

**Productive language development in Polish and Icelandic classroom activities:
The diversity of language context in the digital world**

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to gain insight into Polish and Icelandic teachers' attitudes towards children's productive language skills in the societal languages, Polish and Icelandic, their teaching practices in fostering these skills, and to identify any obstacles experienced. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with two teachers in each country. The Icelandic population is only 364.000, while the number in Poland is 39.857.000. In Iceland, English is an additional language to Icelandic, whereas Polish is the dominant language in Poland. Reading literacy among Icelandic youth on PISA has declined and Polish adolescents have improved. According to the Icelandic teachers, the diversity of language context in Iceland has a negative effect on children's Icelandic language skills. Speaking and writing appeared to be practised in a more elaborate way by the Icelandic teachers. School activities focused on speaking and writing can be improved in both the Polish and the Icelandic classes.

Keywords: *primary school, literacy, oral skills, discussions, writing instruction, classroom practices*

Introduction

Language proficiency and cognition are interrelated - both need to grow with time (Grøver et al. 2019, Vygotsky 1978). Moreover, in the digital world, literacy practices demand more elaborate language skills than ever before, the proficiency to integrate information across various texts, to evaluate contrasts and disinformation, and to debate about conflicting arguments, both in oral communications and in writing (Hemphill et al. 2019, OECD 2021: 20, Schleicher 2018). It goes without saying that literacy activities, reading, discussing, and writing, are an inseparable part of learning (Grøver et al. 2019). Moreover, using rich and sophisticated language in speaking and writing are the ultimate language skills (Grøver et al. 2019, Uccelli 2019). Productive language skills, i.e. speaking and writing, are particularly important when students demonstrate their knowledge and skills, being the core milestones when climbing the educational ladder (Pearson 2019, Uccelli 2019). Furthermore, proficient writers, who write in a convincing way, demonstrate more advanced word use in their writings than peers with poorer writing skills (Roessingh 2013, Ólafsdóttir 2015). As modern technology has increased the opportunities to present one's thoughts and beliefs, people with a good command of productive language skills can acquire certain powers.

Furthermore, in the digital world, English is the most widespread language, thus people world-wide read and use English on the internet. In fact, preserving linguistic diversity in modern times has become a real challenge, particularly to languages with few speakers (Multilingual 2022), as is the case with the Icelandic language (Rögnvaldsson et al. 2012). The abundance of entertainment material that is published in the English language is incomparable to that accessible in Icelandic. For this reason, Icelandic people of all ages use English every day (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018), as do children outside school in their leisure time (Jóhannsdóttir 2018). Although the Icelandic language is the official language in the

society, and the Icelandic language is rich in literature from ancient times up until the present day, English is now an additional language to Icelanders. However, in Poland, the Polish language is the official societal language, and the language preferred by the Polish people (META n.d.). English has still the status of a foreign language among the Polish nation - children learn English at school and use Polish outside the school setting. The Polish language is well supported for digital technology (Rehm & Uszkoreit 2011) and most software packages are provided in Polish (META n.d.).

Thus, while the diversity of languages in the world is threatened, the diversity of languages used within some cultures has been augmented, at least as regards the Icelandic people, who use both Icelandic and English on a regular basis. Moreover, as Icelandic pupils divide their leisure time between Icelandic and English, their language skills may be distributed between these languages, resulting in less proficiency in Icelandic (Oller et al. 2007, Ólafsdóttir et al. 2016, Thordardóttir 2021). The dual language context in Iceland may also affect teachers' attitudes towards the importance of their pupils' Icelandic language skills, and the opportunities they provide their learners with to develop these skills. These may differ from that of teachers in Poland, where the national language is preferred and used by the nation. Opportunities to make progress in productive language skills in the school language need to be provided to all children, for their active participation in school and successful performance in all fields of study (Pearson 2019, Rutherford-Quash & Hakuta 2019, Uccelli 2019).

This article presents findings from a study conducted in Poland and Iceland. Semi-structured interviews were taken with two teachers of nine-year-old children in each country, one teacher in the countryside and another teacher in a city. The main aim of the study was to gain insight into Polish and Icelandic teachers' attitudes towards providing their nine-year-old pupils opportunities to practise their productive language skills in the societal languages, Polish and Icelandic, the teachers' practices in fostering these skills, and to identify obstacles they experienced.

The findings contributed to the professional development of the two authors, as they have given an indication on how the education of student teachers can be improved and developed. The article first discusses what elements have proven successful in productive language activities at school, then important facts about the countries are discussed, as regards inhabitants, digital use, the Polish and the Icelandic languages, educational outcomes, and statistics, as well as national curricula for both countries.

Theoretical background

As an effective means to increase productive language proficiency of learners, an explicit instruction is pivotal (Bayat 2016, Gadd & Parr 2017, Hough et al. 2012, Lawrence et al. 2011). For example, an explicit instruction showed positive results in the study of De Smedt and Van Keer (2018) with 11 teachers of 206 fifth and sixth graders. Their approach included increasing learners' knowledge of writing by comparing different text genres, as well as augmenting their skills in writing strategy through planning, writing, and reviewing. Importantly, the intervention consisted of frequent, regular, and supportive writing environments. The pupils who received writing instruction of this kind outperformed those whose writing was predominantly based on peer assistance, and both these groups showed better results than the comparison group who received "business as usual" writing instruction.

