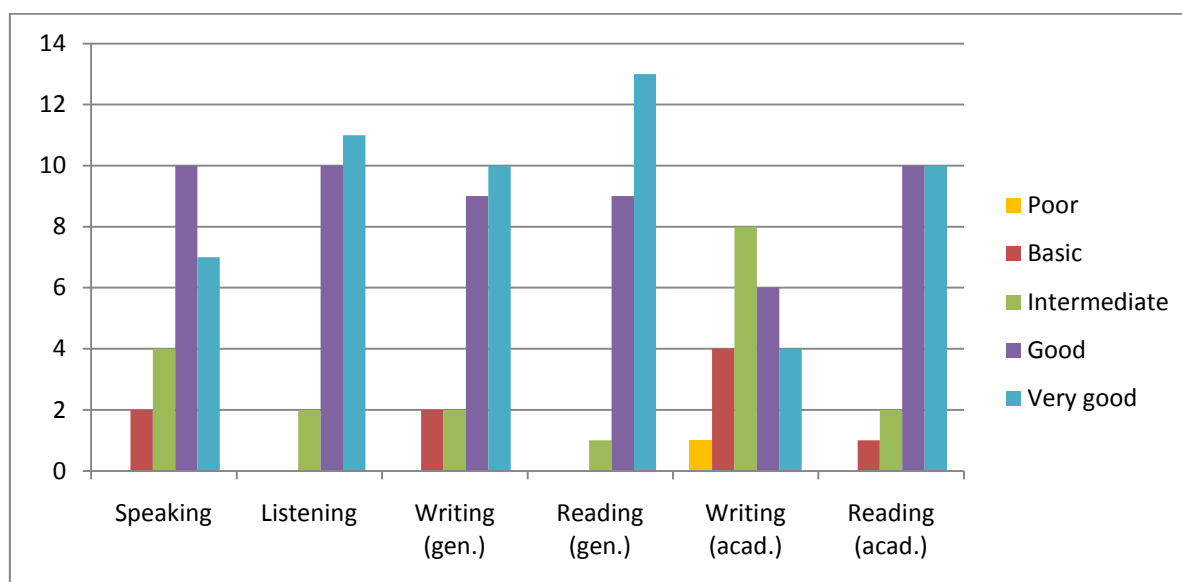


Figure 7 Distribution of students' answers for the School of Health Sciences.

To complete this School-specific analysis, the School of Education was represented by the smaller group, 14 informants. This was the only School where relevant differences from the whole sample were observed in the rating of speaking abilities. More students

consider themselves “Good”, but less rate their proficiency as “Very good”. Similar data can be observed in all the other skills. The students at the School of Education show a greater tendency to rate their skills as “Intermediate” and “Good”, and declared themselves “Very good” in smaller percentages in all the skills. Table 8 shows the detailed results and Figure 8 shows them in a chart.

	Poor	Basic	Intermediate	Good	Very good
Speaking	0	1	2	8	3
Listening	0	0	2	7	5
Writing (gen.)	0	2	4	3	5
Reading (gen.)	0	1	1	7	5
Writing (acad.)	1	1	6	3	3
Reading (acad.)	0	1	4	5	4

Table 8 Data collected for the School of Education.

