Icelandic teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards grammar

Abstract
There has been a long-standing debate in Iceland on how the teaching of Icelandic language and its grammar should be approached; how it should be taught, what should be included in it and whether or not grammar should be taught as a separate entity. This article aims to provide additional scientific foundation for this discussion by shedding light on teachers’ and students’ views of these matters. The data used comes from a larger research project on the current standing of Icelandic in Icelandic compulsory and upper secondary schools and consists of interviews with a total of 56 students and 19 teachers of Icelandic in 9 compulsory and 5 upper secondary schools in three different parts of Iceland. The results are characterised by contrasts and conflicts as there seems to be little consensus amongst both teachers and students about what grammar consists of or how it links to other aspects of Icelandic as a school subject, and both groups harbour serious doubts about its general usefulness, even though they appear to agree that it is a good tool for determining what is right and what is wrong in language. These results are a cause for concern, and they call for introspection and reflection amongst teachers of Icelandic in order to establish a clearer consensus on how grammar should be approached in schools. At the same time, the results add further nuance to the ongoing research on the application of and attitudes towards grammar in European and Nordic school contexts.

Keywords: Icelandic grammar, grammar teaching, language use, language attitudes, correctness, educational linguistics

Isländska lärares och elevers attityder till grammatik

Sammanfattning
Det har länge debatterats i Island hur man bör nära sig undervisningen av det isländska språket och dess grammatik; hur undervisningen ska ske, vad som bör ingå i ämnet och huruvida det ska undervisas specifikt i grammatik. Denna artikel ämnar lägga en vetenskaplig grund för denna debatt genom att belysa lärares och elevers synpunkter på ämnet. Datan som används kommer från ett större forskningsprojekt om isländskans nuvarande situation som skolämne på grundskole- och gymnasienivå och består av intervjuer med sammanlagt 56 elever och 19 lärare i isländska i 9 grundskolor och 5
Gymnasieskolor i tre olika delar av Island. Resultaten kännetecknas av kontraster och konflikter då det verkar råda en allmän oenighet bland lärare så väl som studenter om vad grammatik består av och om dess kopplingar till andra delar av skolämnet isländska. Båda grupper uttrycker även stort tvivel om grammatikens användbarhet även om de är överens om att den kommer till nyttja för att avgöra vad som är rätt och vad som är fel i språkliga sammanhang. Dessa resultat är något oroande och ger lärare anledning till självbetraktelse och reflektion för att etablera en tydligare utgångspunkt för hur de kan närma sig undervisning av grammatik i isländska skolor. Samtidigt tillför resultaten ett ytterligare perspektiv till den forskning som nu drivs om tillämpningen av och attityder till grammatik inom europeiska och nordiska skolor.

Nyckelord: isländsk grammatik, grammatikundervisning, språkbruk, attityder till grammatik, språkriktighet, språkdidaktik

Introduction

Icelandic is a central subject in both compulsory and upper secondary schools in Iceland, in much the same way as Danish is central in Danish schools, Swedish in Swedish schools and so on. The subject can also be said to be multi-faceted as it includes not only grammar, but also literature, writing, reading, verbal delivery, listening and observing, as is reflected by the national curricula for both these school levels (Ministry of education, science and culture, 2014, 2012). This article focuses on the first of these sub-themes, that is, grammar and the role of grammatical metalanguage in first language (L1) learning and teaching, as this is described in the national curricula. There, the main focus is on making students knowledgeable about their mother tongue, improving their language use and increasing their interest in the language, together with an emphasis on equipping students with the analytical concepts and tools necessary for metalinguistic instruction and discussions. Consequently, our study contributes to the ongoing research on the application of and attitudes towards grammar in European and Nordic school contexts (see Myhill et al., 2012; Nygård & Brøseth, 2021; and references there).

The aim of the research presented here is to shed light on the status of grammar in Icelandic compulsory and upper secondary schools by analysing interviews with 14 groups of students (4 students per interview) and 19 individual teachers of Icelandic. The overarching research questions to be answered are the following:

RQ1: What are teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards Icelandic school grammar and what do they think of the utility of teaching and studying this grammar?
RQ2: Which recurrent themes, patterns, paradoxes and conflicts appear in the interviewees’ discourse about the concept of grammar, its usefulness/uselessness and their expectations regarding the learning outcome?

In combination, these questions concern the teachers’ attitudes towards language proficiency, their evaluation of the usefulness of grammar, and how they approach
it in their teaching. They also regard students’ understanding of what it means to be proficient in Icelandic, their interpretation of the term grammar, and to what extent they think it is useful to study grammar.