Gadd and Parr (2017) studied teaching practices of nine teachers whose upper primary and middle school classes (210 pupils in total) had shown outstanding gains in writing. They found that learning tasks employed in these classes were purposeful for the learners and they included meaningful opportunities for their involvement. The teachers both used direct writing instruction and gave their pupils opportunity for self-regulation, i.e., the pupils were allowed to choose their own topics, they were responsible for seeking support from peers and the teacher, they worked in collaboration with each other, and practised writing both in and out of school.

The aim of the study conducted by Edwards and Jones (2017) was to gain insights into the view of 8–11-year-old boys about themselves as literacy learners, and especially as writers, as well as their teachers' views about the boys. They found that the boys made the best progress in literacy when the teachers valued their ideas and incorporated strategies for developing learner agency into their daily classroom practice. The results highlighted the strong links between the beliefs and actions of the teachers and the boys' perceptions of themselves as writers. The best teachers made provision for them to have choice in writing activities and independence in writing through peer discussions. This is in concordance with other findings that show that children become more motivated to write if they are given ownership of their writing, through topic choice, small group discussions, and peer partner writing (Czerniewska 1992, Graves 1983).

Topics on engagement dilemmas have indeed proven to be successful, as is the case for the well-known *Word Generation Program* (Snow & Lawrence 2011). An example of a study of the program's impact is the Lawrence and colleagues (2016) research with in total 8.382 middle school learners. The learners read a passage about a chosen topic and, importantly for the student engagement, this was of sufficient interest for them to be willing to read, talk and write about it. Important all-purpose academic words were highlighted and taught explicitly and across school subjects. This was followed by discussions, debates, and writing activities in which the children presented their own point of view and supported their arguments. The children worked in small and larger groups and in whole classroom settings throughout the process. Results indicated that the intervention was most promising for those with poor language skills, although all learners made progress in their language skills. These instructional methods can thus be considered as an effective means to mitigate the *Matthew Effect* (Stanovich 1986), as these practices can help diminish the literacy gap between learners (Lawrence et al. 2016).

Academic words play an important role in the Word Generation program, as these words are indeed fundamental for both writing and reading skills required from age nine, when learners start the lengthy process of reading and writing to learn (Beck et al. 2013, Chall & Jacobs 2003, Cummins & Man 2007, Ólafsdóttir et al. 2016). Not surprisingly, educationally strong students are more likely to use such words compared to learners with limited word skills (Dobbs & Kearns 2016). Moreover, a positive relation has been detected between the use of academic words and writing proficiency (Figuroa et al. 2018, Ólafsdóttir 2015, Roessingh et al. 2013). For example, in her study with Icelandic sixth and eighth graders, Ólafsdóttir (2015) found that proficient writers, who were able to organize their texts and present and give support for their arguments in a convincing way, used a higher number of Icelandic academic words compared to less proficient writers. However, while subject-specific words are normally taught explicitly within the corresponding discipline, teachers are often not cognizant of the importance of academic words that are used across a wider subject area (Beck et al., 2013; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2020; Roessingh 2016).

Moreover, research has demonstrated that feedback from teachers on students' writings can lead to improvements in the writing proficiency of learners at all ages (Black & William 2001), if it is detailed, clear, and provides the opportunity to respond by improving the text and submitting it again, even several times (Ólafsdóttir 2016). Such feedback has proven to be the most effective for learners who struggle the most. A case study with one teacher and her 6- and 7-year-old learners demonstrated the effectiveness of letting children participate in the scaffolding throughout the writing process (Dix 2015). The teacher created a magic space through discussions in which the voice of the children was heard, the children were valued as writers and active learners and took part in the scaffolding. The scaffolding interactions were flexible and responsive to individual children's learning.

Furthermore, findings indicate that learners whose teachers cooperate regularly make better progress in literacy than learners of teachers who work in isolation (Goddard et al. 2007, Leana & Pil

2006). Indeed, collaboration between teachers is effective in increasing the learning outcome of their pupils in general (Jang 2006, Lomos et al. 2011, Sigurðardóttir 2007).

An important responsibility of educational systems is to provide equitable learning opportunities for all, so that everyone will master language proficiency that allows for the fulfilment of their needs and ambitions in life: educational, personal, social, and professional (OECD 2019). Productive language proficiency plays a key role in this respect.

Taken together, there are certain instructional methods that have proven to be effective in supporting learners in developing their productive language skills. Even if conscious and willing to implement an effective instructional approach, teachers however face multiple complexities in their daily work with children. Language use, language teaching, and language learning are processes influenced by a host of factors (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012). These are emergent from the dynamic processes of change that operate in all languages used by individuals. It is indeed the changing and adapting element of language, which is a tool for communication in a constantly changing world. A complexity system theory perspective views language use as a dynamic system that emerges and self-organizes from frequently occurring patterns of language use (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012: 111).

We need to consider the tasks that learners perform and to consider each performance anew - stable and predictable in part, but at the same time variable, flexible, and dynamically adapted to fit the changing situation. Learners actively transform their linguistic world; they do not just conform to it (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012: 159).

