

Are National Curriculum objectives for teaching English being met in Icelandic compulsory schools?

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This article looks at recent research on English language teaching at the compulsory level in Iceland with regard to National Curriculum objectives. Three main issues are discussed: types of teaching methods used, the use of English during instruction, and the types of assessment methods used. The National Curriculum for foreign languages follows the principles of communicative language teaching and emphasizes the teaching of all four skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) and integrating grammar and vocabulary with skills-based instruction. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of techniques, activities, and materials that take into account diverse learning needs, use English as much as possible during instruction, and assist students in becoming autonomous learners through goal-setting and self-assessment. Assessment should be constructive, informative and include a variety of methods. Formal assessment (written tests) is not considered appropriate for learners in grades 1-5. An analysis of studies of English teaching at the compulsory level shows a discrepancy between communicative teaching methods recommended by the National Curriculum and those used in English instruction. Traditional methods of teaching and assessment are predominately used in schools. On the whole, instruction is teacher-directed and text-book bound and innovative approaches towards more holistic, learner-centered teaching do not seem to have gained ground. Teachers are not fulfilling their role of using English for classroom interaction and communication, and students are not provided with ample opportunities for authentic and creative use of English. Finally, traditional assessment methods based on written tests are used by most teachers, particularly in the upper grades, and little progress has been made in introducing alternative assessment methods recommended by the National Curriculum.

Hagnýtt gildi: Í greininni eru teknar saman niðurstöður íslenskra rannsókna á enskukennslu á grunnskólastigi. Fjallað er um kennsluhætti og námsmat með hliðsjón af nýjum straumum í tungumálakennslu og markmiðum Aðalnámskrár grunnskóla. Greinin veitir innsýn í stöðu enskukennslunnar og nýttist sem innlegg í umræður um stefnumótun í enskukennslu og eftirfylgni með kennslu á grunnskólastigi.

During the last twenty years the use of English throughout the world has increased both in magnitude and nature. It now has a special role in many countries and has emerged as perhaps the world's first truly global language (Crystal, 2004; Graddol, 2006; McKay, 2002). The number of non-native speakers of English has

rapidly expanded and millions of individuals are learning English as an additional language. Over 100 countries now prioritize English as the chief foreign language to be taught in schools (Crystal, 2004).

The growing importance of English can also be seen in Iceland. There is abundant

access to English in Icelandic society through the media, and it is widely used in various sectors of life such as tourism, business, commerce, finance and education. In a survey of Icelanders' foreign language knowledge commissioned by the Ministry of Education in 2001, the majority of participants (N=732, age 18-75) stated that English was the foreign language they found most important to know. English was also the language the participants said they used most other than their mother tongue (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2001).

The main purposes of this article are to shed light on English language teaching practices at the compulsory level in Iceland and discuss them with respect to current theory about language learning and teaching. The article focuses on 2 main questions:

- What teaching and assessment methods are most commonly used in English instruction at the compulsory level in Iceland?
- Are the teaching and assessment methods consistent with the National Curriculum objectives for English and current ideas about foreign language teaching?

Three main areas will be discussed: the types of teaching methods used, the use of English in the classroom, and the types of assessment methods and feedback used in English classes.

The article begins with a brief discussion of the development of English teaching in light of its current status as a global language. This is followed by a discussion of language teaching theory and clarification of important concepts in the field.

Foreign language or second language?

The changing status of English in the world is having repercussions on the teaching of English. A shift is occurring between traditional foreign language learning where exposure to and learning of the new language is primarily limited to the classroom and second language

learning where the new language is commonly the dominant language in the culture and the learner is exposed to it both in and outside the classroom (as in many immigrant situations). Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007) proposes that the foreign and second language context be viewed as a continuum, and discusses the consequences that the type and amount of exposure experienced by learners in Iceland have for their language learning. An example of the impact that language exposure may have on language learning can be seen in a study of English skills of nine and ten year old children in Iceland conducted in 2005. The study tested the English comprehension and communication skills of children in 8 schools around the country who had received very little or no prior instruction in English (Auður Torfadóttir, Brynhildur Ragnarsdóttir & Samúel Lefever, 2006). The children were asked to complete a set of English listening tasks which were based on an international test of English for young learners and intended for use after 100-175 hours of formal instruction. The outcome was surprisingly high - an average of over 70% correct answers. The results show that many children in Iceland have acquired basic English skills by the age of 9 without any formal English teaching. A likely explanation is the great amount of English that children are exposed to in their daily environment, for example through media sources.

Communicative Language Teaching

Just as the nature of English exposure and use has changed over the years, the objectives of language teaching have also changed. It is no longer considered sufficient to be able to read classical texts in a foreign language and be well-versed in grammar rules. Since the 1970s the definition of language learning has expanded to include much more than knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Social, cultural and pragmatic aspects of language are now also recognized as essential elements of language learning. Current language learning pedagogy follows the lines of Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT) where the focus is on language use, “real-life” communication in the classroom and fluency as well as accuracy (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 2005). Language learning is viewed as a partnership between the teacher and the learners where teachers strive to motivate learners to reach their full potential by meeting their differing needs and appealing to their interests. In addition, more attention is being given to preparing learners for lifelong language learning.

Communicative language teaching is based on a broad set of principles about the nature of language and language learning and teaching. In an attempt to simplify and clarify what is meant by communicative language teaching, Brown (2007) provides seven related characteristics as a way of describing the approach:

1. **Overall goals.** Communicative language teaching suggests a focus on all of the components (grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic) of communicative competence (See Canale & Swain, 1980 and Auður Hauksdóttir, 2007 for a more detailed discussion of communicative competence).
2. **Relationship of form and function.** Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus, but remain as important components of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
3. **Fluency and accuracy.** A focus on students’ “flow” of comprehension and production and a focus on the formal accuracy of production are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take

on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use. At other times the students will be encouraged to attend to correctness. Part of the teacher’s responsibility is to offer appropriate corrective feedback on learners’ errors.

4. **Focus on real-world contexts.** Students in a communicative class ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom. Classroom tasks must therefore equip students with the skills necessary for communication in those contexts.
5. **Autonomy and strategic involvement.** Students are given opportunities to focus on their own learning process through raising their awareness of their own styles of learning (strengths, weaknesses, preferences) and through the development of appropriate strategies for production and comprehension.
6. **Teacher roles.** The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and guide, not an all-knowing font of knowledge. Students are encouraged to construct meaning through genuine linguistic interaction with other students and with their teacher.
7. **Student roles.** Students in a CLT class are active participants in their own learning process. Learner-centered, cooperative, collaborative learning is emphasized, but not at the expense of appropriate teacher-centered activity.