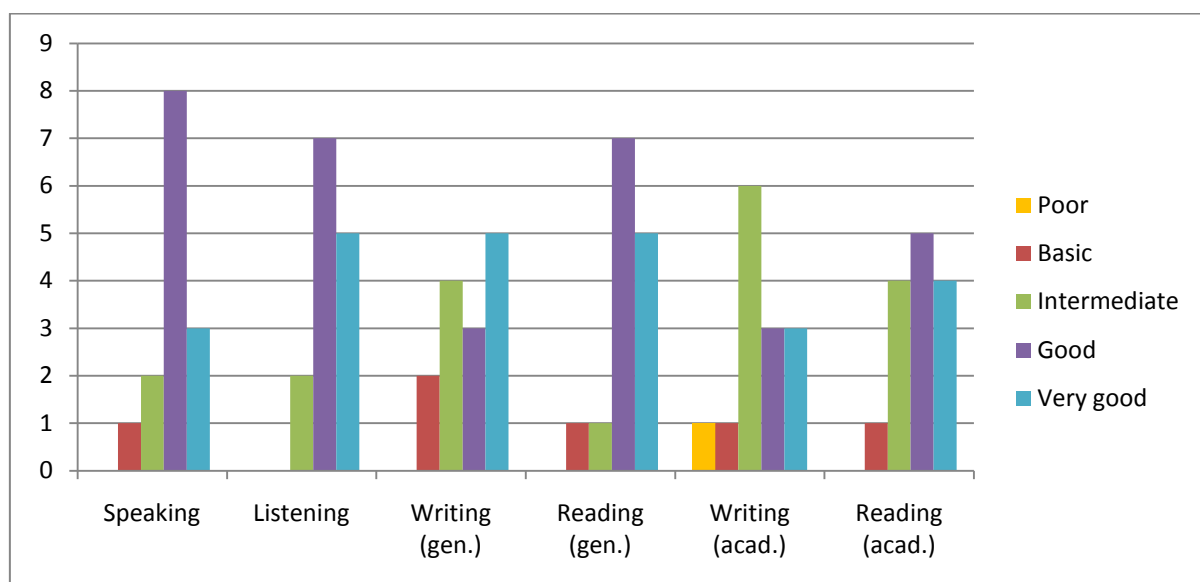


Figure 8 Distribution of students' answers for the School of Education.

As it can be observed, there is a connection between the School attended and the feelings students show towards their preparation in English. This might be influenced by the different exposure students have to the language. It is relevant, for instance, that most

of the teaching in most Schools is carried out in Icelandic, with the exception of the Department of Foreign Languages. This might result in the students having different opportunities to work actively with their English skills. The greatest number of textbooks in English is found in the scientific and medical faculties (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2009, cited in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafþís Ingvarsdóttir 13), and it is in fact the School of Engineering and Natural sciences that has the greatest number of respondents rating their skills as “Very good” and “Good”. Moreover, differences can be related to the most represented gender among students, as it will be discussed further on.

2.2 Gender-related differences

During the preparatory phase, it was deemed important to have a closer look at whether the gender of the respondent might have an influence in the perceived ability. As mentioned above, the sample included 68 males and 58 females. The responses were analyzed one by one and the data compared. Though overall similar, some differences emerged. It was observed that more males than females consider their proficiency “Very good” in listening and writing informal English. Males were also more likely to consider their writing, both informal and academic, to be “Good” than were females. Proficiency in writing informal English was rated as “Informal” by more females than males. But when it comes to writing academic texts, then females feel “Very good” in higher numbers than males.

It can be said that males in general are more confident about their proficiency relative to informal aspects of English than are females. On the other hand, the situation is reversed when considering academic specific English, where girls rate themselves as better skilled than boys do. Table 9 shows the detailed data relative to each question as provided by males and females. Figures 9 and 10 show the differences between genders in two graphs.

	Poor		Basic		Intermediate		Good		Very good	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Speaking	0	0	4	3	9	11	29	27	26	17
Listening	0	0	1	1	2	4	25	26	40	27
Writing (gen.)	1	2	5	4	6	13	26	17	30	22
Reading (gen.)	1	0	2	1	3	4	22	23	40	30
Writing (acad.)	5	4	5	8	19	15	28	16	11	15
Reading (acad.)	0	1	3	3	10	11	30	20	25	23

Table 9 Differences in responses between the genders.