Thus, teachers have throughout generations encountered changes in productive language use and performance that represent changes in society, and which constantly affect their language instructional settings. Moreover, each individual learner, each teacher, each group, and each class “are nested in the school as a complex system, with elements that include, as well as the obvious people and buildings, the parents, laws and guidelines, finances, and so on” (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012: 202). In fact, these are all likely to differ not only within each society, but even more so between different countries.

Teachers are “the key-actors in the teaching of writing, we should focus on what teachers do and think in the practice of writing education, and what students write” (Graham & Rijlaarsdam 2016: 788). Comparisons between countries of educational opportunities provided to learners are important to gain insight into countries’ capacity to meet the needs of individuals in a modern world in which mobilization and digitalisation have become the norm. Indeed, the internet has connected people and countries all over the world, which largely increases individual potential and at the same time has made the world more complex and ambiguous (OECD 2021). Literacy skills needed in the 21st century still include basic literacy skills, decoding and understanding (Hoover & Gough 1990), whereas, additionally, critical thinking and the ability to search and analyse information, in oral debate and in writing are of utmost importance. This makes it clear that language skills have never been as vital as in modern times, for active participation in society, at school, and at work (OECD, 2021). On the other hand, language use on the internet has become less diverse, with the English language dominating the digital world (Multilingual 2022). This is more of a threat to languages spoken by few people than to languages of large societies. Consequently, as diversity in language use world-wide has diminished, it has been augmented within some countries, namely in Iceland, but less or not at all in Poland.

Poland and Iceland, the nations, the languages, and digital use

Poland and Iceland are two European countries, the former an island in the north of the Atlantic Ocean, the latter an Eastern European country, surrounded by neighbouring countries. In Iceland, the number of inhabitants was in the year 2022 only 364.000 (Statistic Iceland n.d.). The small population has nonetheless grown steadily in the last decades, mostly because of new immigrants, the largest

group namely from Poland. In the year 2021 roughly 5% of the total population were first generation immigrants from Poland (Statistics Iceland n.d.). On the other hand, the number of people living in Poland was 39.857.000 in 2022 (Macrotrends 2023), and between 2010 and 2021 the number went down due to the birth and death rate, and migration. However, last year the trend went up, mainly because of an increasing number of immigrants, from Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Germany (Macrotrends 2023, Statista 2023).

Icelandic is the official language in Iceland, and it is the language that in ancient times was spoken in the Northern countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) (Hólmarsdóttir 2001). Unlike the inhabitants of the neighbouring countries, the Icelandic people have striven against the adoption of foreign words and have preserved the grammar to a large extent unchanged. Throughout the centuries and until this day, Icelandic has always been, and still is the language used in school and is still strong as regards published literature and media (Hólmarsdóttir 2001).

As regards digital use, Icelanders were already in 2016 among the top nations in the world in their access to the internet. That year, 98% of the Icelandic population were rated as active internet users, whereas in Poland the share was 67% (Kemp 2016). The number of households in Poland that have access to the internet has nonetheless increased in the last years, and in 2018 the share was 84% (Statistica n.d.).

In Iceland, the use of English has become abundant, as people of all ages use English every day (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018). For example, young Icelandic people spend several hours each day on the internet, predominantly visiting websites in English (Jóhannsdóttir 2018, Rannsóknir og greining 2016). Thus, young people use and learn English to a considerable extent outside the school setting, as they are motivated by the need to use English in their leisure time (Jóhannsdóttir 2018: 57). Because of the extensive use of English in Iceland, English can no longer be classified as a foreign language, as English has become an additional language to Icelandic, since “without it, it would be difficult to function in Iceland” (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018: 31). This is mainly the result of the small size of the Icelandic nation, and the fact that the supply of entertainment in Icelandic is poor in comparison to the ever-growing digital recreational material in the English language (Rögvaldsson et al. 2012). However, English is still taught at school as a foreign language, which has been criticized by researchers who have studied the use of English by Icelandic children outside school (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018, Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir 2018, Jóhannsdóttir 2018).

The Polish language is on the other hand better supported for digital technology (Rehm & Uszkoreit 2011). Most software packages are provided in Polish, and “it seems that Poles prefer to use their own language in everyday life” (META n.d). In the case of the Polish pupils, English is for them a foreign language, although it is first in the rank of foreign languages taught in primary schools. In 2015, more than 9 out of every 10 primary school children learnt English as their first foreign language (Eurostat 2017). It has been claimed that “the relative importance of English as a foreign language may be further magnified because pupils tend to receive more instruction in their first foreign language than they do for any subsequent languages they study” (Eurostat 2017).

Language use and language skills have a strong and reciprocal relationship, and proficiency in the school language is the fundamental influencing factor on academic achievement (Grøver et al. 2019). The extensive use of English among Icelandic youth may have a negative effect on their Icelandic language skills and thus their academic achievement. This threat is not yet evident among Polish youth, as Polish is still the language used both in leisure time and in school.

The educational performance of Icelandic and Polish learners can be compared by examining the results of PISA the last two decades.

