The main objectives of the evaluation commissioned by the Ministry of Education were:

- To gather information regarding the implementation of the National Curriculum for English instruction at the compulsory level.
- To gather information about English teaching and the position of English in schools in Iceland, i.e. objectives and areas of focus, learning goals, teaching and assessment methods, teaching materials and use of class time.
- To gather information about English teachers’ education, teaching experience, and their attitudes towards English instruction.
- To put forward recommendations for improving English teaching and learning.

Eight schools were randomly chosen by the Ministry from the capital area and the southern and western parts of the country. The schools represented a range of sizes and types from large urban schools to smaller village and country schools. The evaluation was carried out by Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir, Laufey Bjarnadóttir and Samúel Lefever.

Survey methods and tools

The evaluation focused on English instruction in grades 5, 9 and 10 in the participating schools. A written questionnaire was given to the pupils and their English teachers. The pupils’ questionnaire focused on the following areas:

- attitudes towards the English language
- opinions about teaching and learning methods and materials
- use of English in and outside of school

The teachers’ questionnaire asked for background information regarding education and teaching experience and their opinions about English teaching and learning methods and materials. In addition, English lessons were observed in all of the participating schools and interviews were taken with the teachers. Additional information was obtained from a number of sources such as school curricula and syllabi, lesson plans, and school assessments.

A total of twenty three teachers (12 in grade 5 and 11 in grades 9 and 10) and 788 students (213 in grade 5, 271 in grade 9 and 304 in grade 10) were involved in the evaluation. All of the teachers but one were certified teachers but a minority had some form of special training in English. Only about one third of the teachers at both levels had taken English as their main subject at university. This is similar to the findings of the survey of educational backgrounds of language teachers conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2006 (Menntun dönsku-, ensku-, og íslenskuennara í grunnskólum 2005–2006, 2006). The results of the nationwide survey showed that less than half (46%) of the teachers who taught English in grades 8–10 last year had some form of special training in English. Of those teachers who taught English in grades 5–7 last year, even fewer (29%) had any special training in English.

National Curriculum in English

Since this was an evaluation of National Curriculum objectives it is good to recall the main objectives for English teaching at the primary and lower secondary level:

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

(Aðalnámskrár grunnskóla, Erlend tungumál, 1999)

The National Curriculum also places emphasis on the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing and integrating grammar and vocabulary with skills-based instruction. Teaching methods and materials should be motivating and appealing to the learners and encourage active use of the language.

Examples of teaching methods and activities that are recommended in the curriculum guidelines are:
• songs, games, role play
• theme and project work
• information and computer technology
• pair and group work

In addition, teachers are encouraged to:
• use a variety of methods that take into account diverse learning needs
• use the target language as much as possible during instruction
• train students in oral communication

Finally, importance is placed on creative and active language use and establishing and maintaining positive attitudes towards the learning of English.

Findings
The findings of the evaluation show that both pupils and teachers have very positive attitudes towards English and recognize the value of knowing English. A vast majority of the pupils feel that it is very or rather important to know English, as can be seen in Figure 1.

The pupils were asked what they thought were the advantages of knowing English. Over 90% of the pupils in both groups stated that English was important to be able to communicate when abroad. A large majority also said it was useful to understand English movies, TV programs and music and to read English books and magazines. Most pupils felt knowing English was important for future study and work. Many pupils stated that English was important for using the Internet. More boys said English was useful for playing computer games, twice as many as girls.

The pupils were also asked to give their opinions about learning English at school. Most pupils said they liked learning English and the younger learners were very positive about their English lessons (Figure 2). Almost 70% of the pupils in grade 5 said they liked their English lessons very much and 28% said they enjoyed learning English most of the time. In comparison, 25% of the older learners said they enjoyed learning English very much and 58% most of the time. This poses the question whether the tendency of teenagers of being more negative towards school in general could be the cause of this decline in interest or is the instruction in the older grades no longer as appealing or motivating as to begin with?

The pupils were asked to rate how easy they felt it was to learn the four language skills in English. Their responses shown in Figures 3 and 4 indicate that most of them find it easy to learn English. The skill that is most challenging for the older learners
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is writing in English while fifth graders said both reading and writing in English are the most difficult skills to learn.

Most of the schools in the evaluation used teaching materials recommended by the National Centre for Educational Materials (Námsgagnastofnun), i.e. Network in grades 9 and 10 and Portfolio in grade 5. In spite of positive attitudes towards learning English, pupils were not so pleased with the teaching materials used in English instruction (Figure 5). Only 46% of the pupils in grades 9 and 10 said they thought the teaching materials used in their lessons were ‘very good’ or ‘good’. On the other hand, almost all of the pupils in grade 5 were quite happy with the teaching materials (47% – very good, 41% – good).