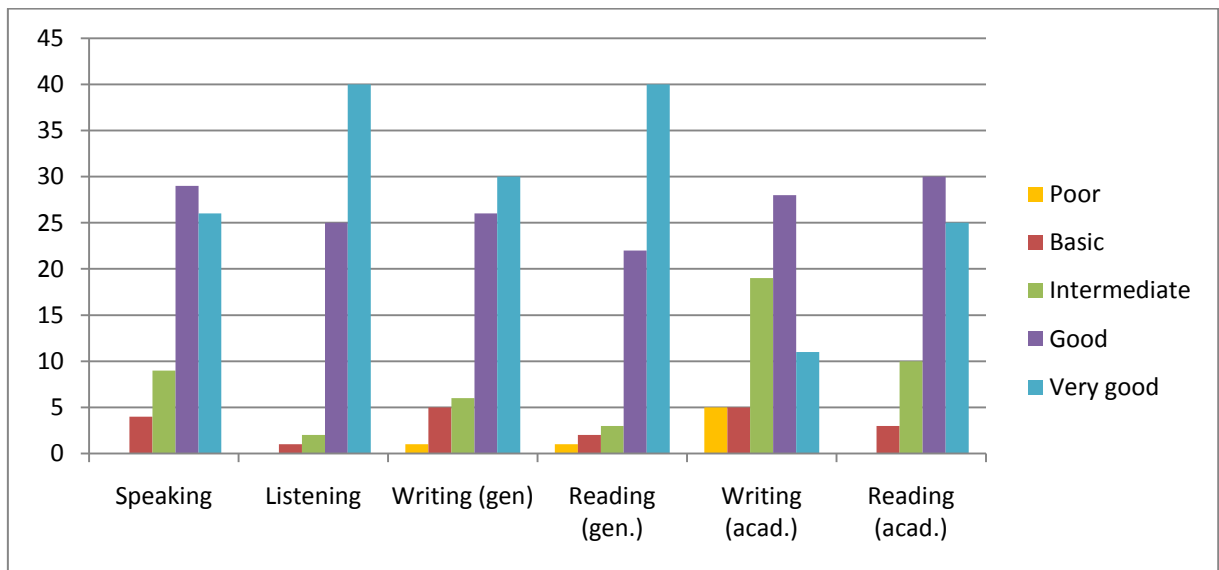


Figure 9 Responses given by male informants.

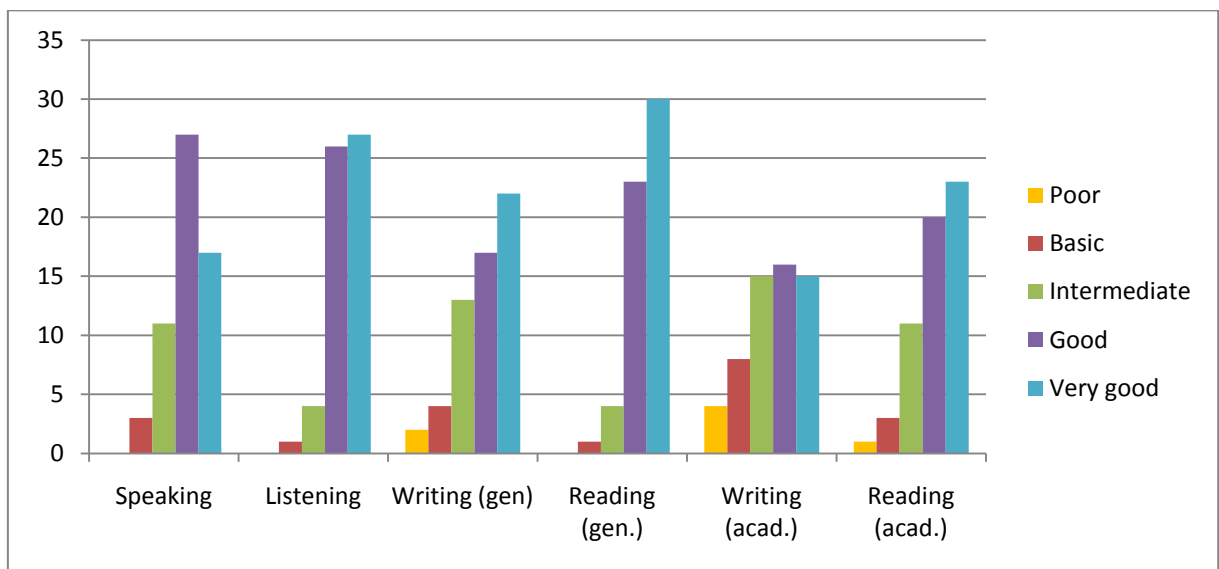


Figure 10 Responses given by female informants.