Educational outcomes of pupils in Poland and in Iceland, basic educational statistics, and the national curricula

PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) is an international measurement administered every three years to 15-year-old learners (OECD 2019). The aim is to identify how well students, by the end of compulsory school education, are prepared to actively participate in society. PISA does not capture learners' speaking and writing skills. Nonetheless, reading literacy performance in Poland and Iceland gives some indication about the language skills in question (Lawrence et al. 2016). In 2015, the average reading score in Poland was 506 and in Iceland 482, the former above and the latter below the OECD average (493) (OECD 2016a). The average three-year trend by that year was up by two points in Poland but down by nine points in Iceland (OECD 2016b: 152). In 2018, the average reading score in Poland had gone up to 512, which was one of the highest scores among the participating countries, whereas in Iceland the mean score went down to 474, which was still below the average OECD score (485) (OECD 2018). In 2018, 85% of Polish students reached at least the basic level, whereas in Iceland the proportion was 74%, and 12% of the Polish learners achieved the two highest levels but the share in Iceland was only 7%.

Both countries devote less of the total instructional time to reading, writing, and literature in primary school than the OECD average (24%): Iceland 20% and Poland only 18%, which is the lowest of all OECD countries. In the OECD report it is stated that: "Matching resources with students' needs and making optimal use of time are central to education policy" (OECD 2017a: 335). Thus, it is more important to consider the quality of the instruction provided to children rather than the amount of time.

Another issue to consider is the student-teacher ratio, which is reported by the OECD for compulsory schools. In 2015, there were 19 Icelandic pupils per teacher and in Poland 18 pupils, thus the two countries are similar in this respect and lower than the OECD average (22). Although smaller class sizes should offer more opportunities for teachers to give better individualized support to students, the effects of this variable have proven to be mixed (OECD 2016a).

Finally, it is worth comparing the objectives of educating children at primary schools as stated in the Polish and Icelandic *Core Curriculum for General Education*, as regards speaking and writing activities. The development of Polish language skills, including the extension of the range of vocabulary, is regarded as one of the most essential tasks of teachers working at primary schools (Ministry of Education 2014: 2). During primary education, pupils are expected to increase their communication language skills, in the oral as well as in the written form (2014: 1). When the objectives of early school education are taken into consideration specifically, by the end of the third-grade pupils are expected to be capable of creating short texts and utterances (Ministry of Education 2014: 7). They should be able to participate in discussions and be aware of the means of proper communication in various situations (Ministry of Education 2014: 7).

In the Icelandic Core Curriculum, it is stated that in a democratic society, "it is of vital importance to be able to take part in discussions of various kinds. Those who have a good command of spoken language, enunciation and conversation are better equipped to take part in social discourse and to communicate their knowledge with ease." (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014: 98). Similarly, the objectives of developing writing skills are described as follows:

Society makes increasing demands on people's ability to write a variety of texts and to express themselves ... Those who have a good command of written language can communicate what they want to others. They are also likely to enjoy good quality and appreciate what others publish (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014: 99).

Thus, in the Icelandic Curriculum productive language skills play a significant role while vocabulary is hardly mentioned, the latter is in contrast to the high value of vocabulary stated in the Polish Curriculum.

The theoretical background to this case study between countries is based on the guidelines gained from research findings demonstrating an effective approach in teaching, speaking and writing to children. The principles of the complex systems theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012) will be considered when discussing potential factors that teachers experience as obstacles in the support that they give their learners in developing their productive language skills. In Iceland, the diversity of language use by young people is taken into consideration, their extensive English use in addition to Icelandic. The teachers were not directly asked about this as the researchers were attempting to find out, indirectly, if the dual language context might be one of the obstacles they claimed they experienced with their pupils.

First, the scholars put emphasis on the teachers' attitudes towards productive language proficiency in the school languages (Polish and Icelandic), and their answers were compared with the national curricula. Secondly, information was obtained about their teaching practices aimed at increasing these skills. Thirdly, questions were posed about obstacles experienced by the interviewed teachers in developing speaking and writing skills in the school settings.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two teachers of nine-year-old children in each country, one in a city (CT) and one in the countryside (CS). The schools were chosen as they were situated within one hour's driving distance from the researchers and the principals were willing and supportive with regard to the teachers' participation. The four teachers who consented to take part in the study had more than two years of teaching experience and conducted their lessons in the societal languages, which was a prior set criterion.

Participants and the school settings in the Polish and the Icelandic schools

The Polish teacher in the CT had completed MA studies in early school education and had been working in the field for 15 years. By contrast, the teacher in the CS had completed post-graduate studies in early school education at a teacher training college and had three years of experience in the field. Both the Icelandic teachers had completed three years' teaching education at the University of Iceland and the CT teacher had spent an extra year at a school of education in Denmark. Both teachers had extensive teaching experience, the CT teacher 17 years, and the other 20 years.

In Poland, the teachers worked in classes of 18 (CS) and 20 (CT) pupils whereas in the Icelandic class in the CT numbered 28 children and the class in the CS only nine children. In the Polish classes all children spoke Polish as their native language. In Iceland, one pupil in the CS and three pupils in the CT had another native language other than Icelandic.

In Poland and in Iceland, the interviewed teachers were class tutors who gave lessons in all major school subjects (not gymnastics and in Iceland not in handicraft, which is included in the primary school curriculum).

Data collection

All interviews were conducted in spring term 2017 and took about two hours each. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed (Brown et al. 2017).

Results

Findings cover the area of (1) teachers' objectives of teaching productive language skills to nine-year-old children (2) the manner of developing productive language skills in the classroom, and (3) obstacles encountered by the teachers in their attempts to develop pupils' productive language skills and the potential ways of overcoming them.

