

Content-based instruction
A closer look at CBI in Iceland

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Lokaverkefni til B.Ed.-prófs í Grunnskólakennarafræði

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Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands
Júní 2011

Abstract

In this essay Content-based instruction is examined; a foreign language teaching approach that is becoming widely used throughout the world, where teaching a language and teaching content is combined. Aspects of the approach are discussed and its effectiveness in Iceland is explored, as well as whether or not it has an affect on the first language. Is this approach effective as a means of learning both language and content? Is it a realistic option in Iceland? Does it affect the first language? These are some of the questions explored in this essay. In addition, a qualitative study of the application of Content-based instruction within the International School of Iceland is examined and discussed. Students and a teacher were interviewed about the use of English in the classroom and their attitudes towards it.

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1 Introduction

When I was younger my family moved to Africa, and with very limited knowledge of English I attended school where English was the main language used. Gradually I learned most of my English this way, as well as maths, biology, history, geography, accounting and physical science. Lately I've contemplated whether my schooling was, in fact, "content-based instruction" (CBI) in action. As an Icelandic kid in the early nineties I had not had as much exposure to English as a language as children do today. There was no internet, not even a computer in every household yet, most TV programmes for children were dubbed, but of course there were movies and music. Kids today are exposed to English at a much higher level than when I was young, both in media as well as the internet and computer world which results in their grasping some basics of the English language at a much earlier age than before. This makes me wonder that if this seems to have worked so well on me, with my very limited English at the time, would it work even better with Icelandic children today, with their seemingly more advanced English nowadays at an even earlier age? Is this effective as a means of teaching both subject and language? A related question is whether it affects the first language.

2 Content-based instruction

2.1 The importance of English in Iceland

The main purpose of learning another language in school is to be able to interact with people from other countries whether it is directly or through media such as telephones or the internet and we want to be able to read their books, letters or articles, speak with them, write to them and listen and understand. People want to be able to speak other languages for various reasons; social, personal or work related and this is especially important here in Iceland because of the fact that the whole nation's population is so small and we cannot expect people from other countries to speak our language. English has become the international language of the world. It is the language used by most people in the world when communicating with people with a different language. Thus, English has become the second language for most people in the world. It is the language most often used in business and commerce around the world, as well as in science and technology and international relations (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). In light of this fact it is not surprising that although many Icelanders do learn various languages such as Danish, French or German, English is the language most often chosen by Icelanders nowadays, to master and use when communicating with the rest of the world. Therefore in this essay I will focus on English as the second language when taking a closer look at Content-based instruction in Iceland.

2.2 Krashen's Monitor Model: acquisition versus learning.

The linguist Stephen Krashen's theories in second language acquisition have had a great influence in the field of language teaching and especially in foreign or second language teaching. He states that a language can only be acquired through comprehensible input. Moreover, the level of the input must be just beyond the learner's competence level in the language, and then both understanding and

language acquisition will take place (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

The Monitor Model hypothesis put forth by Krashen is one of the best known theories in second language acquisition and has been very influential in the field. The theory is based on the difference made between *learning* and *acquisition*. Krashen states that there is a distinct difference between the two which, according to him, are the only two ways to learn a language. According to Krashen, while *learning* is a conscious process of studying and paying attention to the language, its rules and form, *acquisition* on the other hand happens through exposure to the language; as the result of using the language to communicate, much like children pick up their first language. Furthermore, Krashen puts emphasis on acquisition as being a more natural language development process (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). In short, acquisition is a sort of subconscious process while learning is a more conscious development. According to Krashen the comprehension gained by these two different means, is stored separately in the brain so learnt knowledge can therefore not be converted into acquired knowledge or vice versa (Ellis, 1990). Krashen also puts far more importance on acquisition as a way of learning a second language because it produces fluency while learning the rules of a language does nothing to develop fluency (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

Content-based instruction as an approach fits well with Krashen's theory because it is based on interaction, conversation and on using the language for a particular purpose, like learning about content matter, rather than learning too much about the language itself, grammatical rules and form (Lightbown and Spada, 1999) as might be the case in many language classrooms. The main goal in CBI is to use the language to be able to communicate and to learn about other things through the language.