The article is organised as follows. After a brief literature review, the methods used in the study are described in more detail, after which the main findings, as they appear in interviews with both students and teachers, are presented. The article then concludes with a discussion of the findings and some final remarks. The most central themes observed in the teachers’ discourse was the conflict between the possible usefulness and uselessness of traditional grammar teaching. As for the students, a central theme turned out to be “correct” language use and the discrepancy that the students experience between, on the one hand, what they believe they need to learn and should be learning at school, and, on the other, what they are actually learning there.

Literature review

As has been mentioned, the chief objective of grammar teaching, according to the Icelandic National Curriculum Guides for both compulsory and upper secondary school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, 2012), is to improve students’ language use and make them conversant on the subject of language and language use. Regarding the implementation of the curriculum, a certain development may be discerned where grammar is transferred from mainly being a supportive tool in general reading and writing instruction during the first years of compulsory school towards becoming a subject in its own right in the later school years, as well as at upper secondary level. This is to a significant extent reflected in the teaching methods applied. In the early stages, grammar is not specifically taught, but as the students move on through the school it becomes a more specific element with traditional blackboard presentations and follow-up exercises for the students (Angantýsson et al., 2018).

As in many other countries (see Myhill et al., 2012, and references there), there has been a long-standing debate in Iceland, particularly amongst teachers, on how the teaching of grammar should be approached (for an overview, see Angantýsson, 2014). The questions addressed in this debate primarily concern what should be included in the teaching of Icelandic grammar, how it should be taught, and whether or not grammar should be taught specifically at all. Linguists have also taken part and pointed out that both teaching materials and the general teaching approach are outdated and have a tendency to get stuck in a superficial discussion of the correct and incorrect use of Icelandic (see e.g., Blöndal, 2001; Óladóttir, 2011).

However, little research has been carried out on Icelandic school grammar and its application. The main contribution in recent years comes from two doctoral theses, on the one hand Sverrisdóttir’s (2014) examination of the execution of the
national curricula in schools and classrooms and, on the other, Óladóttir’s (2017) study of teachers’ and students’ views and attitudes towards school grammar as it appears in the last grades of compulsory schools. These doctoral studies reflect some of the main issues that have been touched upon in international research on the teaching of grammar, namely, on the one hand students’ and teachers’ views regarding grammar and its teaching, and, on the other, the connection between teachers, attitudes towards the teaching of grammar and what actually takes place in the classroom (see Song, 2015, for an overview). Interestingly, Óladóttir’s (2017) study indicates that Icelandic compulsory and upper secondary students commonly define grammar as speaking and writing correctly, which is consistent with the results from Nygård and Broseth’s (2021) survey administered to teacher students in Norway.

In the following discussion, we specifically keep an eye on the theories of Gee (2004) and Bourdieu (1977, 2008) regarding how some students enter their school with a certain cultural capital and therefore fare better than other students in both learning and using the formal language that is used and taught in schools (see also Delpit, 2001). This look into the students’ views is particularly interesting in light of recent signs that, due to increased globalisation, rapid technological advances and an ever-increasing use of English in most aspects of modern life in Iceland, the status of the Icelandic language as quite central to the national identity may not be as undisputed as it used to be (see e.g., Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010; Sigurjónsdóttir & Rógnvaldsson, 2019). At the same time, the popularity of Icelandic as a school subject has dwindled while that of English is on the rise (Sigþórsson et al., 2014), and there are indications that Icelandic children and teenagers view studying Icelandic as a “necessary evil” for schoolwork and future domestic employment opportunities, while English is tied to entertainment, travelling and exciting employment opportunities abroad (Einarsdóttir, 2019; Stefánsdóttir, 2018).

Finally, it should be kept in mind that there have been growing concerns about teacher education in Iceland, especially with respect to the (alleged lack of) instruction and training in Icelandic as a subject. Thus, the Icelandic language council has repeatedly reported on the necessity for greater emphasis on Icelandic as a subject in the university curriculum for teacher education (Íslensk málnefnd, 2009, 2017, 2021). Based on extensive research on Icelandic as a school subject, Jónsson et al. (2018, p. 249) also conclude that the challenges of teachers of Icelandic are too demanding with respect to their limited educational background. It has also been pointed out that students in Icelandic compulsory and upper secondary schools receive considerably less amount of L1 instruction than their peers in Denmark and Norway (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2008, p. 26).
Methodological considerations

The results that are presented and discussed here come from a larger research project that looked into the current standing of Icelandic as a school subject in both compulsory and upper secondary schools. For the purpose of this project, we selected nine compulsory schools and five upper secondary schools for participation, by means of a stratified random sample. For practical purposes, and to ensure that schools of different types (like size and organisation) were examined in the study, we decided to include a total of eight schools from the greater Reykjavík area, which contains about two thirds of the Icelandic population, while the remaining six should be in two other and more sparsely populated parts of the country. These were Norðurland in the northern part and Austurland in the eastern part. Within each compulsory school, we collected data from years 3, 6 and 9, and in upper secondary schools years 1 and 3 were included. We did this to ensure both that the collection of data stayed within reasonable limits and that we gained insight into all relevant age groups on each school level.

