Icelandic alphabet books: a key to the culture

Viktoriia Buzukina
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Abstract

This essay is a research and analysis of first alphabet books for children under three years old, the requirements in designing them with the main emphasis on the visual part, which is a key to the culture and environment of a child. The study is applied on the Icelandic market. The importance of early literacy is described, as well as mentioned when it is better to start introducing children to the letters of the alphabet.

The Icelandic traditions are not in favor of learning letters of the alphabet before preschool, so these are not published for children aged zero to three. The small market in Iceland also creates some limits. The research shows that most of the first high-quality and fully illustrated books available in Iceland are by foreign authors and illustrators.

Interviews with people in the fields of literature and education, editors at publishing houses, Icelandic writers and illustrators as well as my close look at Icelandic alphabet books show that the visual culture is very poor and not developed properly. The research summarizes problems in Icelandic ABC books and suggests ways to improve the visual part of alphabet learning materials.
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Introduction

One of the first books parents buy for their children in Ukraine is an alphabet book. I remember having one big cardboard ABC when I was a child and I bought one for my son when he turned one year old. The alphabet book is more then just learning the letters; it is a first introduction to the culture of your country. Some professors in the field of rhetoric state that learning the alphabet should begin early in children’s life and they should definitely be introduced to the letters before the age of three.¹

Publishing children’s book is a manufactured process. To get all the way from an author to a child, a book goes through the agent, publisher, editor, readers, designer, marketing, advisers, reviewers, booksellers, advertising, other media, and then through parents to the child.² All these links are important, but the first point of the study is to focus on the work of designers and illustrators who are responsible for the visual part of making the imagery that transmits the meaning in a recognizable way and connects it to the environment of the child. Research will be made to identify the most important aspects required for designing a high-quality alphabet book as a part of a daily experience for infants and toddlers, who are not able to read the text, but are ready to understand through images. Through this cognition they will be on the way to literacy, because “Literacy development begins in the very early stages of childhood, even though the activities of young children may not seem related to reading and writing.”³

The Icelandic children’s book market is made up of a big variety of literature for a wide range of ages. The second point of this study is to research how many alphabet books exist in Iceland and for which ages they are targeted. Are these books good enough to introduce children to the language and do they represent the local culture? How many books are actually “... home made ...”⁴ but not written and illustrated by foreign authors. The ratio between Icelandic picture books for toddlers and those that are translated would help to analyze the situation. The research is based on interviewing people in the fields of literature and learning for children of the preschool age, editors at publishing houses and at the government institutions, popular writers and illustrators and, with their help, to find solutions on how to improve learning the alphabet by making it visually more unique, entertaining and educationally useful.

⁴ Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 16 November 2012.
Early literacy traditions in Iceland

Learning the Icelandic alphabet is generally difficult. However there are few materials for toddlers available in stores such as alphabet books or simple ABCs. Do Icelandic children learn the alphabet? When and how? – These are the first questions to start the research. Rannveig Auður Jóhansdóttir, the lecturer at the Research Centre for Children and Youth Development in Iceland, that is mainly focusing on the reading and writing development from infancy to the teenage years, gave an introduction to the culture of learning the alphabet in Iceland.

It is not a very strong tradition in Iceland to introduce children early to the letters. After 4 years old they become introduced to some of the letters from their names or names of their family. They put these letters on the wall and play with them. This is very common, but in the preschool. Telling the story is a very strong tradition in our country. We have storybooks for teachers, which they read aloud and help children to select most common sounds and letters out of them. For the toddlers there should be toys, cubes or any other games with the alphabet … but our last 10 years of research showed that it is very important that the language development was improved and started earlier.

Icelandic children start to learn the alphabet at preschool when they are ready to learn to read. Deanna Mascle, professor in technical communication and rhetoric, writes that children should “... be well on their way to alphabet mastery before preschool.” But there are no ABC books, cubes, or cards in Iceland, which would be designed for children under 3 years old. Is it good to limit toddlers from introducing them to the visual shapes of letters?

Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, the editor at the Icelandic book publishing house, Forlagið, mentioned in her interview that some years ago “... teachers were against that children were learning the alphabet before entering the school to keep them all on the same level.” Of course it is not a rule nowadays, but the early introduction of children to the letter-language-culture chain is not established in Iceland, and Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, the Icelandic writer and illustrator points to that problem, too:

I think that because of this separation, of taking the reading out of the home and putting into a school is probably one of the reasons why you won’t find any books at all that teach anything about the letters until children are actually ready to start school. So that is probably why the alphabet book kind of falls out of the picture, because there no longer exist the home responsibility. People were for some while afraid of teaching their children because of these arguments, which is really bad. This is changing now, but this is probably why we have this gap and a game of associating a letter and a picture, which is a fun game, and it does not mean that a child would necessarily learn to read, but he will be ready to learn to read and to associate a letter with a sound. The playfulness of it was taken away and is made to be a really serious thing now, like you have to learn to read.

Both with the entertainment part of the alphabet book, unconsciously children receive basic information about the letters, because the building blocks of language and literacy are formed in the first three years of a child’s life. In his first year, a child’s brain doubles in size, by the age of three, a child’s brain is twice as active as an adult’s one and a baby’s job is to learn. Judith Shickedanz, a professor of education at Boston University, where she has served as coordinator of the early childhood program, first “... described categories of early literacy behaviors … They help us to see the meaning of these book behaviors and see the progression children make along the path to literacy.” Her study also shows what young children like in books, how they should look like, and what the content should be.

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8 Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 16 November 2012.
9 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
Alphabet books for toddlers: format, content, illustrations

As mentioned earlier, learning the Icelandic alphabet starts at the preschool age and alphabet books exist in some variety here. However, before analyzing them I need to know about the format, style and content of books that are focused on infants and toddlers. In her book, *Much More Than the ABC’s*, Judith Shickedanz describes what young children at specific ages like in books (image 1).

![Image](image1.png)

**What Young Children Like in Books**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infants 0-6 months</th>
<th>Young Toddlers 12-24 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Books with simple, large pictures or designs with bright colors.</td>
<td>• Sturdy board books that they can carry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stiff cardboard, &quot;chunky&quot; books, or fold out books that can be propped up in the crib.</td>
<td>• Books with photos of children doing familiar things like sleeping or playing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cloth and soft vinyl books with simple pictures of people or familiar objects that can go in the bath or get washed.</td>
<td>• Goodnight books for bed time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infants 6-12 months</th>
<th>Toddler 2-3 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Board books with photos of other babies.</td>
<td>• Books that tell simple stories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Brightly colored &quot;chunky&quot; board books to touch and taste!</td>
<td>• Simple rhyming books that they can memorize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Books with photos of familiar objects like balls and bottles.</td>
<td>• Bed time books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Books with sturdy pages that can be propped up or spread out in the crib or on a blanket.</td>
<td>• Books about counting, the alphabet, shapes, or sizes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plastic/vinyl books for bath time.</td>
<td>• Animal books, vehicle books, books about playtime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Washable cloth books to cuddle and mouth.</td>
<td>• Books with their favorite TV characters inside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Small plastic photo albums of family and friends.</td>
<td>• Books about saying hello and good-bye.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proceeding from this information, most of the books for toddlers should be strong and durable. The main points in designing a picture book for them would be narrowed to the choice of the materials for printing, the size and weight of the book, the content. The classic idea of the alphabet book is “... to have a letter and something that you associate, connect with in your mind ...” – says Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, an Icelandic writer.

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14 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoriia Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
Anita Silvey, the author of *Children’s books and their creators*, describes the importance of these connections in the first alphabet books:

The very youngest child needs simple, uncluttered books. Words should represent familiar, concrete objects, with “A” beginning apple rather than atom. First alphabet books typically pair initial sounds with words, and these associations should depict regular phonographs. Pages that proclaim “K is for knife” or “G is for gnu” bewilder rather than educate. These key words should also have unambiguous names; “B for bowwow”, in a book peopled with nouns rather than verbs, will confuse the child who identifies the animal as a dog … Complications in naming lead to misunderstanding.

Designing the picture book for infants or toddlers means making simple content with familiar objects found in everyday life. The recognition of all these objects depends on illustrations in the book. Nowadays “… there are enough scattered, broken up and fragmented images, when I do books for the smallest children I want something calm, so the child could focus on one thing at a time …” – says Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir. Different styles of illustrations make each book unique. Images get special textures when they are done with pen or ink, watercolor, gouache, 3-D cut-paper collage, pencil, pastel, digital drawing and of course in blended techniques. With the help of any of these tools it is important to create images, which would be connected to the habitual environment, be recognizable and calm. I agree with everything here, except that being calm and peaceful may lead to losing some visual focus in the pictures. To grab the child’s attention, I find that visual contrast and colorfulness, but not the extreme one, is very important for the first books.

Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, authors of the book *Children reading pictures: interpreting visual texts*, write what children say about picture books and the major point from them was that “… getting the pictures “right” was more important then getting the words right.” I am focusing on toddlers who are not able to read the text, the pictures are their first storytellers, and reading the images is not a left-to-right movement. The eyes focus either on the largest identifiable object or on an object that has a particular interest for the viewer.

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16 Anita Silvey, *Children’s books and their creators*, p. 17.
17 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoriia Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
21 ibid., p. 192.
This means that the smaller the child is the simpler and bigger images should be in books. Everything new is exciting for toddlers, but I agree that the more familiar the object – the better. In the same book, the author asked one girl about what she looked at first in the spread and she said “the bike, because I can ride a bike.” Together with the familiar objects, cultural depictions are as important as the images themselves and Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir points on it:

We have to realize that we actually need Icelandic books, not just translated ones, because we don’t have alphabet books or even, as we are saying “pointing” books, where would be Icelandic things … the spring for an Icelandic child is a dandelion up against the wall, it is not the swallows coming. In a book you need these things that are familiar. Of course we need the exotic as well, but not for small children, they need familiar things, that they could see themselves in the mirror of the book.  

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23 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoriia Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
Publishing children’s books in Iceland

Translated books from zero to three are popular in Iceland. Parents buy them a lot probably without realizing whether they are by an Icelandic or foreign author. The statistics provided by Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, an editor at Forlagið, shows that in the year 2011, two Icelandic picture books for children under three years old and nineteen translated books for the same age were provided on the market. In the year 2012, four Icelandic and twenty-six translated books were published. The statistics are based on titles at the annual book catalogue, Bókatíðindi, distributed to all houses. Sigþrúður explains the reason for this big gap in the Icelandic market:

It would be impossible for us to print board books for very young children only for the Icelandic market because it is so small and it would be very expensive, it will never pay back … There is only one Icelandic board book, which has been on a market for around 20 years and was reprinted again and again, it is Íslensku dýrin (e. Icelandic Animals). All the other books of this kind in Iceland are published because we join a co-printing with foreign publishers, when colored images in books are printed at one “go”, and then text in different languages is printed over.

The co-printing makes the production cheaper because books are published for a very big market. But when I look at all these books, they look very similar to each other because of the same objects, images or photos inside. I could not find any information on why the content is so narrow and limited, but this is probably happening because designers make books fit for many countries, creating some kind of “neutral” culture. Icelandic publishers can find solutions to print board books for toddlers, and as Sigþrúður mentioned, there is one board book that keeps being republished, but it is not an alphabet book, unfortunately. It is hard, of course, to compete with bright foreign books full of novelties, sounds, textures or flips, like first books with numerals, colors or shapes from abroad. But the Icelandic alphabet is unique and cannot be done by foreign authors, so it initially does not have competitors. From this point I would like to start analyzing the existing Icelandic alphabet books and examine if they fulfill the aforementioned requirements.

24 Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, electronic mail to Viktoria Buzukina, 22 November 2012.
A close look at Icelandic alphabet books

The Icelandic children’s book market has some difficulties with publishing a big amount of board books for children at an affordable price. Research shows an obvious domination of foreign children’s books over Icelandic ones and thereafter leading to the influence of foreign culture. During the analysis of Icelandic ABC books, my main emphasis will be put on the visual part of the book, how images work with the content and whether they represent the Icelandic environment.

The history of traditional Icelandic alphabet books is short and all the books, which are only a few: Gagn og gaman27 (e. Fun and Learn) and Við lesum28 (e. We are reading), have low-quality illustrations. This is because the focus of these books is stories and rhymes, which in those days were considered the most important elements. In 2000, Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir published a book, Stafurinn minn og stafurinn þinn29 (e. My letter and your letter) with full-illustrated pages and it was one of the first books that focused on making the visual part the most dominating.