2.3 Content-Based Instruction or Content and Language Integrated Learning

Content-based instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are terms used for a variety of different approaches that have the

commonality of integrating language and content and have both language and content-learning objectives (Stoller, 2004). These are the two terms most widely used; CBI more commonly in the U.S., while CLIL is the favoured acronym in Europe according to the Eurydice European Unit (2006). The term bilingual education is often used as well. Content-based instruction or Content and Language Integrated Learning are according to the Eurydice European Unit (2006) broad terms describing many forms of bilingual education where a second or foreign language is used to teach subjects in the curriculum other than the language lessons themselves. In this essay the term Content-based instruction or CBI will mainly be used.

Integrating content and language is not a new idea but one that is becoming increasingly more practiced in language classrooms around the world and one that is continuously evolving. According to the Eurydice European Unit (2006) some of the goals for using this approach besides the obvious objective of mastering a language as well as learning subject matter, is also to prepare for life in a more internationalised society and convey values of tolerance and respect between cultures. Content-based instruction is based on just that purpose by the clear focus on deriving meaning from certain content using a foreign language. Thus, the focus in a CBI lesson is on content, but not necessarily on specific aspects of language, and language acquisition is the expected result. This is not a new idea as such and teachers have sought to use interesting material to further interest their students for years but the methodology now known as Content-based instruction emerged in the 1980's from the work of Bernard Mohan where he takes a closer look at language learning and subject matter and states that it is possible to integrate the two successfully (Nunan, 2003). Stoller (2004) concurs and also states that CBI is considered successful when learners master the language as well as understand the content and are able to discuss the content in the language in a meaningful way.

Content-based instruction is also based on the theory that language proficiency derives from integrating the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. During a CBI lesson students for example read articles, communicate

with each other, write about their findings, listen to others and take notes, thereby using all of the four language skills together. According to Nunan (2003) “this reflects what happens in the real world, where interactions involve multiple skills simultaneously”. Language proficiency involves both social and grammatical understanding; people need to be able to modify their language from formal to informal, oral to written depending on what is required in different situations. It is important that the content is interesting and relevant to the students (Nunan, 2003), because they will enjoy lessons more this way and become more motivated. Language is learned most effectively when it is used as a way to pass on information of interest to the students (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). While they learn about a certain issue in a specific language, they also learn practical use of the language. It is easier for language learners to acquire new vocabulary when there are contextual clues to help convey meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Experts agree that students learn a foreign language better when focusing on specific material instead of continually focusing on the structure of the language itself. However, it might be useful to do so from time to time, building on students’ background knowledge of their first language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The aim is for students to be able to use and understand the target language without needing to translate everything from, and into, their first language.

The use of authentic material and authentic use of the language itself is considered very helpful when learning a new language because being able to use language in a meaningful way is one of the main objectives when learning a language. The use of authentic material and subject integration are not new ideas, but they have been incorporated into the classroom in content-based instruction. Furthermore, this approach includes more than teaching a subject *in* the target language as the Eurydice European Unit (2006) describes it, but *with* and *through* the language as well. This calls for a more integrated approach to teaching both subject and language. However, there is a difference between the language used in the language class and language used in the subject class. In the language class the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are part of the focus but in the content class they are the means of learning content, whether it be mathematics, geography or something else.

So, it is important to introduce language relevant to the content area; for example to introduce math concepts such as addition, subtraction, division, multiplication, fractions etc. to help students understand the material in mathematics class (Peregoy and Boyle, 2000). The same goes for other subjects which all have important key concepts used within the field. Here the language is a means to an end, rather than the end itself (Deller and Price, 2007).