In accordance with Icelandic law, we reported the study to the Icelandic Data Protection Authority. Following this, we sent a letter to the principal of each school asking for participation and upon acceptance they sent a standardised information letter to parents. Where the participation of minors was required for interview purposes, we asked parents or custodians for their written consent. We visited each school in order to collect data and each visit was preceded by a preparatory meeting between one or two representatives from the research group and the principal or other administrators from the school in question on each occasion. At these meetings, the data collection process was explained and participants for interviews selected.

In each school that was visited, we conducted interviews with students and teachers, using interview guides with open-ended questions, based on a number of themes regarding the interviewees’ views of and attitudes towards different aspects of Icelandic as a school subject and a language of teaching. As regards students, they were interviewed in groups of four, from years 6 or 9 in each of the nine compulsory schools and years 1 and 3 in each of the five upper secondary schools. Each group consisted of two girls and two boys. Principals and teachers were consulted to ensure a certain level of diversity regarding school performance. Each interview with the student groups lasted around 30 minutes. The questions asked in the part of the interviews that dealt with grammar touched upon issues such as what came to the students’ minds when they heard the concept ‘grammar’, what it meant to be good at grammar and how important it is to be good at it, and whether or not they felt they could use their own knowledge of grammar to monitor their language use.

When it comes to teachers, we emphasised individual interviews with teachers of Icelandic, normally teachers who had been observed for one schoolday. The interviews with the teachers of Icelandic lasted 50–60 minutes. The questions that
the teachers were asked about grammar revolved around issues such as which teaching methods they felt were the most useful, what they thought about the teaching materials used, and the importance of grammar, both as a separate entity and in relation to other parts of Icelandic as a school subject. The results reported on here include interviews with 14 teachers of Icelandic in compulsory schools and a further 5 in upper secondary schools. The total number of interviews with students and teachers was 33; 23 in compulsory schools and 10 in upper secondary schools.

In designing and administering the interviews, we used the methods of historical discourse analysis, as described by Jóhannesson (2006, 2010). This approach was deemed to be suitable for this study as it consists of the four main steps of:

a) choosing the subject matter and perspective (i.e., the teaching of Icelandic grammar from the perspective of both teachers and students),
b) finding material that sheds light on the subject (i.e., qualitative interviews with teachers and students, as such interviews are likely to reveal the informants’ views through their relatively informal context),
c) analysing the data,
d) looking for patterns, paradoxes and conflicts in the discourse (i.e., the usefulness/uselessness of teaching grammar, the links, or lack thereof, of grammar to other parts of Icelandic as a school subject, the general understanding of the grammar concept etc.).

All interviews were conducted under similar circumstances. Thus, individual interviews with teachers took place in a private office or a meeting room and interviews with students were conducted in a classroom or a meeting room where peace and quiet could be ensured. We recorded interviews and transcribed them verbatim, including pauses, repetitions, unfinished sentences etc., in accordance with standard procedure in qualitative research (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). They were then indexed with the aid of the programme Qualitative Data Analysis Miner, based on the methods described by Charmaz (2003). Thus, we used initial coding to organise the data and get an overview of its content and then used focused coding to identify themes in the interviewees’ discourse, based on the patterns, recurrent themes, paradoxes and contrasts that emerged. These themes are discussed and explained in greater detail in the results section below. For the purposes of this article, the authors translated relevant samples from the interviews from Icelandic to English.

Results

The presentation of the results is divided into two main parts. First, we present the views of teachers of Icelandic in both compulsory and upper secondary schools, and this is followed by a section where the views of students from both school levels come to the fore.
Teachers
A central part of the interviews with the teachers that participated in this study concerned their thoughts and beliefs regarding Icelandic school grammar, and its purpose and teaching. Here, four main themes emerged.