2.3 Age-related differences

I had hypothesized that different age groups would rate their proficiency differently. However, the results show that young individuals are as likely to consider themselves very skilled as are older ones. No relation between age and perceived ability in English was detected. In the eventuality of a larger study, this certainly needs to be further investigated.

One of the questions in the survey asked the students to indicate to what extent they consider a number of options to have played a role in their learning of English. The list I provided included educational institutions, television, the interaction with family members, and more. Other categories would have been interesting to analyze, but these seemed to be overall exhaustive.

The aim of this question was twofold. On one hand, I wanted to see what students in general feel is more useful for their acquisition of language skills. On the other hand, I had a particular interest in finding out how different age groups might provide different data. It can be expected, for example, that computers might not have had a major influence in the life of a young person some thirty or forty years ago. Thence, the respondents in the age groups 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 would probably not rate computers among the most useful tools they had to learn English. As I have previously pointed out, computers were considered to have helped a lot the 63% of the total sample. Perhaps a higher importance would be given to literature; considering the scarce presence of televisions and the mentioned point made about computers, it could be expected that people read more.

These and other hypotheses were kept in mind. Results for the mentioned age groups (45 to 54 and 55 to 64) were analyzed separately. Since the great majority of the sample was included in the two youngest age groups, the general results were considered representative enough to draw comparisons.

Interesting findings emerged. The computer hypothesis proved to be correct. Fewer people in the older age groups consider the use of computer to have been helpful in their acquisition of English, though it is recognized to have helped “a little”. Secondary school rated considerably higher within the age groups 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 than it did in the general sample. This could be due to the fact that school was perceived to be stricter and perhaps better preparing people in the past than it is today. For many people it was also the only way to get an education, and this could show in the results. Surprisingly, literature was not considered very important by many respondents. The result could be explained by

the fact that in the past people used to read more in the native language. It has moreover to be kept in mind that there were very few respondents in these age groups, which means the results need further verification on a larger sample.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this survey offer some interesting data on the students' perception of their language skills. It has to be said, however, that the small size of the sample analyzed makes any generalization hazardous. Nevertheless, the results indicate that further study on the aspects considered would provide useful material. A larger survey seems worthwhile. It is possible that students who feel they are not so well prepared in English avoided participation in this study. Individuals who feel more confident are more likely to provide information on their linguistic skills.

In general, students at the University of Iceland feel they are well prepared to meet the requirements of the programs. The great majority of them rate their skills as good or very good. Some problems seem to arise when academic language is considered on its own; more students admit their level is "Basic" or "Intermediate". Writing is the aspect of language most students feel less prepared at, with more respondents than in any other question indicating their level as "Basic" and "Intermediate". On the other hand, reading and listening are the skills that collect the highest ratings. Only the reading of academic textbooks shows somewhat lower levels of self-evaluation.

The results relative to single Schools show that some differences are indeed present. These can be related to the different educational requirement. As Björkman (cited in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 13) mentions, scientific texts are substantially different from those used in the humanities. Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2009, cited in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 13) points out how the School of Health Sciences and the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences are the ones where most textbooks and courses taught in English are found. The findings of this study show that 96% of the students at the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences consider themselves "Good" or "Very good" at reading academic textbooks, and so does the 87% of the students at the School of Health Sciences. These results seem to indicate that a higher exposure to reading material in English helps students feel more comfortable about their proficiency. It would be interesting to test this hypothesis further.