When we started to make picture books in Iceland in the late 19th century, there were very few people who could do it, we had 2-3 people who did illustrations and not very good ones. Icelandic tradition in illustrations is very limited and quite poor. But even now, when the market is obviously bigger, we still did not develop the idea that the visual is as important as the text.30

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27 Helgi Eliasson & Ísak Jónsson, Gagn og gaman: lesbók fyrir byrjendur, Ríkisútgaða námsbóka, Reykjavík, 1933.
30 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoriia Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, the author and illustrator of the book tries to prove the importance of illustrations and introduces parents to the simplicity of the content by having less text and simple objects, one per page, as Judith Shickedanz mentions. Inside are short and simple sentences that help to memorize the letter and connect it to the object (images 3, 4). The book was in some kind of sense innovative for Iceland, but it follows the Icelandic tradition, that “... children learn their first letters through their names.”

Here on each page we can see different Icelandic names connected to letters and objects. But the cover of the book (image 2) does not show that it is an ABC book when you first see it, only the title tells us about it.

Some of illustrations have inconsistencies, for example on the page with the letter *O* for *Ormur* (e. *Worm*), where the worm looks more like a rope (image 5). But if this “rope” had eyes, for instance, it would change the whole perception, as it is shown in another book, *Við lesum: lestrarbók A* (e. *We are reading: Reading book A*) (image 6).

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Visual misunderstandings are one of the most common problems in the children’s first picture books. “One preschooler, upset because she had read an alphabet book incorrectly, sadly pointed out this problem: ‘I said ‘R for rope’, but the book meant ‘S for snake’!”33

Referring to Sylvia Guðmundsdóttir, the editor at Námsgagnastofnun, the Icelandic National Centre for Educational Materials (later NCEM), the font used in the books for the smallest children should be non-serif. It should be as much as possible approximate to the letters we write, “A serif font is too busy and the spacing between letters becomes not clear.”34 Sylvia gives an example about the most suitable typography that they, at NCEM, chose for the latest reading book Lestrarlandið35 (c. The Land of Reading). Here, on the image 7, is a non-serif font from the Lestrarlandið, Unit Bold Alternate.36 The main characters, which editors of the book point on, are a and g (image 8), because in a serif font these letters are shown not in the way we usually write them. And this way we can see in a book Stafurinn minn og stafurinn þinn (image 9), where a serif font, Century Old Style Regular,37 is used (image 10).

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33 Anita Silvey, Children’s books and their creators, p. 17.
34 Sylvia Guðmundsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 21 November 2012.
The author of the book mentions that she would now choose another typeface, but would still stick to some classic serif font, because for the smallest children “it is better to start with something classic.”³⁸ I think that the typeface choice in first books can be either serif or non-serif and they should visually match with the style of illustrations first of all, to make their unification aesthetically beautiful and not confusing. The typeface should be of clear shapes with no features or extra decorations.

Í stafaleik

The book Stafurinn minn og stafurinn þinn, is the only alphabet book in Iceland that can be targeted for children under 3 years old, in my opinion, but it has never been republished for some unknown reason. Rannveig Auður Jóhannsdóttir, the lecturer at the Research Centre for Children and Youth Development in Iceland mentioned a book Í stafaleik³⁹ (e. In a letter game) as an example of another alphabet book that could be a part of the toddlers’ experience because it is very entertaining. This book is rich in content. The cut and paste style of illustrations introduces children to different textures and objects. Every time the next letter is a collage out of new elements: pencils, buttons, papers, or fabric (images 11, 12). Together with this collage there is shown an image of a child, who imitates the shape of the letter with his posture. “Toddlers should start to learn the alphabet through the game ...”⁴⁰ – says Rannveig, and that is why this book could be a part of your entertainment with your child at home.

³⁸ Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
The book has short enough sentences to receive a “first ABC” status. But I would not agree with Rannveig or with the editors at Námsgagnastofnun on this status, I would say that this book is for older children, who are ready to read and have a wider vocabulary. The only one part I found interesting for toddlers is a double cover page with hidden images (images 13, 14), but the deeper I went into the book, the more I was disappointed. Some letters do not correspond to the objects that are complicated here in so many cases. I am surprised how this book was published.