Teaching objectives

Regarding the objectives of developing productive language skills, both teachers in Poland claimed that this aspect is a crucial part of education, since it enables children to communicate. The CS teachers did not mention the role of vocabulary at all, whereas the CT teacher claimed that words need to be learnt for understanding but did not indicate productive use of words.

In Iceland, both teachers asserted that productive language skills are essential for educational success in all subjects and that language skills should already be developed at a young age, as a valuable means for children to achieve academic progress in general. The teachers emphasised the importance of giving children frequent opportunities to express themselves in class, in spoken and written form, so that they can practise making themselves understood, and that children should cooperate with each other in discussions. The CT teacher mentioned the importance of developing pupils' capacity to express their opinions. The same teacher did not mention vocabulary as regards productive language skills, whereas the CS teacher emphasised that she teaches her pupils vital words and encourages the children to use them.

Productive language skills in the classroom

Both the Polish teachers claimed that writing and speaking activities were practised in their classrooms. They said they taught writing explicitly; their pupils were educated on how to formulate short pieces of text and what parts they were supposed to include. The teachers said that they worked with their pupils on specific forms of writing, such as invitations or announcements. Both teachers claimed that they frequently encouraged their pupils to express their own opinions within the class setting. The interviewed educators in Poland focused on providing children with positive feedback and involved pupils in peer correction, mainly on spelling and grammar. The CT teacher said she approached her pupils individually and drew their attention to their mistakes to support their writing skills.

Both Icelandic teachers asserted that speaking and writing skills were exercised on a regular basis and often across subjects. In the CT school, writing was frequently in the form of informational text summaries. The CS teacher claimed that the pupils frequently composed stories and wrote on specific topics, and that they were encouraged to write creatively. In CT and CS writing activities were most often a part of project-based learning, such as the universe, an ecological lifestyle, etc. The CT teacher said that the children frequently worked in pairs or small groups, read about the chosen subject, and sought information from digital sources. Both teachers said they gave basic guidelines on how to structure the texts and provided sample sentences on how pupils could start each section. With the CT teacher children read and employed peer correction on their written works. Additionally, both interviewed Icelandic teachers said they corrected the pupils' writings, as regards text structure, grammar, and spelling errors, but they did not require the children to respond to the feedback and resubmit improved writings.

The CS teacher in Poland highlighted that cooperation existed between the teachers of the same age groups, whereas the CT teacher said that the teachers tended to work alone, and the linguistic aims determined by them were not discussed in any way.

The Icelandic teachers maintained that they worked in close co-operation with other class teachers for setting instructional aims, planning, and conducting the lessons. Additionally, they grouped the children across class boundaries in the various oral and writing activities.

Obstacles and potential solutions

Among the obstacles that both teachers in Poland referred to were pupils' shyness, laziness, or unwillingness to undertake activities, which demanded active language use, either in the spoken or the written form. The children found it particularly problematic to speak in front of the whole class, and it

was much easier for them to participate in discussions in smaller groups. The CT teacher drew attention to pupils' use of basic vocabulary to create simple sentences, which, in the teacher's opinion, were too simple for their age and the problems that some pupils had with mastering orthography and handwriting. She found it difficult to meet these children's needs, as other children in the class were more proficient in this respect. When the question about overcoming obstacles was addressed, the CT teacher claimed that smaller classes would be far more manageable and would make it easier to support the specific needs of individual children. The CS teacher said she paid special attention to motivating children through praising their efforts, and sometimes by giving small rewards, and creating a friendly, stress-free atmosphere in the classroom. Nonetheless, the CS teacher believed that nine-year-old pupils ought to write more, and she would like to devote more time to writing activities, but this was challenging because of all the other things that had to be done in class.

In Iceland, the CT teacher claimed that the high number of students in her class posed a problem because it was difficult to meet the needs of each child. She also claimed that many children were overprotected by their parents, and as a result they easily gave up when asked to accomplish demanding tasks. She emphasised a substantial level of stress in modern society - parents tended to work too much, and children had many extracurricular activities, such as sports and music classes. She remarked that her pupils got distracted easily and had difficulties in concentrating on their tasks. Thus, overprotection and an overload of activities appeared to have similar negative consequences on the children's willingness and ability to participate in school activities.

Interestingly, based on twenty years of teaching experience, the Icelandic CS teacher believed that children had become less creative, which was particularly evident in situations when pupils were asked to compose stories. In the teacher's opinion, this might be caused by the substantial amount of time pupils spent in front of computers. Yet the teacher highlighted that this was not applicable to children who lived on farms, because they were too busy helping their parents with agricultural work. Due to the considerable amount of time they spent with their parents and other adults in natural communicative settings, they were far more creative than their peers.

Both the Icelandic teachers claimed they needed more time for practising productive language skills in the classroom. This was particularly urgent for pupils with special educational needs, who tended to require more effort and attention than the others. Moreover, children with poor language proficiency frequently withdrew in-group work and class discussions. The teachers stated that they tried to meet the needs of these children by lowering their demands and having them work in smaller groups. Nonetheless, these children were in a way neglected, as they remained behind their peers both in Icelandic skills and in their performance in the various school subjects.