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is also supported by the CBI or CLIL approach as it focuses on more than just the language itself. Therefore, the linguistic intelligence is not the only relevant intelligence in the CBI classroom, but so is musical intelligence, logical/mathematical intelligence or whichever intelligence corresponds with the subject or material being taught at any given time.

A lot of what is practiced under content-based instruction falls under communicative language teaching where the students actively participate. This allows for learning through doing instead of depending too much on the teacher to be the sole source of language input and information (Nunan, 2003).

2.4 Motivation

Motivation is a big aspect of the CBI approach and is perhaps one of the most important issues in language learning. Krashen states that language acquisition is nearly impossible when a learner is unmotivated in any way, whether it is because of anger, anxiety or boredom (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Thus, a learner's prospect of learning another language depends a great deal on his own state of mind and attitude towards it. Extensive research has been done on the importance of attitude and motivation in second language learning and findings show that there is correlation between positive attitudes and learner motivation and successful language learning (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Therefore, it is not surprising that great emphasis is put on learner motivation in teaching today. CBI provides the possibility of increasing learner motivation through use of authentic

material as well as countless possibilities for teachers to use whatever materials students are interested in working with. It is also an ideal approach to implement variety in material, tasks and activities and teaching methods. This can also boost students' motivation.

However, motivation is not all there is to learning a new language. Even highly motivated students can have difficulties in learning a new language which is sometimes caused by a difference in language learning ability and in the compatibility of the instruction itself and student's individual learner's styles (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Even so, motivation is considered a pivotal factor when learning a new language.

2.5 Teacher training

In order to be able to use CBI effectively teachers need to be well educated and quite adept in the target language. On top of language proficiency they need to have a good grasp of the subject as well. In a CBI classroom it is important to have clear language objectives as well as content learning objectives (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Therefore it is ideal to have two different teachers work together, one who is knowledgeable about the subject and one whose expertise lies in the language itself, because language teachers often lack knowledge in a particular subject, and subject teachers might not have any background in teaching a foreign language, knowledge of its structure and syntax or familiarity with appropriate language teaching methods. Although having two teachers with different expertise is ideal, it is usually not the case in reality because of limited resources within schools.

2.6 French Immersion

The most commonly known example of CBI is probably the French Immersion program in Canada. According to Peregoy and Boyle (2001) in immersion programs, students receive their subject matter education through the second language to increase second language ability while learning academic content. It

is a form of bilingual education with English speaking students receiving their education in French. The ultimate aim in immersion programs is for students to become fully bilingual. Research on the French Immersion shows that students develop good comprehension as well as confidence and fluency in the French language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). The research findings also provide some support for Krashen's theory of comprehensible input. However, it has been noted that French Immersion learners often continue to make the same linguistic errors after years of exposure to the target language in the classroom. This suggests that these programs seem to be helpful in the early stages of learning where basic comprehension and communicative skills are of most importance but may not be sufficient in helping learners build up their language abilities to advanced levels (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Another possible explanation might be that more attention needs to be given to language objectives within the programme. Nevertheless, according to the Eurydoce European Unit (2006), the Canadian immersion experiment has been considered very successful and has had a great influence on the development of CBI.

2.7 L1 and L2

Second language is learned differently than a first language, except in bilingual or multilingual cases (Mitchell and Myles, 1998). The environment when learning a second language is different where either it is learned in a classroom setting or, when in another country with a different language, whereas in bilingual cases both languages are learned at once as a first language. Second language acquisition is also influenced by first language as we see for instance in cases of foreign accent or direct translation cases which are not always grammatically correct in the foreign language. This is known as language transfer, and can cause errors in second language use (Mitchell and Myles, 1998) and is in fact one of the main cause of errors in the target language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). But second language acquisition also builds on first language knowledge. Our knowledge of word order, syntax and other grammar factors help us build up second language knowledge, especially if the languages are related.