While Sylvíu Guðmundsdóttir, the editor at Námsgagnastofnun, was leading me through the book, I asked her to open this flip page on the letter D, one of the Icelandic letters, which never begins a word. She did it for me and said: “Dúkka! … Oh, this is something not correct … why D is for Dúkka? … (pause) no, it is correct, the author means here Brúða.” Dúkka and Brúða both mean Doll in English, but Brúða is a more fancy doll, and the word was used in the older days. When I asked people what they imagine when I say Brúða, most of the replies were that it is a doll made of ceramic, that would only stand on a shelf and not be played with. Similar visual misunderstandings are met with other words, I asked people to find the letter-object connections and the result is shown in the table below.

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41 Sylvíu Guðmundsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 21 November 2012.
This table shows: objects, with which people identified images – a letter – original objects, meant by authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front cover</th>
<th>Back cover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ávextir – Á – Ávextir</td>
<td>Horn – H – Horn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaka – A – Afmeliskaka (the confusion here was because of the candle, which turns Kaka (e. Cake) into a Birthday cake.</td>
<td>Poki – P – Poki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaðra – B – Blaðra</td>
<td>Sól – S – Sól</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tré – É – Tré (Tré (e. Tree) would be a better word for the letter T, not É).</td>
<td>Örn – N – Örn (In this case it would be better to have an object beginning with a letter N).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dúfa – D – Dúfa</td>
<td>Fiskur – Ý – Ýsa (Using the name of species rather than the word Fish is confusing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dúkka – Ð – Brúða (the image shows a simple regular doll to play with (Dúkka), but not a fancy ceramic doll (Brúða)).</td>
<td>Blóm – R – Rós (here is another example of using the name of the flower instead of the actual word Flower. The Rose is a good word, but it could be more clear visually by having more thorns, for example).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epli – E – Epli</td>
<td>Ugla – Ú – Ugla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Músf – M – Músf</td>
<td>Ostur – O – Ostur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanski – H – Hanski</td>
<td>Vasaljós – V – Vasaljós</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiördlí – F – Fiördlí</td>
<td>Truður – T – Truður</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ís – Í – Ís</td>
<td>Öxi – X – Öxi (the letter X never begins the word in the Icelandic language, so here it is acceptable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skór – I – Inniskór (Skór (e. Shoes) and inniskór (e. Inside shoes). The shoes illustrated here are not clear enough to be identified as inside shoes).</td>
<td>Úr – Ú – Úr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lás – L – Lás</td>
<td>Kassi / Kubbur – Y – Yddari (Yddari (e. Pencil sharpener), was one of the most confusing because the image looks like a box. You can see the same image inside, but this is an alphabet on the cover and it would be better to start the book in a more clear way).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolti / Hringur – J – Þójó (The drawing of the Jóyó is poor. The string, which is a key identifier in this toy is hardly visible).</td>
<td>Fugl – Æ – Æður (one more example of using the name of the bird instead of the actual word Bird. Some interviewed could not even remember the name of it).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanna – K – Kanna</td>
<td>Þyrla – Þ – Þyrla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G – nothing (That is strange not to have an object associated with the letter).</td>
<td>Teikning / ? – Ó – Óli Prik (Óli Prik is a character that children draw in a kindergarten while singing the song about him).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The book is obviously full of misunderstanding even in the opening pages, but it might have been done for a reason, to use it with much more older children. In the content of alphabet books “… key words should … have unambiguous names; “B for bowwow” … will confuse the child who identifies the animal as a dog …”42 This kind of confusions are met here: Óli Prik as a character, complicated names of fishes, birds and flowers are used instead of the original simple and known meanings. The book was published in 1991 and has a visual reflection of these years both in illustrations and in the content that is why it will never be republished again. It was a bright and extreme edition, which tried to do many things at a time, but it is not for a new generation of children.

Besides some of the inconsistencies in content and illustrations in these two books the Icelandic environment is reflected both in objects and illustrations. But I would say that only Stafurinn minn og stafurinn þinn would be the Icelandic alphabet book for toddlers, but not Í Stafaleik. The peculiar thing I got from the interviews with people, both cited here and anonymously, nobody mentioned the book Stafurinn minn og stafurinn þinn as an alphabet book for children under three years old and many of these people did not even know about its existence. Moreover, the people interviewed found it hard to identify the books, which would be targeted toddlers aged zero – three years old. Eventually I did not receive any clear answers, only guesses. Some of the responses were that it is Í Stafaleik, others – Stafakarlarnir,43 only few were honest – there are none.