Women are more modest than men when asked about their level of proficiency, and feel on average less prepared. The figures found in this study about gender differences could provide an explanation for the fact that the School of Education is the one where fewer respondents feel comfortable. As pointed out in Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís

Ingvarsdóttir (13) and reflected in the statistics of students at the University of Iceland, most students at this School are women, who are usually more realistic and honest about their skills. Similarly, it has been observed how the students at the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences are the ones who feel most confident about their skills. It might be interesting to point out that most students at this School are men (for the detailed figures, see the University of Iceland statistics). The contrasting results between these two Schools provide additional information on how males and females perceive their abilities differently. Gender therefore can be said to be a significant variable in research if this kind.

The various age groups answer differently when asked what has been helpful in learning English. This confirms the initial hypothesis, and also provides interesting material for further verification. The computer is considered far more helpful by the younger generations, and secondary schools seem to have been a lot more influential in the past than they are nowadays. This might of course be a consequence of the fact that there were less sources of exposure to English.

Students feel they could use a language support course. This is generally offered by academies that have programs taught in English. Although students are expected to learn enough English prior to commence their studies at the university, it seems that this is not always the case. The opportunity of a language support course seems appealing for those who did not manage to acquire adequate English proficiency in high school. Moreover, the findings show that there is a considerable number of students who may be going back to university after years, maybe even decades. It can be hypothesized that such a long break from learning may pose further difficulties to students, not last the challenging language requirement. More study seems appropriate in this specific area as well.

It seems important to point out how the answers to this study might have been provided only by students who feel strong in English. It is a possibility that individuals who are less confident in their abilities decided not to take part in the survey. The gap between the number of students who think a language support course would be useful and the number of those who would actually take part in it seems interesting. It can perhaps be hypothesized that students perceive participation in a language support course as an indication that their preparation is insufficient. Therefore they might be not willing to state that they feel they could benefit by taking part in it. Once again, further research need to investigate these possibilities as well.

It has been mentioned how it is possible that the older students might be individuals who lost their job consequent to the economic crisis still influencing the country. For some

people, going back to university on a student loan seems a better option than staying idle at home on unemployment benefits. A majority of them can be assumed to have been out of school for quite some time. It seems therefore safe to conclude these individuals would find it helpful to be offered some assistance to manage the linguistic requirements of the university curriculum. Though the University of Iceland would have to face an additional cost were it to organize a language support course, this would probably be a good investment. It could be interesting to see how much money is spent by the Government in unemployment benefits paid to individuals who could not manage to successfully go back to university because of language difficulties. An investment in its citizens' education could be a smart move for Iceland.

This small survey brings into consideration various aspects concerning English as a foreign language and English as a language for education. First of all, it has been discussed how the traditional label of foreign language may be no longer appropriate for the Icelandic context. The widespread nature of English and its status are indicative of a transitioning situation. English in Iceland has connotations that fit both the traditional scholarly definition of foreign language (location in a non-English speaking area) and that of second language (mainly high level of input). The main argument against the classification of English in Iceland as foreign language is that it cannot be said that it is not normally used by the community. Many native speakers of Icelandic use English intensely, both with foreigners and with other Icelanders, they need it to pursue education at academic level and to carry on a number of daily activities.

What the findings suggest is that students feel very well prepared to undertake studies at the University of Iceland. This is unfortunately often an overestimation, with yet a high percentage of dropout possibly due to difficulties in tackling the English language requirements (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2007, 53). Responses to this study clearly indicate academic writing as the most problematic skill.

There is a whole scholarly branch dedicated to the study of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), which has resulted in a number of studies and specific publications. Tribble has reviewed some of the textbooks used in college composition courses. What he discovered is that such material seems far better suited for students in the liberal arts than for those in other fields, such as sciences. This is due to the different requirements programs make to students (411). This aligns with the point previously made about how students in different Schools have different perceptions of their abilities.

It therefore seems appropriate that in the future some language support program be introduced in order to help students who need to improve where necessary. The findings of the study clearly show how such a possibility would have the students' approval.