However, language instruction is a very important factor in learning a second language, and research shows that students who receive formal instruction have a deeper knowledge in the acquired language than those who are surrounded by a new language but receive no formal instruction (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). This is not quite in accordance to Krashen's theory of language acquisition where most emphasis is to be put on exposure as opposed to learning grammatical rules and language form. However, this is an important aspect of CBI, where attention should also be given to the language learning itself as well as the subject matter. This information also supports the findings stated above that while French Immersion students seem to learn well at younger levels, their abilities at advanced levels can be somewhat lacking, especially if they are continually making the same errors. That might tell us that there is a need to look at grammar at least to some extent, to help improve learners' existing language abilities and build on first language knowledge.

2.8 Disagreement

During my research I have found that not everybody agrees on what precisely defines CBI. Various linguists and teachers have written books and articles about CBI or CLIL, and sometimes there seem to be discrepancies, especially when it comes to what extent the second language is to be used; should it be full immersion in every subject or can working with a theme and integrate two or three subjects suffice as CBI? There seems to be no official description of what constitutes the approach exactly and how it is to be carried out to be considered proper and valid CBI. Those wanting detailed information need to do a bit of research to familiarise themselves with CBI as there is not for example an official homepage they can go to.

In my opinion there are two ways to look at this. It is possible to regard this as a flaw, for example as a teacher wanting to incorporate this method and needing some sort of framework to work with instead of researching on his or her own all the different information that is to be found, but it can also be viewed as an advantage, as there are only basic ideas or outlines to the approach and so within

the outlines that exist, the teacher is quite free to adapt the approach in a way that suits his or her teaching ideas and style and the group of students in question.

There also seems to be some confusion about the extent of integration when it comes to Content-based instruction. The issue of whether a thematic unit is enough to be considered CBI or whether there has to be full immersion seems to be a bit unclear as well. Because of the lack of a distinct description there seems to be some flexibility about this. CBI can be full immersion but according to the Eurydice European Unit (2006) it can also be partial if only some subjects are involved. Therefore, the integration of the foreign language being taught and another subject or two can constitute Content-based instruction. This again reflects the flexibility of this method which in my view is a positive aspect of CBI. I also see it as positive that this is an approach that is open for evolution and improvement.

2.9 CBI for whom?

Who is this approach designed for? Where is this approach mainly being applied? The most common form of CBI or CLIL goes on in those countries in the world where the population speaks many different languages. In those countries one language which in many cases is English, is chosen as the official language or is the language used in schools where many students are then studying in a second or foreign language. The goal is to be compatible in the language in order to study further, broaden job opportunities or to be able to communicate with people throughout the world. South Africa, the United States and many countries in Europe have been applying this approach for years as many different languages are spoken by the population.

The same rationale for applying CBI does not really exist in Iceland, at least not yet. The biggest part of the population speaks Icelandic, although the number of immigrants is increasing, but the fact is that the students in Icelandic schools for whom Icelandic is not the first language are actually in a CBI environment; where the foreign language is Icelandic but not English which has been the language

focused on in this essay. Nonetheless, there seems to be a need for the International School in Iceland, where CBI or CLIL is being practiced, since there are plenty of students enrolled there, which are of different nationalities, including Icelandic. In my opinion variety and diversity in the school system is a good thing and with the International School available as an option, parents can choose to send their children there to get their education in English, regardless of what their first language is.

3 The International School of Iceland

3.1 Methodology

At the International School of Iceland all instruction is carried out in English, except for Icelandic lessons. Students vary from being of Icelandic nationality, half-Icelandic or foreign. For those students whose first language is not English this is CBI in action.

To find out more about how this form of CBI is being carried out in Iceland I visited the school. I wanted to find out how the instruction was carried out, whether the focus was on language rather than content or vice versa or both, and how the students liked learning this way. I also wanted to see how the students' level of English was, as well as their level of Icelandic. To attempt to find this out I carried out a qualitative study in the form of interviews with four Icelandic third and fourth grade students, and a non-Icelandic teacher, in which I asked them about the use of English in the school.