**Theme 1 – Contradictory views**
The first theme primarily appeared when the teachers were asked how important it was to be proficient in Icelandic grammar and what would be included in this. The research group was somewhat surprised to see how unclear the teachers’ views were in this regard. Almost all of them agreed that grammar is an important part of Icelandic language and that a high level of proficiency is desirable, but when they were asked to elaborate on this they tended to quickly stray away from any kind of holistic view. Instead, they generally focused on a handful of specific grammatical features, primarily various kinds of grammatical errors, that they believed could be rectified by means of increasing students’ proficiency. In this regard, the so-called “þágufallssýki” (“dative sickness”), a tendency to use dative case rather than the standard accusative for the subjects of a set of so-called impersonal verbs, was most frequently mentioned, but this “sickness” has for decades been a pet peeve for Icelandic language purists (Friðriksson, 2008). Other similar examples include one teacher’s annoyance at people using “fæturnar” rather than the standard “fæturna” (comparable to people using “feets” rather than “feet” in English) and another one only related the importance of grammar to whether or not adverbs are a significant part of the language.

There were, however, exceptions to this general pattern. For example, a few teachers saw a clear connection between grammar and language use, as can be seen from the following comment made by one of the compulsory school teachers:

He [who is proficient in Icelandic] is someone who has a varied vocabulary in the first place and can express his thoughts without spluttering that much, but of course someone who’s good in Icelandic, he has read a lot in Icelandic and he knows a lot about the structure of the language, its grammar and all that and he can make use of this, for some other purpose than just analysing single words down to the finest detail, is useful somehow to improve his language use and ehh … yeah, can write and do everything quite well that has got anything to do with Icelandic.

Another teacher broadened the perspective even further and linked the importance of Icelandic and its grammar to Icelandic society as a whole, as he believed that a sound knowledge of Icelandic is needed if one wants to understand Icelandic history and society.

**Theme 2 – Usefulness / uselessness of grammar**
The second theme that appeared in the teachers’ views stems from the perceived conflict between, on the one hand, the usefulness of grammar and, on the other, its uselessness. As we will see later, this same theme emerged amongst the students, but as to the teachers, their doubts mainly revolved around the analytical
work that has traditionally been a central aspect of the teaching of Icelandic grammar. Many of them harboured doubts about how useful this analytical approach is for improving students’ language use, which is the main purpose of teaching grammar according to the national curriculum. This conflict is exemplified by the words of one of the compulsory school teachers, who first said “but I don’t see much purpose … in using a lot of time to teach this analytical grammar, by which I mean classification,” but then went on to say:

But I still feel that they need to have some foundation … For example, I like and want everyone to learn about the principal parts of verbs … because then, you know, they’ll learn the inflection … and get a feeling for this … so I kind of split this up; what matters and what doesn’t matter … and I think it’s good for me to be proficient in grammar but still, if I had to choose, I would surely prefer to have read more and know more about literature.

Here, it is quite evident how the teacher fluctuates from one side to the other regarding what should be taught when it comes to grammar and even regarding the general importance of grammar, in relation to other parts of Icelandic as a school subject. Other teachers expressed similar views, and no sooner had they said that grammar is very important than they mentioned that it is also the part of Icelandic that they believed deserves less attention in school, in particular the detailed analytical work that it often consists of.

It is not entirely clear from the interviews where this conflict comes from, but one possible hint can be discerned from the following words of one of the compulsory school teachers:

It makes me quite sad when … something is included, such as in the national exams, some nasty questions like I’ve been, I was using the national exam from last year, direct preposition or something like that, that is just chicken-shit.

As Sigþórsson’s (2008) research indicated, national exams strongly affected and, in many ways, dictated the teaching of Icelandic for several years, even though changes in recent years have diminished their importance and thereby their direct effects. The grammar part of these tests primarily consisted of questions that were based on analytical work and classification, rather than on language use in any direct sense. It seems reasonable to assume that this emphasis, together with the importance of the national exams, that were the key to upper secondary education, shaped teachers’ standpoint in such a way that they found it necessary to focus on analytical work even though they had strong doubts about the usefulness of such an approach.

Theme 3 – Links to other aspects of Icelandic
Regardless of the teachers’ doubts regarding the usefulness of grammar, there was a consensus among them in the third theme that emerged in the interviews, that grammar and the teaching of it is strongly linked to other aspects of Icelandic. Thus, one compulsory school teacher pointed out that:
We’ve been practising, this winter, the past tense of a number of words such as to sail [sigla] and to play chess [tefla; translated with two words]. If you can’t explain it grammatically, they always spell it incorrectly … Just, why do you write it like this? Well, the stem is here … So, it’s good, as a teacher, to be able to use these grammar concepts as an argument for how to spell words correctly … So, in that sense grammatical analysis is an aid for good language use.

