Introduction
The use of the English language has grown throughout Europe and much of the world in recent years. With this changing cultural landscape the interest in introducing foreign language instruction has increasingly included younger learners. Currently, Icelandic schools are required to teach English beginning in 5th grade (age 10) but a growing number of schools offer instruction in English at earlier ages. Even some preschools include foreign language learning in their curriculum. This trend calls for a reexamination of the objectives of language instruction and teaching approaches that suit very young learners. It also raises questions about the implementation of the instruction in the lower grades and the training of the teachers who take on the task of teaching English to these very young learners.

This article will discuss a research study whose aims were to describe and analyze the English language instruction for children age 5–8 in a preschool and primary school in Iceland. The main research question dealt with was: What teaching approaches best suit language learners at ages 5–8? The study was carried out during the spring months in 2006 and the data was obtained through interviews with teaching staff at the schools and observations of the language learning sessions.

Language learning and young learners
Current language learning theory follows the premise that children learn best through discovery and experimentation and being motivated to learn. Children tend to pick up language from other children relatively quickly because they want to play and make friends. They also pick up language from their daily environment and through the media if it catches their interest. Children’s reasons for wanting to learn a new language can be varied and change with time. Given the prevalence of English in the environment, children are quick to see the value of learning the language for a variety of purposes.

Language status also plays an important role in language learning. If the language in question is seen as important and actively used, it is more likely that children will want to learn and use it. Also, children whose parents speak several languages and move comfortably between cultures will be able to develop positive attitudes and accept different cultures more easily.

A study on English teaching and learning at the primary school level commissioned by the Ministry of Education and conducted in 2005 showed very positive attitudes towards learning English. A vast majority (94%) of the children in grade 5 who were surveyed felt that it was important to know English and 97% said that they enjoyed learning English at school. They also reported a number of advantages for knowing English. These included using it for communication abroad, understanding English language movies and TV programs, and for playing computer games (Lovís Kristjánsdóttir, Laufeý Bjarnadóttir, Samúel Lefever, 2006).

In Teaching Young Language Learners, Pinter (2006) points out a number of reasons why children can benefit from learning a foreign language. It can:

• develop children’s basic communication abilities in the language
• encourage enjoyment and motivation for language learning
• promote learning about other cultures
• develop children’s cognitive skills
• develop children’s metalinguistic awareness
• encourage ‘learning to learn’.

Characteristics of young learners
Foreign language instruction must take into the needs and characteristics of young learners in order to be successful. Teaching objectives and approaches should be geared to the learners’ cognitive level and interests. Young learners at the transition level (ages 5–8) generally have the following characteristics. They are:

• keen and enthusiastic
• curious and inquisitive
• outspoken
There are some advantages that young learners have over older ones. Young children are sensitive to the sounds and the rhythm of new languages and they enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation. In addition, younger learners are usually less anxious and less inhibited than older learners (Pinter, 2006).

The above needs and characteristics of young learners have implications for language instruction. Teachers should provide a wide range of opportunities for hearing and using the language and play should be an active part of the teaching. Tasks should be meaningful and help children to make sense of new experiences by relating them to what they already know. The use of routine and repetition should be emphasized along with opportunities for interaction and cooperation. Finally, praise and encouragement is necessary to maintain children’s positive attitudes, motivation, and self-confidence.

The research study

The study discussed in this article looked at the English language programs at a preschool and a primary school run by an organization called the Hjalli model (Hjallastefnan). The organization bases its educational programs on the following principles:

- gender grouping
- bookless learning – play materials instead of toys
- imaginative and creative
- active and like to move around
- interested in exploration
- learn by doing/hands-on experience
- holistic, natural learners searching for meaningful messages.