The students were chosen with the teacher's help as the students who had spent either the least amount of time living abroad, or none at all, and were of both sexes. I spoke to two boys who had never lived abroad and two girls, both of whom had lived abroad; one in Holland for a year and the other in Germany for about four years. I will refer to them here as Jón, Gunnar, Sigga and Anna. I started by asking the four students about some background information such as whether they had lived abroad at all and if so where and for how long etc., before moving on to more language and content related questions. I asked them about their level of understanding of both language and content, and their opinion on learning in a foreign language. My questions were put forth in the form of chat and sometimes rephrased, or students were asked to explain their answers further. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic.

3.2 Interviews

All four of the students said that they enjoy learning in English and like the English language. They also think that their English is either good or adequate, and improving. Jón said that in the beginning he could not understand anything but now, four years later, he understands everything. The other students also said they understand mostly everything going on in lessons with very few exceptions. When they feel they don't understand something they all said it is never a problem; they either ask the teacher for further explanation or ask their fellow classmates for help. However, the students told me that even though they feel they understand everything quite well, they have the most trouble understanding written texts. They also said they always speak English with the teachers, except their Icelandic teacher where the lesson is conducted in Icelandic.

When asked if they would prefer to be taught in Icelandic, which is their first language, their answers differed a bit. Sigga said she didn't mind either way; she liked learning in English but would also like to learn in Icelandic and felt that maybe she would understand the material even better. Anna also said she enjoyed learning in English and that it was her favourite language and would not prefer to learn in Icelandic; she would rather improve her English even more. The boys also said they liked English and enjoyed learning in English. However, they said they would prefer to learn in Icelandic because it would be easier for them to understand and they could read and write faster as well. Gunnar thought it would be even better to mix the two languages and have for example some of the lessons in English and some in Icelandic.

Here is an example of two different answers to the question of whether or not they would prefer to learn in Icelandic:

Anna: "No I don't want to learn in Icelandic. I rather want to learn more English."

Gunnar: "Learning in Icelandic is easier; I can read better and write faster. I would like to mix it up more and maybe have a few classes in Icelandic, maybe two or three."

Even though all of the students claimed to understand the material just fine they did think they would understand it even better were it taught in Icelandic. All of the students considered their Icelandic to be good or excellent. Only two students said they occasionally mix up the two languages; Sigga gave an example of often using the Icelandic word for a paint brush, “pensill”, for a pencil in Icelandic because of its similarity to the English word. None of them thought their Icelandic was suffering on account of their studies being conducted in English.

When asked whether they spoke any Icelandic in class the students said they usually speak English with each other when doing schoolwork, but sometimes they resort to speaking Icelandic amongst themselves when chatting or talking about the material. All of the four students speak Icelandic at home and after school, but three of the four said they do occasionally speak English after school with other students from the International school, mostly for fun and claimed that it doesn't feel awkward for them because they are so accustomed to doing so in school. One said he never speaks English outside of school. All four students think it is useful to learn in English and become an efficient English speaker for future purposes, for example travelling abroad or communicating with people from other countries.

Interestingly, even though all four students were interviewed separately and privately and so did not hear each other's replies they answered many of the questions quite similarly.

3.3 Observation of English Used in the Classroom

I also observed the students throughout their school day and noted their usage of English. The students did speak English at all times with the teacher and mostly amongst themselves as well and I noticed only one of the girls resorting to Icelandic when talking to her fellow students. I also took note of their good English speaking skills and their willingness to communicate with each other in English, even though the teacher was out of earshot, and there seemed to be no

shyness about it. However, their English writing skills were far behind their speaking skills, which is not surprising considering these students are only in the 3rd and 4th grade.