(Brown, 2007, pp. 46-47)

The next section gives a brief look at curriculum theory and a review of research studies which have looked at the effects of

curricula on teaching practices. Next the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for foreign languages is discussed with particular attention given to the teaching objectives for English at the compulsory level.

The effects of curricula on teaching

During the last 50 years curriculum theory has focused on objective-based teaching in which decisions about what and how to teach are based on the overall purpose of education. The current curriculum model consists of several interrelated factors that influence the goals, methods, and outcomes of teaching. The model delineates the relationship between what curriculum theorists call the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the attained curriculum (Mullis et al., 2007; Rúnar Sigþórsson, 2008). The intended curriculum is the official policy set by the government or educational institution, which outlines the learning and teaching objectives, the instructional content, recommended teaching methods and the organizational plan for instruction.

On the other hand, the implemented curriculum is what is actually taught in classrooms and how it is taught. The implemented curriculum is influenced by several aspects such as teachers' education, their professionalism and beliefs about teaching and learning, and the support they receive for professional development. Exterior factors also influence the implemented curriculum, for example, national tests and external evaluations, as well as demands from society, other school levels, and the job market.

The attained curriculum, however, is what students have learned, their experiences and attitudes about learning. Individual characteristics of students (motivation, self-confidence, learning styles and strategies) have a great effect upon their learning and personal development within the classroom. Curriculum theorists agree that because there are so many contributing factors, there is no guarantee that the intended curriculum will

match with the implemented and attained curricula. However, it is the goal and role of both policy makers and practitioners to ensure that all the necessary conditions for effective teaching and meaningful learning are in place in schools.

The 1974 law regarding compulsory school education marked a new direction in public education in Iceland under the catch phrase of "one school for all". From this time on the focus of compulsory education has been on meeting the needs of all individuals and guaranteeing their cognitive, social and physical development. Under this premise, the role of compulsory schools is to provide pupils with opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills, develop independent thinking skills, and learn to work both independently and cooperatively (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 63/1974). Four national curricula for the compulsory school level have been adopted since 1974 (in 1976, 1989, 1999 and 2007). They all share a strong emphasis on the use of a variety of teaching methods which take into account the individual needs and abilities of all pupils. The curricula have also called for a shift in the role of the teacher away from being an authority figure with all the knowledge to being a facilitator in the learning process that encourages the pupils to be active in their own learning.

Although the Ministry of Education has published four sets of curricula for the compulsory school level since 1974, few studies have looked at the impact of the curricula guidelines on teaching during this time. A few small-scale studies have drawn attention to teaching methods used in compulsory school subjects other than English (Hafsteinn Karlsson, 2007; Sigurgeirsson, 1992; Kristín Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2002; Kristín Jónsdóttir, 2003; Rósa Eggertsdóttir, 1993). Findings from these studies suggest that new, adaptive teaching methods have not been widely adopted in compulsory schools in Iceland. On the contrary, the studies reported that traditional whole class instruction

dominates the teaching, instruction is highly influenced by textbooks, pupils are occupied with workbook work and written assignments, and pupils generally use the same textbooks and work at the same pace.

The most comprehensive study which looked at the consistency between national curriculum guidelines and teaching methods was carried out by Krístrún L. Birgisdóttir (2004). In her study 343 primary school teachers (88% response rate) from three geographical areas of the country completed a questionnaire about their teaching methods and to what extent they met the demands of the National Curriculum in regard to differentiated instruction (*einstaklingsmiðað nám*). Over 50% of the participants said that the textbook had a large influence on their teaching and they were more likely to use whole class instruction than adaptive teaching methods. Approximately half of the participants said they used the National Curriculum guidelines occasionally (once a month or more) and the other half used them more seldom or not at all. In addition, the findings drew attention to the influence that standardized tests have on teaching; 48% of the teachers who teach age groups that take the national tests reported that the tests greatly influenced their teaching (Krístrún L. Birgisdóttir, 2004).

The impact of national tests on teaching practices was also one of the focuses of the study by Rúnar Sigþórsson (2008). His study examined the impact of national tests in science and Icelandic on teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning, teaching organization and student learning in four compulsory schools. He analyzed the data according to four main elements: intended curriculum, teachers' conceptions, implemented curriculum and attained curriculum. His findings showed that national tests had considerable influence on the teaching, particularly at the lower secondary level (grades 8-10). Although they were supportive of the National Curriculum, teachers felt pressured to prepare their pupils well for the tests and that hindered them in putting enough

emphasis on other aspects outlined by the National Curriculum. As in the other Icelandic studies, the prominent style of teaching was whole class instruction where the teacher was in the role of the "informer" who dispersed information to the pupils and rarely asked open questions. Adaptive teaching methods and differentiated instruction were seldom used by the teachers in the two subjects. Hence, there was a disparity between the intended and the implemented curriculum. Curriculum areas not covered by the tests received little attention in the implemented curriculum. Variety of learning activities was lacking and problem solving, reflection, evaluation and creativity were seldom demanded of pupils (Rúnar Sigþórsson, 2008).

Similar results were found in an interview and field observation study of 5 science teachers at the compulsory level (Meyvant Þórólfsson, Allyson Macdonald & Eggert Lárússon, 2007). In this study the teachers were aware of their pupils' diverse needs and learning styles, but they felt constrained by the pressure of curriculum coverage and the national test. They felt the need to prioritize teaching factual information which left little time for adaptive teaching methods and "hands on" activities.

Studies from the United States which look at the effects of curricula on teaching replicate the findings of the Icelandic studies (Barnes, 2002; Hootstein, 1998). Results show that adaptive teaching methods are not widely used and that teachers are not adequately implementing the policy of differentiated instruction. Although a majority of teachers are supportive of using a variety of teaching methods, most teachers predominately use whole class instruction. Studies from other countries in subject areas such as science and environmental education, English language instruction, and instruction in classical languages also show disparity between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum (Bekalo & Welford, 2000; Cotton, 2006; Jones, 2007; Keys, 2005; Kramer-Dahl, 2008; Verhoeven & Verloop, 2002; Wang & Xuesong, 2008).