Both teachers in Iceland claimed that the level of proficiency in the Icelandic language was decreasing in the society in general, because of an increasing use of English at the expense of Icelandic. These teachers said that children had demonstrated difficulties in understanding many words that they were expected to know, and that knowledge of Icelandic vocabulary was in decline. In the teachers' opinion, this was especially true for those learners who spent a vast amount of time on the internet, and notably in English. For this reason, as the CS teacher asserted, they increase their English language skills to the detriment of their Icelandic proficiency. Yet, according to the CS teacher, this did not apply to the children who lived on farms. Their Icelandic language proficiency seemed more developed, giving them an advantage in terms of speaking and writing activities in the various subjects.

The CT teacher in Iceland stated that smaller class sizes would help overcome the main obstacles, however it was better to divide the pupils into groups in which children helped each other and cooperated. The teachers mentioned timid children who gradually gained more confidence in expressing themselves in small groups, and after some time they were more willing to speak in front of the whole class.

The interviewed Icelandic teachers claimed that pupils with a mother tongue other than Icelandic did not have major difficulties in Icelandic. In CS, the child with Swedish as a first language even outperformed others and across all subjects. Some of the bilingual children in CT however needed help and the teacher said she could provide them with adequate support.

Discussions

The aim of the study was to gain insight into Polish and Icelandic teachers' attitudes towards children's productive language skills in the societal languages, Polish and Icelandic, their teaching practices in fostering these skills, and to identify obstacles experienced. The findings will now be discussed, similarities and differences between the teachers in the two countries identified and, based on the theoretical background of the study, improvements will be suggested that can provide pupils with even more effective opportunities to develop their productive language skills in classroom activities. The diversity in language use by young Icelanders will be taken into consideration with reference to the answers of the Icelandic teachers.

On the basis of the statements given by the interviewed educators in Poland, teaching language to develop pupils' mental processes and academic performance (Vygotsky 1978) seems to be the least significant concern for them, as they did not mention the connection between these important aspects in individual lives. Such objectives are also absent from the Polish *Core Curriculum for General Education* (Ministry of Education 2014). Nonetheless, the interviewed Polish teachers believed that speaking and writing skills are fundamental for communication purposes, which complies with the before mentioned document (Ministry of Education 2014: 1). While building vocabulary is promoted in the Polish Curriculum as one of the most essential tasks of teachers, this aspect of language skills was totally absent in the Polish interviewees' answers.

In contrast, the Icelandic teachers emphasised the importance of vocabulary as fundamental for productive language skills, which they claimed were foundational for educational achievement. However, the educational role of vocabulary is totally absent in the Icelandic Curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014). The teachers' beliefs are nonetheless in line with the Curriculum in the sense that productive language skills are in their opinion fundamental for academic success in all fields and for communication purposes.

Both teachers in Poland asserted that they paid attention to supporting the development of pupils' productive language skills. While the teachers did not mention regular discussions or creative writings, they said they frequently encouraged the children to express their opinions. Discussions took place in whole class settings and in small groups. Writing activities in the Polish classrooms were, according to the teachers, done individually and in groups, and limited to short announcements or invitations. Both foci are in concordance with objectives presented in the Polish curriculum (Ministry of Education 2014).

The Icelandic teachers stated they included frequent and regular explicit writing instructions, and both gave their pupils opportunities to write stories. While the CS teacher highlighted that her pupils were encouraged to write creative stories, the CT teacher claimed that she frequently let her children write summaries of information they gathered from texts on the internet. Both teachers said that they used rich discussions to introduce an interesting topic and the children were then engaged in writing with reference to a specific writing strategy. It is indeed emphasized in the Icelandic curriculum that children should write different text genres.

Thus, based on the answers of the Icelandic and the Polish teachers, the former appeared to give their pupils more varied opportunities for discussions and writing activities, and when based on a special topic this included both discussions and writings. Discussions and writing activities about a topic that is interesting to children has proven to be highly successful in boosting language skills and, moreover, this approach has been effective in diminishing gaps between language proficiency among children, as those

with poor language skills have made even better progress than those of richer proficiency (De Smedt & Van Keer 2018, Gadd & Parr 2017, Lawrence et al. 2016). High quality instruction also includes effective guidance from the first steps throughout the entire process (De Smedt & Van Keer 2018, Lawrence et al. 2016), children are active in self-regulation and responsible for seeking support from peers and teachers, and children work in collaboration, inside and outside the school (Gadd & Parr 2017).

The Polish teachers and the CT Icelandic teacher claimed that they used corrections by peers and all four teachers asserted that they gave children feedback as regards spelling and grammar. While the Polish teachers emphasized the importance of a kind and warm attitude, none of the interviewed teachers mentioned that they provided children with the opportunity to improve their writings and resubmit a revised version (De Smedt & Van Keer 2018). Black and Wiliam (2001) have shown that learners at all ages benefit from precise feedback that is tailored to the pupil's needs in a wider sense than only grammar and spelling, then accordingly the learner makes improvements to his paper and submits again. For young children (Dix 2015), it is effective that children participate in the scaffolding and in the discussions that follow, that children are valued, and their specific needs are met throughout the entire writing process. Therefore, in the Polish and the Icelandic classes, regular and precise feedback can be applied in a more systematic and progressive way (Black & Wiliam 2001). The discussions that can occur between the teacher and the pupil throughout the process of writing and feedback can provide a magic space with flexible scaffolding instruction that is responsive to the child's learning in each aspect of the work (Dix 2015).