As can be gleaned from this, the teacher in question saw links between grammar, on the one hand, and both spelling and language use, on the other. This appears to be the strongest link, judging by the number of teachers who mentioned it, but other aspects of Icelandic as a school subject were also discussed. Thus, one upper secondary school teacher mentioned that some knowledge of syntax, and the information it provides on word order and sentence structure, is helpful when it comes to analysing poetry, and one of the compulsory school teachers believed that grammar comes in handy not only when working on writing and literature assignments, but also “simply in life … it is a support for them in using language correctly”. It should be noted, however, that even though most of the teachers saw connections of this kind from one aspect of Icelandic to the other, these connections were not always developed any further. For example, some of the teachers appeared to believe that using literary texts for some minor grammatical analysis, or using material from grammar lessons in teaching spelling, automatically creates these connections.

In the interviews with the teachers of Icelandic, it also became evident that Icelandic grammar and the teaching of it can be linked directly to the teaching of other languages. This is to say that many of them believed a certain level of proficiency in Icelandic grammar to be a requirement for obtaining satisfactory results when learning foreign languages. This is neatly exemplified by one of the upper secondary school teachers who said that “what they don’t know in Icelandic grammar isn’t easily taught in a foreign language”, and another teacher, who teaches both Icelandic and German, mentioned that “I can babble all I want about German personal pronouns but it’s completely useless if they don’t know the concept.” Here, however, a glimpse can be caught of the teachers’ main concern regarding the links between Icelandic, including its grammar, and other languages, that is that not all students are able to transfer their knowledge of Icelandic to other languages.

**Theme 4 – Sociocultural background**

The fourth and final theme can be said to concern the source of the beliefs of the teachers of Icelandic as they were all asked about their linguistic upbringing. Here, quite a clear pattern emerged and their upbringing, as they described it, can be characterised as having been quite conservative and strict with regard to language. Thus, most of them claimed to have been corrected whenever they happened to say something that was not regarded as proper Icelandic. Interestingly enough, the teachers who remembered any specific examples in this context
all mentioned the previously mentioned “dative sickness”, which appears to have been a particular nuisance in the eyes of those who were responsible for the teachers’ linguistic upbringing. As for who these responsible parties were, they appear in most cases to have been close family members, like parents or grandparents, who shaped the teachers’ linguistic views and attitudes at an early stage. The effects of this upbringing seem to have been particularly strong when the entire family shared the responsibility, as can be seen in the following words from one of the compulsory school teachers:

Well, I grew up with my grandfather and grandmother, dad’s siblings and then my parents and my siblings and my grandmother’s brothers were always visiting, so my grandmother would sit on my bed and read me poems and stories and, well, the language used in my home was simply beautiful Icelandic.

Some of the teachers also mentioned that they had good teachers of Icelandic when they were at school, and they emphasised the use of proper Icelandic and thus became strong role models. Certain environmental factors are also noteworthy as four teachers traced their linguistic stance to having been raised in the countryside, where they believe proper Icelandic to have been held in high esteem. Finally, reading and books seem to have been an integral part of the teachers’ upbringing. This is to say that they all claimed to have been raised in homes where books were highly valued, and they spent much of their spare time reading. Only a few of them mentioned which books they read; most let it suffice to say they were introduced to “good books”, but those who did mention specific books appeared to have what can be called a classical outlook, as they grew up on a diet of Icelandic Sagas and Halldór Laxness, the Icelandic Nobel laureate. All in all, these different strands combine to provide the teachers with a strong foundation for their views on language and grammar.

Students

We then turn to the students who participated in this study, and their views regarding Icelandic and grammar in particular. As was the case with teachers, four main themes emerged in the interviews with the students.

**Theme 1 – Right and wrong**
The first theme, which was also the most prominent one, was formed on the basis of the students’ repeated reactions to questions regarding what they thought of when they heard the concept ‘grammar’, and what it meant to be proficient in this aspect of Icelandic. Here, it quickly became evident that the students’ main concern was questions of right and wrong in terms of language. This is exemplified by this short excerpt from an interview with students from year 9, which shows
their reaction to the concept of Icelandic grammar (R stands for Researcher and S for Student):

S1: *Málfinnur* [a short book on Icelandic grammar that is widely used in Icelandic schools]
S2: God yes
S3: The grammar books and my grandmothers
...
R: You mentioned your grandmother, why do you make a connection between her and grammar?
S3: Because she corrects my grammar

Judging by these students’ contribution, grammar is mainly useful as a “correction tool” and there is also a hint, confirmed by students’ comments in other interviews, that prescriptive grammar schoolbooks are often the foundation on which these corrections rest. Similar “right/wrong-views” were expressed in another interview with students from year 9:

S1: “Mér langar í” – I’m always corrected about that
S2: My dad never says anything, he doesn’t comment at all
S3: My dad always says something if I say something wrong
S4: There are three girls who are always correcting me and I’m always like whatever