National Curriculum objectives for English

According to many theorists and practitioners, learning a language consists of acquiring the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing and four sets of enabling knowledge – grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural understanding (Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman, 2005) The four skills are needed for communicative competence, in other words, the ability to use the language for communication in authentic situations – “knowing when and how to say what to whom” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121), and the four sets of knowledge are the building blocks needed for gaining proficiency in any of the skills. The National Curriculum Guide for foreign languages at the compulsory level, which was revised in 2007, follows the principles of communicative language teaching and emphasizes the teaching of all four skills and integrating grammar and vocabulary with skills-based instruction. The aim is that pupils can understand and use the language for communicative purposes in authentic situations. But emphasis is not only on linguistic aspects. The curriculum also stresses the importance of encouraging pupils’ interest in learning languages and promoting positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures. Finally, language learning should be enjoyable and challenging and provide pupils with opportunities for creative use of the language (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

In the section of the National Curriculum Guide for English teaching it is stated that “English plays a key role in international relations, in the areas of politics and business, in education, tourism and information technology sectors, to name a few examples” (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007, p. 16. – author’s translation). With the adoption of the curriculum, which takes full effect in 2010, the entry level for English instruction has been lowered from grade 5 (age 10) to grade 4 (age 9) and schools are permitted to begin instruction in English in younger grades if they choose.

Due to the growing interest in offering

English instruction to children at ever younger ages, guidelines for introducing English in grades 1-3 were included in the 2007 curriculum. The main objectives for teaching English to children in grades 1-3 are to introduce them to language learning, instill a positive interest in learning English, engage them in active learning by creating opportunities for them to use the language, and increase their self confidence as language learners (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007). Teachers are encouraged to provide children with opportunities to hear spoken English and play with the language through the use of songs, games, pictures, and actions. Integrating English instruction with other subjects is also recommended.

The main focus of the National Curriculum Guide is on English teaching in grades 4-10. The curriculum guide lists 14 final objectives which are meant to provide an overview of the general aims of English learning and expected outcomes for pupils at the end of their studies at the compulsory level (grade 10). Several of the objectives specify the levels of ability in the four skills - reading, writing, listening, and speaking - which pupils are expected to reach. Objectives for communicative competence, such as being able to understand and participate in conversations in English and being able to use English in unexpected situations are also listed. Other objectives refer to the sets of enabling knowledge: grammar, vocabulary, and culture. Pupils are expected to gain insight into the culture and lifestyles of people in English language countries. In addition, the list contains objectives having to do with increasing pupils’ awareness of learning styles and strategies and taking responsibility for their own learning (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

The amount of English instruction at compulsory level ranges from two lessons (40 min.) per week in grades 4-7 to three to four lessons per week in grades 8-10 (with some flexibility allowed). The National Curriculum Guide includes suggestions for appropriate teaching and assessment methods

and approaches to be used at the compulsory level. The curriculum guide recommends the use of a variety of techniques, activities, and materials that challenge and appeal to pupils, strengthen their self-confidence and take into account diverse learning needs. Some examples of teaching techniques and activities that are recommended in the curriculum guide are the use of songs, games, role play, themes and project work. Teachers are encouraged to use individual, pair and group work, integrate English teaching with other subjects and use information and computer technology in their teaching.

As children progress in their English learning, teachers are expected to increase their use of English in the classroom. The curriculum guide states that English should be used during instruction to a large extent in grades 7 and 8 and exclusively in grades 9 and 10. Training in the use of learning strategies, independent work habits, and cooperative learning are considered important factors of language learning. Emphasis is also put on assisting pupils in becoming autonomous learners through goal-setting, self-assessment, and the use of learning aids such as dictionaries and correction tools. Finally, importance is placed on active and creative language use and establishing and maintaining positive attitudes towards the learning of English (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

The objectives and recommendations of the National Curriculum call for lessons that focus on individual learner needs and abilities. Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir (2007) views this move towards a more personalized approach as a paradigm shift in language pedagogy, a shift which gives more attention to individual differences and social factors affecting language acquisition. The goal of learner autonomy or getting learners to accept responsibility for their own learning implies a change from teacher-directed instruction to that of learner-centered, self-directed learning (Ingvarsdóttir, 2007; Little, 1999, 2003). It also calls for changes in language assessment which recognize the

importance of an integrated link between teaching and assessment and the role of self-assessment in learning.

The following sections of the article look at recent studies of English teaching in Icelandic schools. The discussion will focus on three main themes: teaching methods, use of English in the classroom and assessment methods, and how classroom practices in regard to the themes differ according to age levels. The findings of the studies will also be examined in reference to the National Curriculum objectives for English teaching at the compulsory level in Iceland.

English teaching methods

The body of research into language teaching and classroom practices in Icelandic schools is small but growing. Although more classroom-based research is needed to provide a more complete picture, recent studies shed light on the current situation regarding English language instruction at the primary and lower secondary school levels.

A comprehensive evaluation of English language teaching at the compulsory school level, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, was carried out in 2005-2006. Eight schools representing a cross-section of school sizes and rural and urban areas participated in the evaluation. Data was obtained from a number of sources such as school curricula and syllabi, school assessments, teacher and pupil questionnaires, interviews with teachers, and classroom observations (Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir, Laufey Bjarnadóttir & Samúel Lefever, 2006). Written questionnaires were given to pupils in grades 5, 9 & 10 (aged 10-16) and their English teachers. The questionnaires surveyed the pupils' and teachers' attitudes towards the teaching and learning methods and materials used in English instruction. Approximately 800 pupils and 23 teachers participated in the survey.

One of the objectives of the questionnaires was to gather information about teaching methods used in English instruction and

their effect on pupils' learning. The teachers were given a list of teaching methods and approaches and were asked to rate how much they emphasized them in their English teaching. Pupils were given a similar list and were asked to rate how helpful they thought the methods were for learning English. The list of twenty-one items consisted of traditional methods and innovative approaches used for increasing variety in the classroom.

The methods teachers in grades 9-10 most frequently ranked as receiving "very much" or "much" emphasis in their teaching were:

- using English listening materials
- reading English books and magazines
- going over homework in class
- grammar exercises
- workbook use
- writing activities
- translating from Icelandic to English

The methods teachers in these grades most frequently ranked as receiving "little" or "no" emphasis in their teaching were the use of songs, games, role play, theme work, and ICT (computer and/or Internet use). These responses show an emphasis on traditional, textbook-bound teaching methods.

The following is a list of the methods that 70% or more of the pupils in grades 9 and 10 said helped them most to learn English in school. Once again the focus on traditional text-book learning is predominant.