However, based on the theoretical background of the study, our findings give reason to suggest that productive language activities are more developed and effective in the classes of the Icelandic interviewed teachers as compared to those of the Polish teachers, at least as can be implied from the interviews. This is also in concordance with the objectives presented in the Icelandic curriculum in comparison to the Polish document. Children need time to take interesting topics into consideration, to search information, to discuss, and to write.

In addition, as lexical richness, i.e., vocabulary use, is closely connected with the quality of writings (Figueroa et al. 2018, Roessingh et al. 2013, Ólafsdóttir 2015) teachers should encourage learners to use a variety of words in their writings (Dobbs & Kearns 2016), as appears only to be practised by the Icelandic CS interviewee. By extension, this approach should be added to the Icelandic Curriculum – it is however present in the Polish document.

Furthermore, according to the interviews, cooperation appears to be practised to a greater extent by the Icelandic teachers compared to the Polish ones, and this was entirely absent in the Polish CT teacher's school, according to the interviewed teacher. Existing research suggests that teachers working together can lead to progress in developing effective teaching habits with positive results in their pupils' outcomes (Jang 2006, Lomos et al. 2011, Sigurdardottir 2007) and, as relevant to our study, in language skills and, in particular, literacy (Goddard et al. 2007).

The Polish and the Icelandic teachers, however, claimed that their main hindrance was the limited amount of time devoted to reading and writing activities at primary schools (OECD 2017a: 342). Indeed, the number of lessons devoted to teaching the societal language is lower in both countries than the OECD average, and Poland is at the bottom in this respect. Nonetheless, the quality of teaching practices, rather than the quantity of time, is of the utmost importance (OECD 2017a). Furthermore, discussions and writing activities are fundamental in all subjects (Grøver et al. 2019, Uccelli 2019).

Another important finding from the interviews is consistent with Iceland's position as a world leader in domestic internet use (Kemp 2016). Neither the Polish nor the Icelandic researcher asked directly about the influence of increased use of digital technology. Nonetheless, both the Icelandic teachers claimed that internet use was exerting a considerable negative impact on their pupils' creativity as well as their Icelandic language proficiency. Consistently, the Polish teachers claimed that their pupils used

words and sentences that were too simple for their age, but they did not link this to digital use. In fact, the Icelandic language is considered to be poorly prepared for digital technology (Rehm & Uszkoreit 2011), resulting in increased English language use by young Icelanders (Rögnvaldsson et al. 2012). The Polish language is better equipped in this respect, and based on the answers by the Polish teachers, their pupils may not be impacted by digital technology to the same extent. The fact that the Polish population is more than a hundred times larger than the Icelandic nation may also play a role in this respect. Most software material is available in Polish, and the Polish people appear to prefer to use their own language in daily life (META n.d.). There is an increasing diversity of language use in Iceland, as young people spend several hours each day on the internet, reading and using English, while Icelandic is still the societal language and the language of school. Using two languages may result in less Icelandic language skills among young people. Indeed, research findings indicate that children who divide their time between more than one language, develop less proficiency in each language than those who predominantly use one language (Oller et al. 2007, Ólafsdóttir et al. 2016). On the other hand, the Icelandic CS teacher claimed that children who lived on farms did not spend as much time on computers and they showed better Icelandic language skills, as well as creative proficiency, than their peers. Thus, it can be suggested that those children did not live in as diverse a language context in their daily lives, which might have given them an advantage as regards Icelandic language skills.

However, none of the four interviewed teachers mentioned the opportunities that computers can provide to school activities which may increase learners' opportunities to develop their productive language proficiency, i.e., to communicate with others in both oral and written form. No less important is the fact that learners have opportunities to develop literacy skills of the 21st century, the proficiency to integrate information across various texts, evaluate contrasts and disinformation, and debate about conflicting arguments, both in oral communications and in writing (Hemphill et al. 2019, OECD 2021: 20, Schleicher 2018). Indeed, computers offer multiple informational resources, demanding analytical and critical reading habits (OECD 2021). Only the Icelandic CT teacher claimed that she made use of technology when her pupils searched for information on the internet.

Both the Polish teachers and the Icelandic CT teacher expressed their difficulties with large class sizes. The teachers stated that they partially met this challenge by dividing their pupils into groups and claimed this approach to be effective in meeting individual needs, to some extent. In this respect it is important to bear in mind that class sizes in Iceland and Poland are in general smaller than in other OECD countries, and that this variable has not proved to be related to countries' performances on PISA (OECD 2016b).

The children in the classes of the interviewed teachers were nine years of age, that is the age at which pupils start the long-term process of using language for learning. Therefore, it often happens at this stage of learning that children with poor language skills begin to lag behind other students in learning gains (Chall & Jacobs 2003). All teachers of nine-year-old pupils should be cognizant of the risk facing children with limited language skills, demanding effective support. Though the Icelandic teachers expressed their concern as regards children with poorer Icelandic language skills, our findings suggest that the Polish and the Icelandic interviewed teachers need to be better informed about effective approaches in responding to the needs of all children, and this is of great importance as regards the pupils of foreign origin in the Icelandic classes, and Icelandic children living in a dual language context (Ólafsdóttir et al. 2016). Rich discussions and writing activities have proven to be effective in diminishing the educational gap between children, particularly with emphasis on academic words, so that academic words are understood and used in oral and written discourse (Lawrence et al. 2016).