One of the objectives of the questionnaires was to gather information about teaching methods used in English instruction and their effect on pupils’ learning. Pupils were given a list of teaching methods and approaches and were asked to rate how much they learned English through their use. The teachers were given a similar list and were asked to rate how much they emphasized the methods in their English teaching. The lists of twenty one items consisted of traditional methods and innovative approaches used for increasing variety in the classroom.

The agreement between pupils’ and teachers’ responses was generally strong. Teachers tended to emphasize the same methods that pupils ranked as helpful for learning English.

The methods that pupils in grades 9 and 10 ranked highest were:

- translating from English into Icelandic – 82%
- translating from Icelandic in to English – 79%
- workbook use – 78%
- reading English books and magazines – 75%
- making word list with translations – 74%
- grammar exercises – 73%
- watching English videos in class – 73%
- using English listening materials – 71%
- going over homework in class – 71%

The methods that grade 9–10 teachers emphasized ‘very much’ or ‘much’ were (in order):

- using English listening materials
- reading English books and magazines
- going over homework in class
- grammar exercises
- workbook use
- writing activities
- translating from Icelandic into 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 in the upper grades were:

- watching English videos in class
- speaking activities
- working with English songs and lyrics

Pupils rated these methods as helpful for learning English but the majority of teachers reported placing only ‘some’ or ‘little’ emphasis on using them in lessons.

In grade 5, pupils ranked workbook use, listening activities, speaking activities, and translating from English to Icelandic as being most helpful for learning English. Their teachers reported putting emphasis on the same methods along with pair work, group work and discussion in English.

At first glance it seems surprising that beginning learners of English find translation from English to Icelandic to be helpful but perhaps they are referring to the act of learning new vocabulary by translating new words into their mother tongue. This is just one of the questions that arose when interpreting the results of this question. It was also difficult to know whether pupils’ answers were a reflection of how much the methods were used in
instruction rather than how helpful they were for learning English. It is also possible that pupils place more value on teaching activities that are linked to tests and grades. Additionally, pupils may not have been familiar with all of the methods and thus not capable of rating their helpfulness.

Several teaching methods, such as the use of games, role play, theme work and computer use that are effective in activating students in creative and /or authentic like language use received very little emphasis, according to the teachers’ responses. Likewise, pupils said that these methods were seldom (or not) used in class.

The National Curriculum for English emphasizes that teachers use English as much as possible during instruction. The teachers and pupils were asked to estimate the amount of English use by both the teachers and pupils in the classroom. According to their responses, less than half of the pupils in grades 9 and 10 (44%) reported that their teachers used English ‘always’ or ‘often’ during lessons. This is in agreement with the teachers’ responses since most of them said they use English and Icelandic interchangeably during instruction. A majority of the pupils (79%) said that pupils ‘sometimes’ or ‘seldom’ use English when answering the teacher and 75% said that pupils ‘seldom’ use English when talking to one another during lessons. The pupils’ responses can be seen in Figure 6.

These results seem to indicate 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. But once again, it is difficult to know how the pupils interpreted the question. It could be that pupils chose the ‘always’ possibility if the teacher used some English in every lesson rather than solely English during the entire lesson.

Pupils were also asked about their use of English outside the classroom. Their responses show that they have several opportunities for authentic use of English outside school. They use English primarily for entertainment through English media, i.e. film, television, music, Internet and computer games. In some cases a gender difference was apparent, most notably in the case of playing computer games. Nearly 70% of the boys at both levels said they often used English for playing computer games, which was twice as many as the girls.

Conclusions
The results of the evaluation clearly show the positive attitudes of pupils and teachers towards learning English and the range of opportunities the pupils have for authentic use of English outside of school. The evaluation also indicates some areas for improvement. Although teachers were aware of the National Curriculum guidelines, felt they were realistic, and used them to plan their teaching, the evaluation showed that certain discrepancies exist between teaching methods recommended by the National Curriculum and those used in English instruction. In particular, more focus is needed on spoken communication, using English during lessons, and using teaching methods that ‘activate’ the learners and give them more chances to use English for fun and creative use. An important question that needs to be asked in light of this evaluation is whether teachers are using the positive attitudes and authentic learning opportunities as much as they could in their English teaching?

This article looks at only a few of the findings from the evaluation commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The full report can be accessed at the Ministry web site or at http://bella.stjr.is/utgafur/enskukennsla.pdf. Teachers are encouraged to read the report and consider the outcomes and implications for English teaching and learning at the compulsory level. We hope the report will encourage discussion and lead to changes that will benefit both teachers and learners of English in Iceland.

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References