The English instruction

The goals of the language instruction in the two schools are to engage the learners, spark their interest in English and increase their overall self-confidence and participation in society by increasing their awareness of the rich use of English that surrounds them in their daily life. The English program is taught by a native English speaker who regularly comes to the schools and meets with the children. The instruction is in the form of guided play within a theme which includes logical progression, the use of songs and music, visual clues, movement, and interpersonal and intrapersonal connections, usually all in an outside environment. The themes are geared to the age levels of the children and in most cases parallel to what is being taught in the general school curriculum. The English teacher draws on the theories of Multiple Intelligence and different learning styles by Howard Gardner to compliment her teaching style and goals.¹

The typical framework of one 40 minute period once a week does not suit the needs of the children or the type of learning situation desired for this age group. Instead, the class groups are split in half, both in numbers and in time (for example, 2 groups of 12 children for 20 minutes each). Each group receives English instruction four days in a row instead of once a week, which greatly increases the children’s retention and enthusiasm for English. After the children’s week of instruction they have an off-period of 3 weeks. But the connection with English is kept alive during the off-period because children are exposed to English lessons for other groups while on the playground. In addition, the children remain motivated because they see the English teacher as a guest. During the off-period they look forward to their next set of English lessons.

The children’s classroom teacher participates in the English lessons and acts as a co-teacher. The partnerships with the co-teachers provide a sense of security, especially for the youngest learners. The co-teachers also help the learners to comprehend and make the language connection. Together the set of teachers are able to provide an environment that encourages the learners to participate and take risks.

¹ The English program is called ‘Connect with English’ and was developed by Elizabeth Nunberg, nunberg@gmail.com.
Findings

Interviews were taken with the principals of both of the schools. In both cases the principals were very pleased with the English program and felt it was a beneficial part of the school curriculum. They stated that the objectives were to provide children with the opportunity to learn English while they are so open and interested. Introducing English instruction allowed them to enrich the program for the 5 year olds and it proved very popular with the children, their parents and the other teachers, so it was decided to make it a regular part of the curriculum for the 5–8 year old children.

The principals felt the teaching methods were successful and fit in well with the schools’ curriculum principles and objectives. In their views the main aspects of the teaching methods were the following:

– focus on play and creativity
– effective timetabling
– outdoor instruction
– positive cooperation with co-teachers
– scaffolding
– positive outcomes for the learners: increased confidence, positive attitudes, learning languages is fun!

Support for these main aspects was given by the following quotes by the principals (P):

P1: “All the teaching is done through playing and using as much creativity as possible. The teacher doesn’t use books or photocopied sheets. The teaching is more spontaneous, creative and playful.”

P2: “Instead of sitting at a desk and looking at a piece of paper, the children go outside and are active. It is physical instruction and they are much more active.”

P2: “The main goal is to introduce English to the children, the possibility of learning a language which is just like learning to tie your shoe or use the bathroom on your own. They are so enthusiastic at this age and so proud of their learning. They are so happy when they have learned something new.... They also connect what they have learned with their daily life.”

Six co-teachers were also interviewed in two groups of 3. They also felt that the English instruction was a successful and productive addition to the school curriculum. They mentioned a number of factors of the teaching that led to successful outcomes:

– integrated teaching
– indirect learning, learning through play, songs, repetition and fun
– harmonious with school objectives and teaching philosophy
– co-teachers are assistants; they give individual attention and encouragement and provide security. They are participants in the learning activities and models for learning.
– increase in children’s self confidence and interest in English and other languages

The following comments by the teachers (T) support the above points. The first set of comments relate to the teaching objectives and methods of the English instruction.

T2: “One of the main objectives of our curriculum is that children enjoy what they are doing – learning should be fun. If it is not fun then we change our approach to make it fun. Enjoyment and being positive is what children remember most.”

T2: “I think our reasons for learning a new language are to be able to communicate with others, not necessarily to be able to write without mistakes in the new language but to be able to talk to people with other languages... We don’t begin by learning grammar, instead we try to find our own way (to make ourselves understood). That is what we are doing here; for example learning to sing a song and do actions with it just like we do in our own language. We do the same type of things in the new language.”

T4: “What I think is good is the shortness of the lessons; they are concise and the teacher is always well-prepared.”

T4: “Teaching outdoors is a good approach. The teacher is so lively and it makes it possible to use games, running, and shouting. It is especially good for the boys.”

T3: “The teacher does a good job of activating all the children. And the songs and games used in the lessons are so much fun. She gets all the children to participate.”
The next set of comments refers to the role of the co-teacher and the partnership with the English teacher.

T4: “To begin with, with the 5 year olds, we are there to help them answer the teacher. For example, when she says something to them and they are supposed to repeat, we do it too so that they understand what to do. Then we (gradually) stop doing it because they have learned what to do.”