- translating from English into Icelandic – 82%
- translating from Icelandic into English – 79%
- workbook use – 78%
- reading English books and magazines – 75%

- making word lists with translations – 73%
- grammar exercises – 73%
- watching English videos in class – 73%
- using English listening materials – 71%
- going over homework in class – 71%

The agreement between teachers' and pupils' responses in regard to teaching methods was generally strong. Teachers tended to emphasize the same methods that pupils ranked as helpful for learning English. It is interesting to note that pupils tended to give high ranking to traditional grammar-translation methods. However, teachers said that they did **not** emphasize these methods in their teaching - with the exception of translating from Icelandic into English. Other methods that did not match well between pupils' and teachers' responses were the use of speaking activities, watching English videos, and working with English songs and lyrics. Pupils in the study rated these methods as being helpful for learning English but the majority of teachers reported putting only "some" or "little" emphasis on using them in lessons. Some teaching methods, such as the use of games, role play, and theme work, which the National Curriculum Guide recommends for encouraging active, creative language use, received little or no emphasis, according to the teachers' responses. Likewise, many pupils (30%-40%) said these methods were seldom (or not) used in class.

The information gathered through the classroom observations in the study seemed to be consistent with the questionnaire results. A variety of classroom activities and teaching methods were observed such as listening tasks based on textbook materials or recorded stories, silent reading and reading aloud, textbook or workbook exercises (e.g. gap-filling), writing activities, making word lists, and grammar

drills. Considerable classroom time was used for checking homework, sometimes by showing answers on an overhead transparency. English use in the classrooms varied greatly. In a few cases the teacher used English extensively but more commonly little English was used for communicative interaction between teacher and pupils. Oral discussions in English were not common and pupils rarely used English during group work. In some classrooms pupils answered the teacher's questions in English.

Another survey of English teaching practices was conducted by Helga Sigurjónsdóttir in 2006 as part of her B.Ed. thesis. A representative sample of grade 10 English teachers completed a questionnaire about their English teaching. Twenty-seven teachers participated in the survey, which gave a response rate of 75% (Helga Sigurjónsdóttir, 2006). The teachers were asked to indicate the skill areas they emphasized most in their teaching. The skills most frequently mentioned were reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing and listening comprehension - the same skills that are tested on the school-leaving exam (*samræmd lokapróf*). Only 10% of the teachers gave speaking and communicative activities the highest ranking in terms of emphasis, even though the National Curriculum clearly stresses the importance of oral skills. In the same survey over half of the teachers said they emphasized the teaching of grammar and many of the teachers said they assigned grammar activities for homework. The findings of this survey indicate that traditional workbook use including grammar and vocabulary activities received more teaching time than communicative activities.

A few studies have been conducted that give insight into English teaching at the primary level. In a survey done in 2002, Auður Torfadóttir investigated how the curriculum changes introduced in the 1999 National Curriculum had been implemented. With the adoption of the 1999 National Curriculum the beginning level of English teaching was lowered from grade 7 to grade 5. Auður

surveyed 75% of the teachers who taught English in grade 5 during the year 2001-2002. The findings showed that teachers placed most emphasis on the areas of speaking and listening, followed by vocabulary and reading. The most commonly used teaching methods and activities were songs, games, workbook use and pair work. Least emphasis was given to role play and theme work (Auður Torfadóttir, 2003). Although teachers used songs and games with the pupils, the difference between the amount of workbook work and activities that allow for more creative language use was noticeable and illustrated the teachers' reliance on traditional teaching methods. Teachers in the survey also seemed to place importance on direct grammar teaching since many of them criticized the teaching materials for a lack of grammar exercises. However, the National Curriculum recommended that beginning English learners at this age learn grammar indirectly and that grammar instruction be integrated with the learning of the other skills (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999).

Similar results regarding English teaching for beginners were found in the 2006 evaluation discussed above (Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2006). The grade 5 teachers said it was most important to teach speaking, listening and vocabulary in English. Half of the teachers said direct grammar instruction was important at this level. Almost all of the teachers placed emphasis on workbook use, pair work and having pupils read aloud. Many teachers emphasized using songs and games but role play, computer activities and using video materials received the least emphasis.

The most recent study of teaching methods in the upper grades of primary school (grades 5-7) was carried out in 2007 (Lefever, 2008a). The study sample consisted of 30% of the nation's primary schools from all geographical areas. Teachers answered a questionnaire about their background and education, teaching methods and areas of emphasis, use of teaching materials, target language use, and assessment methods.

Teachers in this study placed most emphasis on the teaching of vocabulary and listening. However, they put more importance on reading and less on speaking English than grade 5 teachers did in the 2006 evaluation and in Auður Torfadóttir's 2002 study. This difference could be a result of the broader range of teachers in the survey (grade 6 and 7 teachers in addition to grade 5). Traditional teaching methods were most commonly used, such as reading and listening to English materials and doing workbook activities. Teaching methods that focus on activating students in creative or authentic-like language use such as theme work, role play, student presentations, video and computer activities received very little emphasis, according to the teachers' responses. Likewise, fewer than half the teachers (45%) said they put "some" emphasis on games and a similar percentage said they put "little" emphasis on using songs in their English teaching.

An additional study at the primary level was carried out in 2007 in order to investigate the extent and nature of English teaching being offered in grades earlier than prescribed in the National Curriculum Guide (grades 1-4). All the primary schools in the country (N=173) were contacted and asked to indicate in what grade they began English instruction. Next, a questionnaire was sent to the teachers in the primary schools that were offering English in grades 1-4. In the questionnaire the teachers were asked to describe their English teaching. Forty-nine teachers from 33 schools answered the questionnaire. The response rate for the survey was 70% and the participating schools were distributed around the country (18 schools in the capital area, 15 schools from around the country). The outcomes of the survey showed that during the school year 2006-2007 English was taught in the youngest grades in approximately 30% of the country's primary schools (Lefever, 2007). This is an increase from the year 2002 when only 10% of primary schools offered English before grade 5, the required grade level for beginning English

instruction at the time (Auður Torfadóttir, 2003). Many of the schools that participated in the study started English instruction in grade 1 while others introduced it in grades 3 or 4. In most cases the amount of teaching offered was ½ - 1 lesson per week in grades 1 and 2 and two lessons per week in grades 3 and 4. In a few schools the instruction was broken down into shorter lessons, e.g. 15 minute lessons two or three times a week.

Over half (60%) of the teachers in the survey said they used conventional whole group instruction for teaching English. Some teachers (17%) used other approaches such as rotating centers or stations, and a similar percentage of teachers said they integrated English with other subjects or used theme teaching. Most teachers in grades 1-4 (63%) said they focused primarily on spoken English and the use of songs and games. Others placed emphasis on vocabulary and listening to English. A few teachers said they mainly used workbooks and worksheets in their teaching.