Stafakarlarnir

The abovementioned books are available only at the libraries now, but the most popular alphabet book that is for sale, is Stafakarlarnir (e. Alphabet guys) by Bergljót Arnalds, which has been republished six times. It is big and in a hardcover, has an interesting idea where the letters are figures. The author says that the book is for “... two – eight years old. This depends if children are learning the alphabet, practicing reading or gaining more words into their vocabulary.”44 I disagree with her. The book is complicated for a two or three year old child, it is for older children, who are familiar with the letters and ready to start learning to read. Illustrations are all over the place, there is no calm in them, which is very important for young children, as mentioned by all those professionals interviewed. “In this book toddlers will not be able to connect the letters of the alphabet with the objects they know, which is the idea of a traditional alphabet book.”45

42 Anita Silvey, Children’s books and their creators, p. 17.
44 Bergljót Arnalds, electronic mail to Viktoria Buzukina, 18 December 2012.
45 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
Stafakarlarnir is an example of an alphabet book with typically modern, extremely computerized and very superficial illustrations, which here, unfortunately, seem to be done without putting much effort into them. The idea for the visual part was probably to make the book look modern, but the illustrator here, as for me, doesn’t have much experience in digital drawings or did not put much effort into his work. “Digital artists using scanned and/or digitally created objects and patterns have a distinct advantage over traditional artists … the range of creative options is, arguably, much wider.” But at Stafakarlarnir, the less interesting option was chosen. Primitive effects and simple gradients are used here. Colors in the book are initially bright, but because of the simple gradient the background looks pale, making the whole image fade away. Objects themselves are flat and have a simple shiny effect that make them less attractive (image 17), to compare, for example, with another book by the same author, Gralli Gormur og stafaseiðurinn mikli (e. Gralli Gormur and the alphabet sorcery) (image 18). Here more complicated effects are used and illustrations become more interesting.

The color palette, for my opinion, is not chosen properly in *Stafakarlarnir*. Illustrations could be more pastel and calm, or more deep and “juicy” because of the chosen colors. Both directions could work and here are examples. The pastel digital illustrations from the foreign alphabet book *ABC’s*\(^48\) (images 19 – 21), have no gradient effects, the images are simple and calm. The lighter colors here are not a result of reducing the transparency, they are are full and beautiful pastel colors here. Another example of bright computer illustrations, which have gradient effects that is not fading into white like in Stafakarlarnir, but from a darker brown into a lighter brown, for example. This makes illustrations more deep and juicy, but at the same time calm and warm. These are digital illustrations from an application *Wee A B See*\(^49\) (image 22), the new type of learning media, which I will touch on next.


Stafrófið

Nowadays, apart from traditional books, new technologies provide us digital learning materials. One of the world’s most popular mobile platforms, Android,⁵⁰ which is now popular in Iceland allows users to install and play different applications (hereon referred to as simply “apps”).⁵¹ In 2012, Soffía Gíslassdóttir, released a new Android app, Stafrófið⁵² (e. The Alphabet) into the market, which is also available in an English version (images 23, 24).

This is definitely a breakthrough in the materials available for learning the Icelandic alphabet and is probably very popular among parents and children who are using Android tablets. This app is similar to Stafakarlarnir, where letters are figures, and has the same problems with illustrations and colors.

Here are shown two kinds of letters – the regular non-serif font and illustrated cartoony letters-characters that do not look like letters at all, but visually are more interesting than the objects supported (images 25 – 28). This should be the other way around. The letters have a gradient effect, their eyes are shining, they are more alive and fun compared to the illustrations that should be connected to them. These kind of letters, I think, are not suitable for children under three years old as an introduction to the alphabet. They are not clear and visually are confusing.

If we compare this application to other apps on the market available also for Icelandic children we will see a huge difference in illustrations, typography, ideas and technical part. With an app, children can not only see the letter and a supporting image, but can practice themselves in listening and spelling, writing the letter with a finger on a screen, play games with different stages and make learning fast and fun. Children nowadays starting from the age of two or three years have their own touch screen tablets where they have their personal interactive world with fun and educational apps with animation, cartoons and games, with an option of choosing sounds, music, male or female voice. Here, on images 29 – 34 are shown examples of alphabet apps that have attractive digital illustrations and interesting content to follow.
Interactive Flash Cards

Letter and Number Trace

Interactive Alphabet

ABC 123 Fun.