T2: “We participate in the activities with the children. We also use this when we are practicing; we can make mistakes. It doesn’t matter if we say something wrong; it’s OK. Nobody makes fun of us if we mispronounce a word, we just practice until it’s right. We encourage the children as positively as we can without pushing them too far. We try to encourage them and they encourage each other. If they are having trouble, we tell them it is OK and that it will go better the next time around.”

T1: “We carry on with what the teacher has been doing and it is an advantage for us to be able to see the group from an outside perspective. It is good to be able to step out of the teacher’s role and observe them and see how they work.”

T1: “We are sending the children off to someone else. It gives them security having us with them in the English lessons. We follow them through in their learning. We know what they have experienced.”

T2: “...and we can use that. For example, I can go to the English teacher and tell her about something that may have happened during the morning and ask her if we can include that in the English lesson.”

T1: “The English teacher has also given us ideas that we can use in our teaching, for example in Icelandic instruction, so there is good continuity and carryover”.

Outcomes
The principals and co-teachers felt that they were several positive outcomes of the English program. In addition to the children’s positive attitudes and enthusiasm for learning English, they saw increased confidence in the children and active interest in using English for their own purposes. The principals and co-teachers reported several examples of children using English outside of the English lessons, for example during play time, in interaction with each other or in interaction with visitors to the school. They also saw a growing language awareness, as can be seen by the following comment by a co-teacher:

T1: “The children are becoming aware of the diversity of languages, which is a very positive experience for them. They begin to make connections with other languages too, for example the link between Danish and Denmark.”

Areas for concern
Foreign language instruction for young learners does, however, present a number of challenges for educators. A chief concern is ensuring smooth transitions between programs and school levels. Since children begin to learn English at various ages, they are more than ever likely to have different levels of English proficiency. Teachers at both the primary and secondary levels must be prepared to deal with students with mixed levels of language skills and knowledge. With an increase in total number of years spent learning English, another concern is that of maintaining motivation and positive attitudes in students who have been learning the language for several years.

A common problem in language programs for very young learners is an over-reliance on literacy skills. Learning to read and write in English is not simple, and when classroom teaching and learning depend on being able to read and write, some children will begin to fall behind. Many children in the early grades need more time to master the complications of reading and writing in their mother tongue before they can utilize these skills in learning an additional language.
Another important challenge is that of educating teachers with sufficient English skills and knowledge of language teaching methodology geared to young learners. Teachers need to feel confident and willing to use English in the classroom in order to increase children’s exposure to the natural use of English for communicative purposes.

The current situation regarding the education of English teachers is far from satisfactory. According to the findings of a survey of educational backgrounds of language teachers conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2006, only 29% of the teachers who taught English in grades 5–7 last year had some form of special training in English (Menntun dönsku-, ensku-, og ÍslenskuKennara í grunnskóulum 2005–2006, 2006). The need for teachers trained in language teaching is of serious concern, particularly in light of the evergrowing interest in beginning English instruction at younger levels. Clearly, more focus is needed on guaranteeing language teaching training for classroom teachers before these curriculum changes are made.

Conclusion

Introducing English to children at an early age gives them the opportunity to widen their horizons and awaken their early enthusiasm and curiosity about languages. This enthusiasm and thirst for learning can be extended with active teaching methods that focus on learning the language through play and discovery. Focus should also be on learning the language for interaction and communication. The teacher is the main source of motivation for many young children so teachers with suitable methodology and a good command of the language are essential components of success. Finally the organization and implementation of the language program need to be flexible and conducive to effective learning. With all these factors in place, introducing language learning at an early age can result in children’s increased self-confidence, joy of learning and active participation in the larger society.

References


Undanfarin 3 ár hafa enskuKennnarar fjölmennat á ráðstefnuna og látið vel af. Fjölbreytt val fyrirlestra, vinnu- og umræðufunda er í boði sem og sýning útgáfufyrirtækja. Félagið hvetur sérstaklega þá kennara sem hafa ekki sótt þessa ráðstefnu áður að grípa nú tækifærið því auðvelt er að komast til Aberdeen um Glasgow.