The main challenge experienced by the Polish teachers was children's shyness, whereas according to the Icelandic teachers this factor appeared to be more of an exception, demanding individual support only to a few. The data obtained in this study does not shed light on possible reasons for this difference.

The researchers suggest that Icelandic and Polish cultures may differ, possibly in children's upbringing by their parents and in school - even already in kindergarten.

In this respect, and what can be put forward in the view of complex systems theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2012), is that the teachers in both Poland and Iceland were influenced by the cultural and social contexts in which they were teaching. In Iceland, an emerging factor with a possible negative impact on pupils and teachers is the increasing use of computers and consequently extensive use of the English language, resulting in lower proficiency in Icelandic, which can be considered as a societal influence. The diversity of language use in Iceland poses challenges to teachers and their pupils. Additionally, in the Icelandic CT teacher's experience, there appeared to be either stress in the society or overprotection by parents that had negative consequences on her Icelandic pupils. Here, the former can also be considered as a societal influencing factor and the latter domestic.

In Poland, the exact motivations for teachers' approach towards developing pupils' speaking and writing skills in the Polish language cannot be determined. One potential reason for differences could be divergent qualifications. In accordance with the OECD report (2016: 5) "qualifications are one of the strongest predictors of staff quality" and they help to demonstrate the amount of "specialised and practical training, (...) professional development" as well as the experience that a particular teacher has gained. However, it is not the only factor influencing "staff-child interactions" contributing to pupils' higher results, as "working conditions" play a vital role in this matter too (2016a: 5). Notably, the teacher qualification significantly differed in the case of the Polish teachers. Although the type of schools where they worked were quite similar, their location could influence the practices adopted by the teachers too. What is more, theoretically, actions taken by the teachers could be affected by their individual teaching preferences and approaches.

The Icelandic teachers, however, had identical educational backgrounds, and both had long teaching experience, which may explain similar attitudes towards the skills in focus. An important positive dimension is the awareness of the Icelandic interviewees towards the importance of productive language skills in Icelandic as fundamental for all academic fields. Referring to the findings of PISA, Polish learners have shown far better proficiency in reading literacy by the end of compulsory school than Icelandic peers (OECD 2016b, 2018). From this it is tempting to suggest that there are predominantly external conditions hindering language development in the Icelandic classes of the participating teachers as compared to the interviewed Polish instructors. While the former seemed to outperform the latter in their teaching practices, based on their answers, productive language activities provided to the pupils of all four teachers can still be improved (Lawrence et al. 2016).

All four interviewed teachers should be more conscious of the way literacy practices have changed with new technology. Children need to develop strong and up-to-date literacy skills, the proficiency to integrate information across diverse texts, evaluate contrasts and disinformation, and debate about conflicting arguments, both in oral communications and in writing. These are the key skills in the 21st century (Schleicher 2018, OECD 2021). The new opportunities modern technology offers should be embraced rather than striven against. The diversity of language use among young Icelanders should not be at the cost of their Icelandic language skills, considering that in school activities the language use is first and foremost Icelandic, with academic language playing a significant role (Uccelli 2019). Academic language extends far from language exposure and language use outside the school settings (Uccelli 2019). Instead of viewing digital use as a threat to language skills of children, as was evident in the Icelandic teachers' attitudes, the opportunities these offer have to be highlighted and practised in Poland and in Iceland. Effective instruction in language and literacy can be achieved when learners are engaged and when the topic is relevant and interesting to them (Gadd and Parr 2017, Lawrence et al. 2016). In school activities, students learn language, they learn through language, and they learn about the language (Pearson 2019, Snow 2019). Productive language skills, the ability to use the language of

school, in discussions and in writing, are the ultimate language skills, and these should be practised with the use of the internet, rather than instead of it, and with active participation of each and every child. An important responsibility of educational systems is to provide equitable learning opportunities for all, so that everyone will master language proficiency that allows for the fulfilment of their needs and ambitions in life: educational, personal, social, and professional (OECD 2019). Rich discussions and writing activities have proven to be effective in diminishing the educational gap between children, particularly with emphasis on academic words, so that academic words are not only understood, but most importantly also used by learners in oral and written discourse (Lawrence et al. 2016).

These findings have contributed to the professional development of the authors, as they give an indication of how the education of student teachers can be improved and developed in Poland and Iceland.

Limitations

This study is based on interviews with two teachers in Poland and two teachers in Iceland, and it does not include classroom observations. Thus findings represent rather the interviewed teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and what they maintain they do in class with their nine-year old pupils. The aim of the study is therefore not to give reliable information about teaching practices in both countries, on the contrary it is the wish of the authors that findings can be used to reflect on teaching and learning practices and with reference to research findings that have demonstrated what kind of speaking and writing activities can be most effective. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted some years before the publication of this article, therefore it would be feasible to extend this study with a survey answered by a large number of teachers in both countries. This would give the opportunity to make significant comparisons between and within each of the two countries.

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