3.4 Teacher point of view

The teacher I spoke with is not Icelandic but is able to speak Icelandic quite fluently. The interview was conducted in English.

The teacher is of the opinion that her students like learning in English and that it is a useful language to know because of how widely it is used in the world and can help to communicate with others who speak a different language. She also states that English is one of the easiest languages to learn with easy plurals and short words. She also says that learning another language at an early age increases the ability to learn it better, almost to the extent of a first language and she also talks about the usefulness English because of its dominance in the world of media as well as being the universal Internet language.

When asked if she thinks her students' English is better than that of their peers who are not studying in English she says she is definitely sure that it is and mentions that she has taught Icelandic students in grades 8 and 9 and found that a lot of basics were missing and that the academic level of spelling, grammar, vocabulary and even pronunciation was lower. This backs up her opinion that an early start is better when learning another language.

When asked whether she thinks students learn more language or subject content she says it depends on their background. If they are new to the language it takes a little time to understand the content better but she thinks it comes rather quickly. In the bilingual classes it is very balanced but students from different countries with not much background in English learn more English than content at first. Finally she tells me her opinion on the social benefits of learning another language saying that it broadens the mind, widens perspectives, opens up new

opportunities in life and can only be good for the first language.

3.5 Discussion/interpretation

Since these students receive all of their instruction in English, except for their Icelandic instruction, this can be considered full immersion. From these interviews it seems that both students and teacher are very happy with this arrangement. The students enjoy learning in English and see it as a useful skill for their future. They don't see many downsides to learning in English, except for it being a bit more difficult than if they were studying in their first language. However, I got the impression that they view this as a temporary problem as they are aware that their English skills are gradually improving and they continually understand more of the material, and understand it better. This, I feel, is an important aspect of CBI; that in the beginning students will understand little of the material or understand it partially, but in a relatively short amount of time their understanding will increase greatly. Both the teacher and the students seem to think that the price to pay is relatively low compared to the ultimate gain; that it is worth understanding less for a while and facing the difficulty of reading, speaking, listening and writing in a foreign language instead of their own because in the end they will gain another language and a broader perspective. Their attitude toward content comprehension seemed to be that they feel they understand mostly everything, or at least enough to keep up, even though they are aware that understanding would probably be greater or at least easier in their first language and so they seem quite happy with this arrangement.

In the case of the students whom I spoke to and observed during my visit at the International school, Content-based instruction seems to be working quite well. Students communicated in quite good English with the teacher as well as each other and also seemed to understand subject material well. As to be expected at this age, their listening and speaking skills are more advanced than their reading and writing skills. This would also be the case were they learning in their first language. All four students spoke Icelandic in their homes and outside of school and from what I observed their Icelandic level did not seem to be suffering on

account of CBI and none of them thought it was. They also felt that they understand content well enough and I did not observe any evidence to the contrary. However, these are questions worthy of further and deeper study.

Although a big concern with CBI is whether or not language acquisition is suffering on account of content being the focus in the classroom it seems to me that the students I observed are acquiring more language than content, at least for the time being. I believe at this young age students are acquiring a huge amount of language knowledge and are gradually understanding more and more of the content being taught, and they seem to be aware of this progress as well. However, at a later stage in their learning this might turn around to some extent. When students have acquired the basics needed to fully understand the content there might be more need to focus on language aspects as well as content matter so that the language acquisition doesn't fall behind or linguistic errors go uncorrected or unexplained.

In the beginning of my research I leaned towards thinking that there might be more language learned than content in a CBI classroom but according to the Eurydice European Unit (2006) people seem to be more worried about the language part being on the wanting side rather than content, and now I believe this is an important concern in the CBI classroom. Therefore it is important to plan CBI distinctly, with both language objectives and content objectives in mind.