Interestingly, the phrase given by Student 1 above (“Mér langar í”, rather than the standard “Mig langar í”) is an example of the so-called “dative sickness” which appeared to give many of the teachers a cause for concern, as we saw above. However, the main point here is that the students were quite preoccupied with right or wrong language and the corrections they received from people around them, and this extended into their replies to questions about what is included in being good at grammar, as was the case with these upper secondary school students:

S1: Just using, you know, language correctly, yeah
S2: Yeah, have a good vocabulary, isn’t that what it’s about?
S1: Yeah
S2: I think so
R: Do you think it’s important, I hear that you frequently mention that grammar is speaking correctly?
S2: Yeah
R: You mean, that’s important?
S2: Yes, that’s very important
S3: It’s so uncomfortable listening to someone who’s always...
S1: Yeah
S3: … saying something incorrect
S2: Yeah and …
S3: … and in the wrong order and like that
S2: … and then there would always be more and more people talking like that and in the end, it would just be ruined, or develop like this
S1: Yeah, everyone would start talking like that
Here, the students worry about the development of Icelandic if it is not used correctly and another group of upper secondary school students mentioned other negative consequences, such as how difficult it is to take someone seriously who talks “incorrectly”. According to these students, sloppy grammar might even make them less attractive in the eyes of the opposite sex.

**Theme 2 – Usefulness / uselessness of grammar**

The second main theme in the interviews with the students is essentially the same as the second theme in the interviews with the teachers, namely, doubts about the usefulness of grammar. As we have just seen, the students found grammar to be a useful tool for determining what is right and what is wrong in the Icelandic language, but at the same time, concepts relating to grammar were what they mentioned most frequently when they were asked about which parts of their studies of Icelandic as a whole they found the least useful. This can be seen in the following reaction from a student in year 9: “Well, I’ve asked my parents: Do you know, for example what a subject is … in a sentence? They don’t know this, but they still seem to live a pretty good life.” Thus, regardless of what linguists and teachers of Icelandic may think, it does not seem to be necessary to know the concept “subject” to ensure a decent quality of life, and other grammar concepts were mentioned in a similar context in the following excerpt from an interview with a group of students in year 9:

S1: Case inflections
S2: The word classes … and verbs and just everything
S3: My dad doesn’t know any of this about subject, object … And still, he has to translate into Icelandic and English from time to time
S1: There’s no need to make things more complicated
S3: Word classes
S2: I don’t understand why we have to know all the word classes
S3: Like the grammar rules, you know, inflecting for case and all that

Here, it is particularly noteworthy how negative the students seemed to be towards learning about word classes, and this pattern is repeated in some of the other student interviews. It is also evident that the students did not quite see the purpose of learning grammar, at least not with the approach that seemed to be used in their schools, and one student turned this into a rather pointed question:

S1: I come to think of all kinds of rules and stuff like that that we have to learn, and I don’t see any purpose in that, and I would like to get an explanation of why we have to learn this and no one that I ask this knows why we are learning this stuff
R: No
S2: Whether it’s adults or kids
This is quite a reasonable question that seems not to have been addressed to any extent in the students’ schoolwork.

**Theme 3 – Expectations and reality**
The third theme that emerged in the students’ responses is directly linked to the second one as it relates to a certain discrepancy that the students experienced between, on the one hand, what they believed they needed to learn and should have been learning at school, and, on the other, what they actually were learning there. Thus, most of the students thought that within Icelandic as a school subject emphasis should be placed on enhancing their literacy and writing skills and felt that too much time was spent on grammar, the usefulness of which they questioned. The following two examples show this quite clearly, but they consist of, first (a), an excerpt from an interview with students from year 9 who complained about the strong emphasis on grammar, and second (b), of one student’s thoughts about what he thought should be the main concern of the teaching of Icelandic in schools:

(a) S1: Word classes  
S2: I don’t understand this insistence on us learning all the word classes  
S3: Exactly  
R: No, yeah, and is much of your time spent on this, perhaps?  
S2: Yeah, kind of  
S1: Yes  
S4: We hardly do anything else these days, you see

(b) I think that spelling and, you know, I would like to learn more about or do more essays and stuff like that, because I know that we’ll be doing a lot more of that in the future

It should be pointed out that the student in example (b) above was in year 9 and the emphasis that he saw as desirable is quite typical for his age peers. On the other hand, the upper secondary school students often called for more teaching of grammar at their level as they felt that this would provide them with the necessary foundation for all the written work that was required of them. Thus, these two age groups contradict each other to a certain extent. The results are interesting in light of Myhill and Newman’s (2016) research on how writers in the upper primary and secondary phase of schooling develop metalinguistic understanding about writing.