English use in the classroom

One of the main objectives of language learning is to increase learners' communicative competence in the language being learned. Communicative language teaching methods focus on the use of the language for interaction in the classroom, both between the teacher and students and students with each other (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Savignon, 2002). Thus a major role of the communicative language teacher is to provide learners with ample learning opportunities for creative and authentic-like language use. This applies to both receptive use (listening and reading) and productive use (speaking and writing). Teachers also have the role of being a model for their pupils by using the language for both teaching and communicative purposes in the classroom. The more pupils are dependent upon the teacher and classroom teaching for hearing the language, the greater the teacher's role as a model speaker of the language. Children learn new words, phrases and appropriate

language use through oral communication with others. Opportunities for practicing the use of the language are essential for expanding their knowledge and building fluency in the language (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006).

The National Curriculum Guide emphasizes the use of English as much as possible during instruction. However, research has shown that teachers often do not use the target language as much as is prescribed (Kim & Elder, 2005). Teachers have given several reasons for not using English during instruction and one of the main reasons is their lack of confidence in their English skills. They do not feel comfortable enough to use the target language for all oral interaction in the classroom, for example for giving instructions, explanations, praising and disciplining pupils (Brown, 2001; Cameron, 2001). Sometimes teachers are afraid of making language mistakes and setting a bad example. However, it is important that teachers send their pupils the positive message that they should try to use English as much as possible and it is acceptable and normal to make language mistakes (Edge, 1989). If teachers are hesitant about speaking English in the classroom and

only use it for teaching purposes, they send the message that English is a school subject which is studied in books rather than a means to communicate with others or use for personal pleasure and benefit.

In the 2006 evaluative study commissioned by the Ministry of Education the teachers and pupils were asked to estimate the amount of English used by both the teachers and pupils during English lessons (Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2006). Less than half of the pupils in grades 9 and 10 (44%) reported that their teachers used English “always” or “often” during lessons. A fifth of the pupils in grades 9 and 10 (21%) said that pupils “always” or “often” used English when answering the teacher and only 5% said that pupils “always” or “often” used English when talking to one another during lessons. The pupils’ responses can be seen in Figure 1.

The teachers’ responses to the question were consistent with the pupils’ answers. A little less than half of the teachers said they mostly used English during instruction while most teachers said they used English and Icelandic interchangeably during instruction.

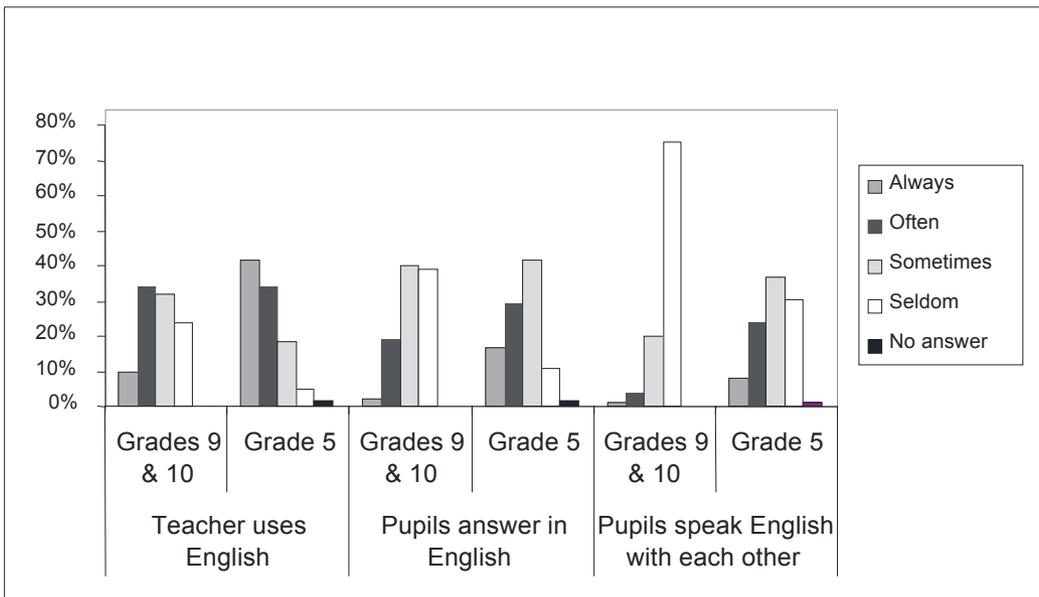


Figure 1. English use in the classroom.

Very similar results were reported in the survey of grade 10 teachers done by Helga Sigurjónsdóttir (2006). Just under half of the teachers (48%) said they used English “very often” in the classroom while 11% said they “seldom” spoke English during lessons. Fewer than 4% of the teachers said they “always” used English in the classroom.

These results show that English is not widely used by the teachers and even less by the pupils during lessons. But the situation seems to be better in grade 5 where a greater percentage of pupils reported higher amounts of English use by the teachers and the pupils. As seen in Figure 1, three-fourths of grade 5 pupils in the 2006 study by Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir, et al. reported that their teachers used English “always” or “often” during lessons. However, the reports by the pupils may be overly positive since they are not supported by teachers’ own reports regarding English use in the classroom. In the study by Auður Torfadóttir (2003), just under half of the grade 5 teachers reported using English “always” or “often” during lessons.

Using English in the classroom is clearly challenging for teachers, especially those who have not been specially trained as English teachers, as can be seen in the surveys of teachers in grades 1-4 and grades 5-7 (Lefever, 2008b). According to their responses, teachers in grades 5-7 used English more often in the classroom than the teachers in grades 1-4. Well over half of the teachers in grades 5-7 (64%) said they used English from 20% - 60% of the time during lessons, whereas approximately half of the teachers in grades 1-4 (51%) said they used English less than 40% of the time during lessons (Figure 2).