4 Conclusion

Content-based instruction is not a new approach to language teaching but it is in constant development. It is increasingly being applied in schools throughout the world, especially in countries where many different languages are spoken or areas with a high number of immigrants. The most important aspect when implementing content-based instruction, is to give attention to both the language and the content being taught and not put more emphasis on one or the other. If properly done neither language nor content should suffer on account of the other. If not, the approach will not work as a means of teaching both content and language. As with other ways of learning language, if the first language is being nurtured, for example in the home, there is no reason it should suffer on account of a new language being learnt.

I found that some of the questions put forth in the beginning of this essay are in fact among the main debate questions on CBI. There is a current debate about whether or not the first language suffers as well as debate about the level of knowledge acquired in a subject taught in a foreign language. Although there is a need for further research on the two concerns, it seems that most people within the field of language teaching agree that the advantages to be greater than whatever disadvantages there might be for the first language. As to the matter of content knowledge in a CBI classroom the main issue seems to be on setting clear objectives and introducing the language needed for whatever material planned. If utilised well, the Content-based instruction approach might be viewed as a timesaving approach where there is more than one focus point during precious classroom time.

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6 Appendix

Student interviews:

Do you like learning everything in English? Why/why not?

Jón: Yes I like learning in English. I like mathematics the most.

Gunnar: Sure, I like it fine, English is alright.

Sigga: Yes I enjoy learning in English, the work is fun.

Anna: I like learning in English, it is my favourite language. It is sometimes difficult though.

Do you think your English is good? Is it improving?

Jón: My English is good and is improving. I don't make any mistakes.

Gunnar: Yes my English is ok. It is improving.

Sigga: My English is ok. It is improving.

Anna: Yes my English is ok and I think it is improving.

Would you prefer to learn in Icelandic? Why/why not?

Jón: If I could choose I would prefer to learn in Icelandic because maybe I would understand everything better.

Gunnar: Learning in Icelandic is easier; I can read better and write faster. I would like to mix it up more and maybe have a few classes in Icelandic, maybe two or three.

Sigga: I wouldn't mind learning in Icelandic; it would also be fun. If I could choose I think I would choose Icelandic because I understand it better.

Anna: No I don't want to learn in Icelandic. I rather want to learn more English.

Do you speak Icelandic in school? With teachers? Other students? Why/why not?

Jón: I speak English with the teachers but mostly Icelandic with the other kids except in class, then we speak English.

Gunnar: I usually speak English with the teachers and mostly Icelandic with the kids. I mainly speak Icelandic during recess.

Sigga: I always speak English with teachers and usually English with my friends in class but sometimes we speak Icelandic quietly when we are chatting.

Anna: Sometimes I speak Icelandic with the teachers but mostly English. I speak both languages with the other kids, but more Icelandic than English.

Who do you hang out with in school? Do you speak English with them?

Jón: I hang out with my friends and we usually speak English, especially if not everybody in the group is Icelandic.

Gunnar: I mostly speak Icelandic with my friends during recess.

Sigga: I hang out with my friends at school and we usually speak Icelandic.

Anna: I only speak Icelandic with my friends during school.

How well do you understand everything that goes on in lessons?

Jón: I understand rather well but I think I would understand everything even better if it were in Icelandic.

Gunnar: I understand everything. It's very seldom that I don't understand something and then I just ask.

Sigga: I usually understand what's going on in class. Sometimes I could understand a bit better though and then I ask the teacher and my classmates.

Anna: Sometimes I don't understand much and then I ask.

How well you understand the subject? Maths, geography etc. Explain.

Jón: I understand it well although I would understand it even better if it were in Icelandic.

Gunnar: I understand it well.

Sigga: I think I could understand the subject better and I would if it were in Icelandic. But I don't mind which language it is in.

Anna: I understand the material but I think I would better understand it in Icelandic. I prefer speaking Icelandic.

Do you think your Icelandic is good? Improving? Declining?

Jón: My Icelandic is good and improving. I don't get confused.

Gunnar: My Icelandic is good. And it is improving.