**Theme 4 – School learning versus cultural learning outside the classroom**
The last theme in the interviews with the students consists of the contrast between what the students learn in school and the cultural capital they gain elsewhere, especially at home, through for example, the reading habits they have grown up with and the linguistic instructions that they have been provided with. This is to say that at times it appears that the school rewards students for a certain knowledge or skills that they gain outside of the classroom but, so to speak, bring with
them to school in their school bags. The following excerpt from one of the interviews, where students from year 9 replied to a question about the level of their grammatical knowledge, is the clearest example of this:

R: But what do you think you know, if you just think about, like, the traditional grammar concepts that you mentioned earlier?
S1: I’m really good at concepts and stuff, but then there’s spelling and then it’s just eeeeee...
R: What about you, boys?
S2: I really understand whatever I’m learning, it’s just, I’m, it doesn’t take me long to grasp things when I’m studying
S3: As you can see, he’s like the mastermind in our class
S4: Yeah, he’s like, quite useful to have him on one’s team in quizzes and stuff like that and
R: Yeah, I see, I see
S2: It’s just because I have read
R: Yes, but do you then think it matters how you talk at school?
S1: Yes
S3: Yes
S2: Mmm, yes
S4: Yes, you shouldn’t hurt other people with your words
R: Mmm, but what about, does it matter whether you talk properly or something like that?
S1: Yeah, you get a higher mark in Icelandic if you talk properly

What should be specifically noted here is what the student marked as S2 above said about having read. With these words he was referring to what he read at home, on his own initiative, and that the knowledge this provided him with was quite useful at school even though it was not brought to him there. To this the final answer of the student S1 to the researcher’s question on whether it matters how one talks at school should be added. When this student replied that one gets a higher mark in Icelandic if one talks properly, she was referring more to the language she brought with her to school from her home than to the language that she was taught at school.

Discussion

The results of this study are in many ways characterised by contrasts and conflicts rather than a clear unanimity. Thus, while teachers generally seem to believe that grammar is important, they are not as sure wherein this importance lies, and there can hardly be said to be any consensus amongst them as to what exactly grammar is (see also Nygård & Brøseth, 2021) or how it is linked to other aspects of Icelandic as a school subject. Furthermore, they express serious doubts about the usefulness of grammar (see also Myhill et al., 2012), especially the analytical work on which it is frequently based, even though they believe grammar skills to be transferable to other parts of Icelandic usage and see clear links between the
teaching of grammar and that of foreign languages. Actually, it is only when it comes to the teachers’ background that a fairly uniform picture can be seen but it seems that teachers of Icelandic have generally had a fairly strict and conservative linguistic upbringing, based on the corrections of parents and other family members, and a diet of classical Icelandic literature.

The picture is equally contrastive when it comes to the students. They express much the same doubts as the teachers regarding the usefulness of grammar; while they find it to be a useful tool for determining what is right and what is wrong language (cf. also Nygård & Broseth, 2021) they do not see any need for delving too deeply into grammatical concepts, which they believe takes up too much of their time in Icelandic lessons, and would rather focus on strengthening their reading and writing skills. It does not seem, however, that they make any clear connection between grammar, on the one hand, and reading and writing, on the other, or see how the former can support the latter. Overall, the image of Icelandic in the eyes of the students is quite striking and a cause for concern. Taken to its extreme, it could be argued that Icelandic students see their language, and grammar in particular, as a tool for speaking “correctly” rather than for saying something sensible. In other words, they don’t use it as their medium of choice to express their thoughts, emotions, beliefs etc. as much as they use it simply to obey the rules they believe it to be governed by. This could maybe be likened to going for a drive and driving aimlessly around only to follow the traffic rules, signs etc. rather than with the purpose of reaching a particular destination with the aid of these rules. This standpoint is particulary worrying in light of the signs found in previous research of the dwindling popularity of Icelandic as a school subject (Sigþórsson et al., 2014) and of students regarding it as a necessary evil, useful primarily for schoolwork and employment, while English is linked to the more joyful parts of life (Einarsdóttir, 2019; Stefánsdóttir, 2018).