Assessment methods

The National Curriculum Guide for foreign languages emphasizes new views towards assessment that place the learner at the center. As stated in the curriculum guide, assessment should assist learners in their learning and motivate them to excel. It should also provide information to learners, teachers, parents, and school authorities about pupil’s learning and check whether the curriculum objectives are

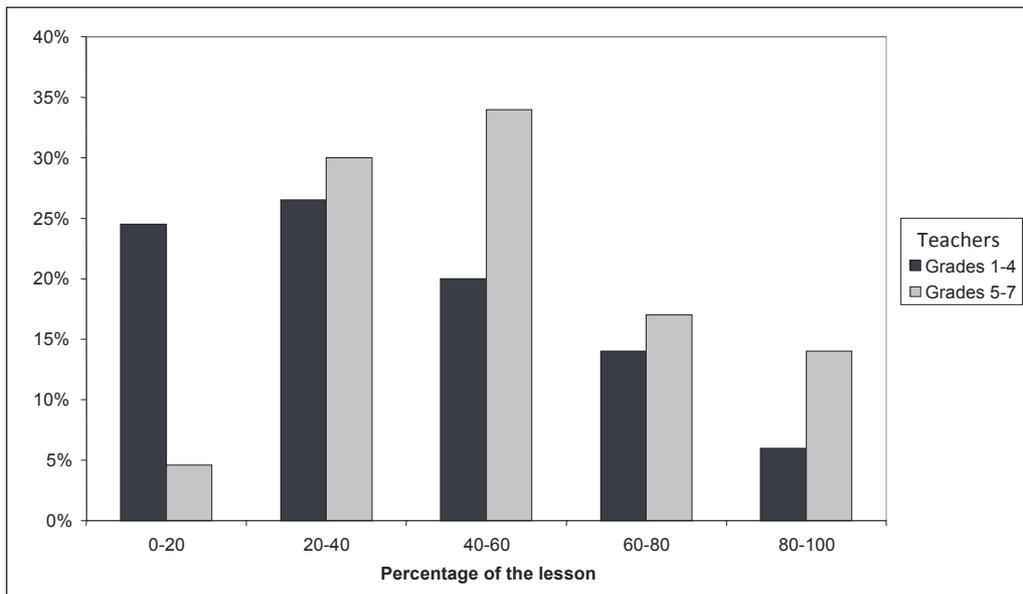


Figure 2. How much English do teachers speak in the classroom?

being met. Teaching and assessment should be closely linked. Assessment in language teaching should include all four skills and reflect the types of activities and topics covered in the instruction. The curriculum guide recommends a variety of assessment methods and emphasizes that assessment should be a continuous process and not reserved for the end of term. Teachers should encourage pupils to reflect on their own learning and gradually teach them to use peer and self-assessment. The curriculum guide suggests that teachers use the *European Language Portfolio* to support pupils in learning how to self-assess and become autonomous learners (European Language Portfolio, Icelandic version, 2006). The National Curriculum Guide explicitly states that formal assessment methods (written tests) are not appropriate for beginning learners of English in grades 4 and 5. In addition, since school-leaving exams (*samræmd lokapróf*) only assess some of the language learning objectives, school assessment should complete the assessment picture. This is particularly in regard to assessment of oral and communicative skills (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

Auður Torfadóttir (2005) questions how well assessment methods practiced in English teaching in compulsory schools in Iceland are in line with the recommendations of the National Curriculum Guide. She points out that teachers and schools seem to be trapped in a tradition of testing which focuses primarily on the written word. This is neither consistent with the communicative nature and purposes of languages; nor is it in step with current ideas about language teaching and learning which focus on communicative skills, active learning and learner autonomy. These ideas are closely linked to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001), which was used for reference in the revision of the 2007 National Curriculum Guide for foreign languages (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007). This framework outlines and describes a range of language competences which focuses on what language learners are capable of

doing in the language (it includes a set of “can do” statements). It allows for more reliable and efficient assessment of language learning between countries and has furthered the development of language teaching and assessment methods. The *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) is another outcome of this research and development process. Both the framework and the ELP are designed to help schools and teachers to change their language teaching and assessment methods with learner responsibility and autonomy in mind.

Many theorists and practitioners in Iceland question the reliability and validity of school assessment practices and more research is needed in the field. In one of the few recent studies which have looked at school assessment practices in Iceland, Erna I. Pálsdóttir (2007) found that school policy at the compulsory level is ambiguous in terms of assessment. Assessment methods and areas of focus differ between subjects and levels, written tests are predominant, and the school-leaving exams influence classroom assessment. Guðfinna Gunnarsdóttir (2005) found similar results in a study among English teachers in ten compulsory schools in southwest Iceland. Her findings suggest that English teaching and assessment in grade 10 are heavily influenced by the school-leaving exam, replicating the results of the study by Rúnar Sigþórsson (2008) and two additional studies of grade 10 teachers, the study by Helga Sigurjónsdóttir (2006) previously referred to and another by Auður Torfadóttir (1999). In those two studies, only a small minority of the teachers included oral assessment as part of pupils’ overall English assessment. It seems that oral assessment is widely neglected even though the National Curriculum Guide explicitly states that schools should assess pupils’ oral skills. This is to compensate for the lack of an oral component in the English school-leaving exam.

This lack of adherence to the recommendations of the National Curriculum Guide was also evidenced in the study by Guðfinna Gunnarsdóttir (2005). Her findings

showed that teachers did not look toward the National Curriculum for direction in regard to assessment. Teachers felt free to make their own decisions about assessment although the majority of them referred to their own school's assessment policy, which allowed them considerable freedom in terms of assessment methods and materials.

The data from Icelandic studies tend to confirm that written tests are the dominant form of assessment in most compulsory schools. In the 2006 evaluation of English teaching, the majority of the teachers in grades 9 and 10 used written tests at the end of term and less formal types of assessment periodically during the term, such as workbook work, written assignments, quizzes and classroom participation. Oral tests or activities were very seldom used (Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2006).

Helga Sigurjónsdóttir (2006) looked at what skills were focused on in written tests in grade 10. Teachers generally tested reading comprehension, grammar, writing, and content from the textbook. Homework, classroom participation, and behavior were also aspects that teachers included in assessment in English. Only one teacher in the study reported using pupil diaries and portfolio assessment as a part of the overall assessment.

The most recent study of English language assessment was done by Lilja Jóhannsdóttir (2008) as a part of her M. Ed. thesis. She surveyed a volunteer sample of grade 8 English teachers (N=39) with a questionnaire about teaching and assessment practices. The findings of the study show once again the strong preference for written exams and the very limited use of oral activities such as oral tests, conversations or oral presentations for assessment. Listening and writing tasks were used for assessment but very few teachers used methods such as pupil diaries, portfolios, and peer or self-assessment.

The focus of written tests reported by the teachers was mostly on reading comprehension and content from the textbook. The most

typically used test items for testing reading and writing were gap-filling exercises, multiple choice questions and short writing activities. Translation activities were seldom used (Lilja Jóhannsdóttir, 2008).

Lilja attempted to ascertain to what extent assessment was formative and motivating for pupils by exploring the types of grading and feedback teachers used. A majority of the teachers gave grades based on the number of correct rather than incorrect answers. However, scoring rubrics which describe performance criteria and give examples of acceptable work were seldom used (Lilja Jóhannsdóttir, 2008).