Live Alphabet

An interesting app with animation, where an airplane flies (image 30), and you can change a girl’s skirt with one touch (image 31).

Best Ipad Kids App Of The Year 2010 at iLounge.53


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Icelandic alphabet learning: summary and problems

The Icelandic children’s book market has a big variety of foreign books from zero to three translated into Icelandic and this is not bad. The more materials our children have – the better. But this picture would not be so sad if there were some Icelandic book options for infants and toddlers, which would represent their familiar environment and introduce them to their culture through the letters with the help of visual connections. From all the alphabet books I have seen both in libraries and stores, I can say that there are no visually interesting and properly designed ABCs for Icelandic children at all.

Referring to the interview with Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, over centuries Icelanders formed a powerful oral tradition, and it is so strong that it becomes hard to realize that the visual part is as important as the text. And this kind of habit, I think, leaves an imprint on the production of picture books in Iceland. All the old alphabet books here have low-quality illustrations, but reflect the culture and environment of the country. The new books like Stafakarlarnir, Gralli Gormur og stafaseiðurinn mikli, Stafirnir: lærum stafróf saman⁵⁴ (e. Letters: learning alphabet together) and Stafróf dýrana⁵⁵ (e. Animal’s alphabet), which were published after the millennium, try to bring illustrations on a modern level, but the content is lacking a definitive Icelandic feel. The newer the book is, the more complicated the content is, with A standing for Api (e. Monkey), and G for Gorilla (e. Gorilla) at the same book, and having F for Fill (e. Elephant) everywhere. Toddlers under three years old can not identify them with real objects because they are not familiar with them in an everyday experience. And at this point I can say that Iceland needs books, which would “... positively reflect children’s identity, home language, and culture.”⁵⁶

Iceland is a developed and unique country and I am sure that there are ways to improve the alphabet learning here so that a classic alphabet book could be made. The latest researches show that the reading skills of children in Iceland is low.⁵⁷ It might be reasonable to start introducing children to the letters earlier in a fun way to improve their literacy skills for the future and enlarge their interest to letters and words not only in oral interpretation, but also visually.

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⁵⁵ Halldór Á. Elvarsson, Stafróf Dýrana, Mál og menning/Forlagið, Reykjavík, 2008.
As it was mentioned, one of the biggest problems is to print the book, but at the same time there is a board book in Iceland, which keeps being republished. So the question is not “how to print?” It is more “what to print?”

In the process of making a new Icelandic alphabet book for toddlers, the main attention should be given to illustrations. I agree with Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, that the visual part is the most important and it should be more developed in Iceland, because “… children interacting with their first texts depend on illustrations to create meaning.”

**Making a first alphabet book as a key to the culture**

The alphabet book stands out of the competition with all the first books because it is something different and unique. New alphabet books in Iceland try to compete with foreign ones and they will hardly win. Authors and illustrators should think about making the book naturally Icelandic and rethink the content to make it a classic edition that would be republished for new generations over and over again. At the moment alphabet learning in Iceland with the help of visual tools is at an early stage of development, especially for children under three years old. There were many attempts to bring it on the proper level, but something was always inhibiting it: wrong typeface choice or illustration style, unfamiliar or old-fashioned objects that make the book “stuck” in the years when it was published. All these seem to be one big experiment and nothing works well for now in my opinion.

When the focus is to make the book as a key of the Icelandic culture, it would be interesting to have some kind of “Icelandic feel” and to get this feeling Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir advises to go a little bit light in colors, into transparent green and blue, but not dramatic ones, very light and frosty a little. I would add to this contrasting images, black outlines or small dark details. I think Iceland is a land full of contrasts and the illustrations could reflect this. To make an alphabet natively Icelandic, the most valuable here is the choice of objects, which would represent the culture and the environment of the child, so it is not convenient to have A for *Api* and F for *Fíll*, but *Appelsín* (e. *Orange*), *Afi* (e. *Grandfather*), *Amma* (e. *Grandmother*) for *A* and *Fjall* (e. *Mountain*), *Fáni* (e. *Flag*), *Flugvél* (e. *Airplane*) or *Fljúga* (e. *Fly*), for *F*, for example.