That the message to be gleaned from these results is quite mixed does, however, not necessarily come as much of a surprise. The findings presented here in many ways reflect that of Óladóttir’s (2017) examination of how grammar is taught and presented in the final grades of compulsory school, and students’ and teachers’ views and attitudes towards it. Óladóttir’s main conclusion is that the teaching of grammar is characterised by an emphasis on prescriptive grammar and what is seen as correct or standard language, while little effort is spent on giving students a broader view of language in order to increase their general interest in it. Thus, topics such as language variation and change, and language acquisition are hardly touched upon. This in turn affects the students’ linguistic behaviour and their thoughts about the Icelandic language, which, as we have seen in the present study, they mainly view as a tool that has to be used “correctly” rather than for the purpose of meaningful communication. Similar indications can be found in Sigurgeirsson (1993) and Sighþórsson (2008) who both found the teaching of grammar to be largely steered by the use of prescriptive grammar workbooks.
The main objective of the teaching of Icelandic, according to the national curriculum for both compulsory and upper secondary school (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, 2012), is to improve students’ language use and to enable them to talk about their own language. These objectives also appear in the curricula of the schools that participated in the study, and seem to be embraced by most of the teachers interviewed. However, the role played by grammar in this regard seems to be somewhat unclear to many of the teachers who, despite their doubts about such an approach, often get stuck in analytical work that is geared towards a prescriptive view of right and wrong language. The end result of this is then a discrepancy between the stated objective of the national curriculum, as well as that of the schools, and how the teaching is carried out. This corresponds to the results of Sverrisdóttir’s (2014) study, which showed that the intended curriculum for the teaching of Icelandic is only partially put into practice in the classroom.

Regarding the possible reasons for this mixed bag of results, the data indicated that the system contradicts itself as to the teaching of Icelandic. While the national curriculum emphasises a holistic approach, where one aspect of Icelandic as a school subject is linked to the other in order to enhance students’ language use, national tests were used which focused on analytical work with grammar and classification from a prescriptive standpoint and thereby in many ways forced the teachers’ hands. These findings add some support to Sigþórsson’s (2008) previous results of the same nature. However, the use and nature of these national exams has changed in the last few years. They no longer function as, in effect, entrance exams to upper secondary schools. Their current purpose, as stated by the Directorate of Education (Menntamálastofnun, n.d.) that is responsible for holding them, is to provide students, parents, teachers and school authorities with information on the extent to which students have acquired the competences defined in the national curriculum, and an overview of students’ learning levels. It will be interesting to see the possible effects of this change in coming years.

Explanations can probably also partially be found in the teachers’ linguistic upbringing, which seems likely to have provided them with a fairly conservative standpoint and arguably forms quite a natural path for them to focus somewhat on the rights and wrongs of language. At the same time, of course, it seems clear that not only students enter their schools with a certain cultural capital in the sense of Bourdieu (1977, 2008) and Gee (2004); the teachers do so as well and it is probably not surprising that this is reflected to some extent in their teaching approach, however consciously it may have been constructed. From this, it follows naturally that the doubts many students harbour regarding the nature and usefulness of grammar might stem from the cultural capital they bring with them. Thus, as could be seen in the results above, students who read much on their own initiative and are raised on standard language, appear to find it relatively easy to keep up with their studies and realise the significance of standard language use, not the least in the context of their schoolwork and how it is valued. Other
students, however, are more doubtful about the purpose of Icelandic, and grammar in particular, possibly because this has simply not been an issue in their upbringing and thus it may take them a while to decide which stance to take in their school and the work they carry out there.

Care should be taken, though, not to read too much into the results when it comes to the possible effects of cultural capital. Even though some information was obtained about the teachers’ background, much of it was indirect, and hardly any information was collected about the students’ background, and what has been presented about it is mainly what could be deduced from their responses to interview questions pertaining to other topics.

Concluding remarks

The analysis of the interview data presented in this study reveals certain recurring themes relating to the perspectives of Icelandic students and teachers towards language and grammar. The students clearly relate this kind of discussion to “correct and wrong” language and feel that grammar is generally an effective tool to determine which uses of language are permitted and which are not. Nevertheless, the students express strong doubts regarding the usefulness of delving too deep into various grammatical concepts. They want the main focus to be on strengthening their reading and writing competence.

The teachers’ interviews delineate somewhat hazy ideas on language and grammar; most of them were satisfied to state the importance of grammar knowledge, without going into further detail in this regard. The teachers also appeared to harbour similar contrasting opinions as the students regarding the usefulness of grammar teaching, particularly the analytical work on which it is often based. The teachers are, however, less sceptical as to whether grammar skills are transferable to other aspects of Icelandic usage and they note the clear link between grammar instruction and the teaching of other languages.

In sum, the research reveals various conflicting aspects. No one appears to doubt the importance of grammar, although it seems less clear how its significant role should be defined. It also appears unclear whether the importance of grammar suggests that traditional grammar teaching is generally highly useful and how its usefulness could be even more enhanced. This ambiguous perspective, then, seems to be very much in evidence in relation to most aspects of grammar teaching.
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