It seems to be common practice at the compulsory level to include aspects that can hardly be seen as language skills as part of the language assessment (Erna I. Pálsdóttir, 2007; Guðfinna Gunnarsdóttir, 2005; Lilja Jóhannsdóttir, 2008). These aspects usually concern pupils' attitudes and behavior. The majority of the grade 8 teachers in Lilja's study included pupils' work habits and classroom participation in their overall assessment and, to some extent, aspects such as creativity, initiative, progress, social skills, and cooperation. Apparently, teachers are not in the habit of giving separate grades for these aspects.

Teachers' opinions regarding the main objectives of assessment were in line with those discussed in the National Curriculum Guide, in other words, to obtain information about learner's language progress, to inform learners about their learning, give them feedback, and to determine learner strengths and weaknesses (Lilja Jóhannsdóttir, 2008). However, the study did not determine whether teachers' assessments fulfilled these objectives.

As stated earlier, the National Curriculum Guide stresses that formal assessment is inappropriate in the lower grades of compulsory school. There is no mention of assessment with reference to English in grades 1-3 but in grade 4 teachers are instructed to encourage pupils and praise them for what they can do with the language. In grades 5-7 the curriculum guide emphasizes that assessment should be

steady and frequent, focus on listening and speaking in English, and gradually begin to include reading comprehension and spelling. Pupils should receive informative and positive feedback (written and/or oral) about their progress in the various English skill areas. Self-assessment should be a part of overall assessment along with teacher assessment (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

The majority of the surveyed teachers in grades 1-4 did not use formal assessment; instead they reported using on-going assessment or portfolios (Lefever, 2007). Many of them based their assessment on the children's participation and their work over the course of the winter. Some teachers gave written comments on pupils' report cards rather than letter or number grades. However, a few teachers said they used written tests, e.g. end of term tests, to assess the children's learning.

On the other hand, the findings from the teacher survey in grades 5-7 showed that a large majority of the teachers (85%) used written tests to assess the pupils (Lefever, 2008a). Fewer than half of the teachers reported using a combination of continuous assessment and oral tests or activities. Once again, few teachers said they used portfolio or self-assessment (12.5%). Thus, assessment practices at the primary level, as with the lower secondary level, seemed to fall short of the National Curriculum recommendations, since formal written tests were widely used in grades 5-7 and even in a few cases in the lower grades. Just as serious is the hesitancy of teachers to implement more learner-centered and performance-based methods such as portfolio assessment and self-assessment.

Traditional written tests are deemed unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. One of their largest shortcomings is that they do not include all skill areas such as the oral skills of spoken interaction and production. It is also difficult to assess creative writing, authentic-like English use, and integrated language use in a written test format. Written tests generally consist of discrete items which test grammar

and vocabulary out of context or reading comprehension and content area knowledge with questions that are far removed from real-life interaction. Perhaps most importantly, written tests rarely focus on what students can actually do in the language, and most students do not see them as positive and motivating (Alderson, 2002; Auður Torfadóttir, 2005; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; McKay, 2002; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Therefore, the overreliance on traditional assessment methods and the failure to introduce holistic, learner-centered methods such as portfolio and self-assessment are serious flaws in English instruction at the compulsory school level.

Discussion

The findings of the Icelandic studies that look at English teaching methods in compulsory schools draw attention to a disparity between communicative teaching methods recommended by the National Curriculum Guide and those used in English instruction. In grades 1-4, a wide range of teaching methods were found and teaching practices were generally in line with the curriculum objectives for that level. The majority of teachers put emphasis on using songs and games in lessons and introducing new vocabulary to learners. Most teachers used conventional whole group instruction and informal assessment methods for this age group. Although teachers attempted to use English in the classroom, more than half of them said they used it less than half the time during lessons.

In grades 5-10, the results of the studies indicate that teachers tended to emphasize traditional, text book-bound, teacher-directed methods that primarily focused on listening and reading in English, workbook use, and grammar exercises. Much less emphasis seems to be put on communicative activities. These results are similar to those found in a survey of 30 English teachers in Japan which showed that teachers used most of the teaching time for grammar instruction, vocabulary work and reading aloud (Sakui, 2004). Although the

National Curriculum recommends the use of pair and group work, teachers did not use it much for cooperative learning purposes. Considerably more emphasis was placed on working individually rather than in pairs or groups (Helga Sigurjónsdóttir, 2006). Although teachers in grades 5-7 were more likely to use songs and games in their teaching than teachers in grades 8-10, the focus on creative and active language use found in the National Curriculum Guide was generally lacking.

The data also show that the use of spoken English is limited in many classrooms, despite its clear emphasis in the National Curriculum Guide. Pupils are not actively using the language for communicative purposes in the classroom and teachers are not providing the English-speaking role model that is expected of them. Finally, traditional assessment methods based on written tests are used by most teachers, particularly in the upper grades, and little progress has been made in introducing alternative assessment methods recommended by the National Curriculum.

These findings concur with those found by Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir (2004) in her study of English teaching at the upper secondary level. She reported that National Curriculum guidelines did not seem to have the desired effect of bringing about changes in teaching. On the whole, the teaching was teacher- and textbook-centered and out of touch with students' reality or everyday life.

Conclusion

The National Curriculum Guide for foreign languages is based on the principles of communicative language teaching with the primary aim of increasing learners' abilities to use languages for communicative, real-life purposes. Teaching should focus on the skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking, and grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural understanding should be integrated into skills-based instruction. Importance is also placed on encouraging and maintaining positive attitudes towards learning languages

and providing learners with challenging opportunities for active and meaningful language use. In addition, the curriculum guide puts emphasis on increasing pupils' awareness of learning styles and strategies and teaching them to take responsibility for their own learning. This review of the research looking at the teaching and assessment of English in compulsory schools in Iceland uncovers a number of discrepancies between the National Curriculum objectives and classroom practices. Most serious is the apparent lack of emphasis on communicative activities and speaking English in the classroom. The studies did not provide data regarding other National Curriculum objectives such as the teaching of cultural understanding and awareness of learning styles and strategies. Likewise, more research is needed to investigate teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, learner autonomy, differentiated instruction and learner strategies, and how they are being implemented in Icelandic schools.

It should be noted that most of the studies were self-report studies and were not followed up with classroom observation or other research methods; thus caution must be taken in making generalizations from the data. Nevertheless, the studies show a strong tendency towards traditional teaching and assessment methods in the schools that were surveyed. On the whole, instruction is teacher-directed and textbook-bound and innovative approaches towards more holistic, learner-centered teaching and assessment do not seem to have gained ground in Icelandic schools. These findings are consistent with those found in other studies conducted at the compulsory level in which whole-class instruction, workbook use, written assignments and written tests are the most common forms of instruction (Hafsteinn Karlsson, 2007; Kristín Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2002; Kristín Jónsdóttir, 2003; Kristrún L. Birgisdóttir, 2004; Rósa Eggertsdóttir, 1993; Rúnar Sigbórsson, 2008).