To study in a language different than an individual's native one poses at least some difficulties. It is a fact that English is taught in different ways where it is a native language than where it is not, and this is certainly nothing new (Howatt 212). Some studies have been carried out, which aimed at finding the most effective ways teachers can stimulate students' improvement. As Wong and Waring report in a very interesting article, extremely positive feedbacks, such as the comment "very good", might have a negative impact. In short terms, they might inhibit the students, who feel they have done well enough and therefore need to do nothing more. On the other hand, individuals who receive fewer laudatory feedbacks engage more actively in class (201).

Nurmukhamedov and Kim add to the discussion by pointing out how the most effective feedbacks are in the form of imperative statements offering concrete hints as to what to change. Students taking part in specific studies have been seen to react better to this type of comments, which stimulate an immediate application of the suggestions received from the teacher (279-280).

To conclude, it might be said that a larger study of the nature of English at the University of Iceland is definitely worthwhile. This study has detected differences among the perceived abilities of students of different Schools, as well as among males and females. No relevant differences were observed among different age groups in their self-evaluation of English skills. However, age seems to matter when individuals are asked what they think has helped them to learn English.

It has to be kept in mind that such a small scale study cannot be used to make generalizations, and therefore the results presented here need to be confirmed by further research. A greater number of students should be interviewed, in order to eliminate chance factors and to get inclusive results. Information on the respondents' year of study might provide additional useful information. It can be hypothesized that after some time spent studying from textbooks written in English the proficiency is perceived as higher than at first. The same can be assumed of the students' ability in writing academic papers. It has moreover to be kept in mind that the study presented here is relative to only one institution, the University of Iceland. It is safe to say that similar research needs to be carried out in other institutions at tertiary level as well.

Changes in educational programs seem necessary in order to provide the students with better preparation to meet University requirements. Further study of these matters would prove extremely valuable in the event of a future educational reform. Some sort of English language support at the University should be taken into serious consideration. A number of students find out rather soon their preparation is not as good as they expected, and perhaps dropout would be reduced if language difficulties could be eased. Indeed, English in Iceland is gaining more and more importance, and the situation is constantly evolving. It certainly is different from what it was a few decades ago, and it will change again in the future. I am confident this small study would offer good points for further research in the field.

Appendix

1) Age <input type="checkbox"/> 18-24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25-35 <input type="checkbox"/> 36-45 <input type="checkbox"/> 46-55 <input type="checkbox"/> 56-65 <input type="checkbox"/> +66																																																
2) Sex <input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F Native language _____ Were you brought up in Iceland? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No																																																
3) What School are you studying at? <input type="checkbox"/> School of Humanities (Hugsvísindasvið) <input type="checkbox"/> School of Social Sciences (Félagssvísindasvið) <input type="checkbox"/> School of Health Sciences (Heilbrigðisvísindasvið) <input type="checkbox"/> School of Education (Menntavísindasvið) <input type="checkbox"/> School of Engineering and Natural Sciences (Verkfræði- og náttúruvísindasvið)																																																
4) What is your level of proficiency in speaking English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good What is your level of proficiency in listening to and understanding English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good What is your level of proficiency in writing general (everyday) English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good What is your level of proficiency in reading general (everyday) English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good What is your level of proficiency in writing University papers in English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good What is your level of proficiency in reading University textbooks in English? <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Basic <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Very good																																																
5) What has helped you to learn the English that you know? (mark all relevant options)																																																
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 25%;"></th> <th style="width: 25%;">Has helped me a lot</th> <th style="width: 25%;">Has helped me a little</th> <th style="width: 25%;">Has not helped me much</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>Primary school</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Secondary school</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>TV/movies</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Travel</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Family in Iceland</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Family abroad</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Work in Iceland</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Work abroad</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Computers</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Music</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Literature</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table>		Has helped me a lot	Has helped me a little	Has not helped me much	Primary school				Secondary school				TV/movies				Travel				Family in Iceland				Family abroad				Work in Iceland				Work abroad				Computers				Music				Literature			
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6) Do you think you need to improve your English? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Why? In what areas? _____																																																
7) Many universities all over the world offer support courses in academic English. Should universities in Iceland offer English language support of this kind? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Would you take such a course (at no extra cost ☺)? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No																																																

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