Sigga: My Icelandic is good. Sometimes I confuse things without thinking like calling a pencil "pensill" in Icelandic because of the English word for it even though I know the Icelandic word is "blýantur".

Anna: My Icelandic is fine. I don't think it's declining but sometimes I mix up the languages.

Who do you hang out with after school? Do you ever speak English with them?

Jón: I speak Icelandic after school. If I'm hanging out with others from school then sometimes we speak English with each other.

Gunnar: I never speak English after school.

Sigga: I speak Icelandic at home and after school, except sometimes I speak English with my friend Karen from school just for fun.

Anna: I always speak Icelandic after school. Sometimes English with some kids.

What would you like to do in the future? Do you think good English skills will be useful for that?

Jón: I want to be a carpenter. English might be useful for that, I'm not sure. But I want to become better in English; it would be good if you would go to England for example.

Gunnar: I want to be a fireman, a painter or a carpenter. It's good to know English if you're a fireman, for example if you go to Haiti to help you need to speak with the people. Practice is good. It's good to know English when travelling and booking hotels or when calling overseas to order goods.

Sigga: I want to be a baker. I also want to learn English better; it's good for the future.

Anna: I want to be a designer. I want to become good in English and travel to other countries.

Teacher interview:

Do you think the students like learning in English? Why/why not?

Yes, many are bilingual, born abroad or have at least one parent from another country. English is also widely used in the world and one of the easiest languages to learn with easy plurals and short words. Knowing English helps students to communicate with their peers and friends who speak a different language.

Are you ever asked for translations of words? How do you deal with that?

Yes sometimes. I use a dictionary in the first language, describe words or have a bilingual peer help etc.

How do you think the Icelandic students benefit from learning in English? Those with English speaking parents and those without?

Learning English (or another language) at an early stage gives them the ability to learn English as if it was their first language. Many of them get the chance to keep the language they are already used to, if born or having lived abroad. Many books, newspapers, airports, sports, pop music and advertisements have English as the dominant language; even on the Internet English is the universal language. With parents who have to move a lot (job based etc.) the children could easily go and keep on learning in any International school around the world and skip preparation courses because they have gained at least medium level stage of English already. English is the first language of some 400 million people.

Do you think their English is better than others' of the same age here in Iceland who are not being taught in English? Why/why not? If yes, how so?

I'm definitely sure their English is on a much higher and better level. I taught English for about 2 years in an Icelandic school as well, at the 8th and 9th grade level, and a lot of the fundamental basics were missing and the academic level was lower in spelling, grammar, vocabulary and even pronunciation.

Do you speak Icelandic?

A little, I speak English, German, French and Italian.

Is Icelandic spoken in class? Between students or between teacher and students?

Yes it is spoken in all grades, more so in bilingual classes, both as an instructional and social language.

Do you think the Icelandic students learn the content just as well in English as they would in Icelandic?

It depends on their background, if they are new to the language it takes a little time, but then again English is easy to learn and you learn languages much easier if you are younger.

Do you think students learn more of the English language than content or vice versa?

I think in the bilingual classes it is very balanced but students from other different countries learn more English.

*Do you think learning in English affects their Icelandic or first language?
Why/why not?*

I see it only as a positive addition to learn another language. Fellini said once: “A different language is a different vision of life”. It widens your thinking and communication abilities and therefore you can appreciate and understand the world in which you live better and it always opens new opportunities. It can only be good for the first language whatever it is. My own children are in the International School of Iceland and they are trilingual (German-English-Icelandic). They are fluent in all three and they never thought about it in the way that they actually have to “learn” a language.

Content-based instruction. A closer look at CBI in Iceland.

Ritgerð þessi er 10 eininga lokaverkefni til B.Ed-prófs við Kennaradeild,
Menntavísindasviði Háskóla Íslands.

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Prentun: Bóksala kennaranema.

Reykjavík, Ísland 2011