New regulations governing basic education in Iceland were passed in spring 2008 (Lög

um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008). The regulations call for changes in standardized assessment at the compulsory level and the present form of school-leaving exams has been discarded. Many language experts such as Little (2003) feel that current forms of standardized testing largely serve to prevent needed reform in language teaching and assessment. So it is likely that these changes will have far-reaching implications. What effect will they have on the development of language assessment at the compulsory level? Will teachers and school leaders use the opportunity to reexamine school assessment practices from top to bottom? Will the changes entice schools to implement learner-centered assessment methods which will, in turn, have an influence on teaching methods? In any case, the new regulations provide teachers and school leaders with a unique and exciting opportunity to reform the traditional teaching and assessment practices that have characterized the teaching of English in Icelandic schools far too long.

Ágrip á íslensku

Fylgjakennarar Aðalnámskrá í enskukennslu? Samantekt á niðurstöðum nýlegra rannsókna á enskukennslu í grunnskólum á Íslandi

Í þessari grein er fjallað um nýlegar rannsóknir á enskukennslu á grunnskólastigi á Íslandi. Niðurstöður þeirra eru greindar með hliðsjón af nýjum straumum í tungumálakennslu og markmiðum Aðalnámskrár grunnskóla. Leitað var svara við spurningunum:

- Hvaða kennslu- og námsmatsaðferðir eru algengastar í enskukennslu á grunnskólastigi á Íslandi?
- Eru kennsluhættir og matsaðferðir í enskukennslu í samræmi við markmið Aðalnámskrár grunnskóla og nýjar hugmyndir um nám og kennslu erlendra tungumála?

Helstu straumar og stefnur í tungumálakennslu síðustu áratuga byggjast á kenningum um tjáskiptamiðaða tungumálakennslu. Héru átt við kennsluáðferðir þar sem „meginmarkmið er

að nemendur öðlist *tjáskiptahæfni* (*e. communicative competence*) á markmálinu, að tungumál og tjáskipti verði ekki aðskilin og að tungumál lærist með því að það sé notað til tjáskipta“ (Auður Hauksdóttir, 2007, bls. 169-170). Tjáskiptahæfni felur í sér að nemandinn viti hvað er við hæfi við mismunandi aðstæður og geti notað málið í raunverulegum samskiptum. Í tungumálanámi er áhersla lögð á fjóra færniþætti: lestur, hlustun, talað mál og ritun, sem tvinnast þó saman í eina heild. Einnig eru undirstöðupættir, eins og málfræði, orðaforði og skilningur á menningu, mikilvægir í tungumálanámi vegna þess að á þeim byggist skilningur og geta til að tjá sig munnlega og skriflega á málinu (Leaver, Ehrman og Shekhtman, 2005).

Markmið aðalnámskrár grunnskóla

Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla í erlendum tungumálum (2007) er byggð á kenningum um tjáskiptamiðaða tungumálakennslu. Kennsla í undirstöðupáttunum skal vera ofin saman við færniþættina fjóra á heildstæðan hátt. Aðalnámskráin leggur einnig áherslu á mikilvægi þess að tungumálanámið hafi merkingu fyrir nemendur og tengist áhugasviði þeirra og daglegu lífi. Námið á að vera hvetjandi og veita þeim tækifæri til að heyra og nota ensku til samskipta og fróðleiks. Annað markmið tungumálanáms er að auka víðsýni og skilning nemenda á síðum og lifnaðaháttum fólks á öðrum málsvæðum og auka umburðarlyndi þeirra. Námskráin fjallar einnig um mikilvægi þess að nemendur tileinki sér markvissar námsaðferðir, sjálfstæð vinnubrögð og læri að skipuleggja og meta eigin framfarir. Aðalnámskráin skilgreinir lokamarkmið enskunáms í grunnskóla og námsmarkmið fyrir hvert námsstig: 1.–4. bekk, 5.–7. bekk og 8.–10. bekk. Hún leggur áherslu á fjölbreyttar kennsluáðferðir og viðfangsefni sem heppileg eru til að hvetja og virkja nemendur til enskunotkunar, t.d. notkunar söngva, leikja, hlutverkaleikja, Internets og tölvuforrita, þemavinnu, samþættingar enskukennslu við aðrar námsgreinar, para- og hópavinnu (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla, Erlend tungumál,

2007, bls. 19-27). Mælt er með að kennarar noti ensku í kennslu að verulegu leyti í 7. og 8. bekk og að kennslan fari alfarið fram á ensku í 9. og 10. bekk. Aðalnámskráin fjallar sérstaklega um námsmat og ítrekar nauðsyn þess að mat skuli vera upplýsandi og hvetjandi fyrir nemendur og í samræmi við kennslu. Formlegt námsmat (skrifleg próf) er ekki talið henta fyrir unga nemendur (1.–5. bekk). Námskráin mælir með fjölbreyttum matsaðferðum og símati, og að nemendur læri að meta sig sjálfir.

Niðurstöður rannsókna á enskukennslu

Niðurstöður um það bil tíu rannsókna sem hafa skoðað kennslu og námsmatsaðferðir í enskukennslu á síðasta áratug gefa til kynna ósamræmi milli markmiða aðalnámskrár og kennsluhátta í skólum. Þeirri miklu áherslu sem námskráin leggur á tjáskiptahæfni nemenda virðist ekki vera nægilega vel fylgt eftir í kennslu. Í yngri bekkjum (1.–4.) er mest áhersla lögð á fjölbreytta kennslu sem höfðar til ungra nemenda en í eldri bekkjum (5.–10.) eru hefðbundnar kennslu- og námsmatsaðferðir ríkjandi. Kennarar leggja mesta áherslu á lestur og hlustun á ensku og bókmiðaða kennslu, vinnubókavinnu og málfræðiæfingar. Minni tími fer í að þjálfra enskt talmál og tjáskipti. Í mörgum tilfellum er enskan minna notuð í kennslustundum en gert er ráð fyrir í aðalnámskránni, bæði af kennurum og nemendum. Námsmat byggist að mestu á skriflegum prófum í 5.–10. bekk og lítið hefur miðað í að auka fjölbreytni í námsmati. Yfir heildina virðist vanta töluvert upp á að sú heildstæða, nemendamiðaða kennsla sem leggur áherslu á tjáskiptahæfni nemenda á ensku sé höfð í fyrirrúmi í íslenskum grunnskólum.

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