Books and apps with foreign culture are the first teachers for infants and toddlers in Iceland, which is not acceptable, in my opinion. As a foreigner living in Iceland and as a mother I would like to have more Icelandic materials for my son who is 20 months old. There is nothing native here for toddlers, who start building their knowledge based on the materials they see in books, apps or a television. Parents always try to find the most interesting, beautiful and interactive

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58 Anita Silvey, *Children’s books and their creators*, p. 17.
59 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 27 November 2012.
resources for their children to learn and play, but they find them abroad. I am sure that the Icelandic parents would preferably buy a native alphabet book for their children or download an alphabet app if they had a choice. Toddlers need high-quality materials with visual connections to their environment. These connections are the keys to literacy and cultural development, which a native alphabet book can give.
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Interviews and electronic mails

Bergljót Arnalds, electronic mail to Viktoria Buzukina, 18 December 2012

Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 27 November 2012

Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, a popular Icelandic author and illustrator. Interview with her gave me a different perspective of alphabet book development in Iceland. As a writer and illustrator, who has been publishing children’s picture books in Iceland for a long time, she described the history of illustrations in Icelandic children’s books. Ragnheiður pointed out the importance of the visual part in all books for children and importance of clear and simple images in books for toddlers from zero to three years old. Moreover, she mentioned that cultural depictions are very important in first books and gave her professional opinion about how the first alphabet book should look like, what should be included in its content and illustrations.

Rannveig A. Jóhansdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 20 November 2012

Rannveig Auður Jóhansdóttir is a lecturer at the Research Centre for Children and Youth Development in Iceland. During the interview she introduced me to Icelandic traditions of learning letters of the alphabet. She gave a very deep and detailed information about when, how and where children in Iceland start to learn the alphabet. Rannveig showed me the very first Icelandic alphabet books and leaded me through the history and culture of the country. She described the results of the latest research done by the Center and provided analysis of learning and reading development of Icelandic children.

Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 16 November 2012

Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir is an editor at Icelandic book publishing house, Forlagið. During the interview we were talking about Icelandic alphabet books market. She also introduced me to some of the ABC books published in Iceland. Sigþrúður provided statistics that showed domination of foreign books on the market and pointed out main problems in publishing board books for children from zero to three years old in Iceland.

Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, electronic mail to Viktoria Buzukina, 22 November 2012

Sylvía Guðmundsdóttir, interviewed by Viktoria Buzukina, 21 November 2012

Sylvía Guðmundsdóttir is an editor at the Icelandic National Centre for Educational Materials, Námsgagnastofnun. During the interview she described main requirements for children’s learning materials such as alphabet books and first reading and writing books. Sylvía told me about typography, illustrations and the content of these books. Sylvía and I went over Icelandic ABCs, both old and new ones, analyzed and compared typefaces and the style of illustrations there.
Images


**Image 2.** Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Stafurinn minn of stafurinn þinn, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2000, front cover

**Image 3.** Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Stafurinn minn of stafurinn þinn, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2000, p. 10

**Image 4.** Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Stafurinn minn of stafurinn þinn, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2000, p. 32

**Image 5.** Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Stafurinn minn of stafurinn þinn, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2000, p. 19

**Image 6.** Björgvin Jósteinsson, Helga Magnúsdóttir & Þóra Kristinsdóttir, Við lesum: lestrarbók A, Námsgagnastofnun, Reykjavík, 1991, p. 4

**Image 7.** Linda D. Ólafsdóttir, from Arnheiður Borg, Sigrún Löve, Linda D. Ólafsdóttir, Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Steinunn Torfadóttir & Sylvíía Guðmundsdóttir, Lestrarlandið: lestráblók fyrir byrjendum, Námsgagnastofnun, Kópavogur, 2011, p. 4


**Image 9.** Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, Stafurinn minn of stafurinn þinn, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2000, p. 6


Image 17. Boullet, Frédéric, from Bergljót Arnalds, Stafakarlnir, JPV útgáfa, Reykjavík, 2012, p.19


Image 22. Wee A B See, I heart this app, 8 August 2012, retrieved 6 November 2012, <http://iheartthisapp.com/apps/wee-a-b-see/>, downloaded image 1


