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Adult Immigrants' Perspectives on Courses in Icelandic as a Second Language: Structure, Content, and Inclusion in the Receiving Society

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at a further understanding on the role of formal language education in immigrants' inclusion and identity redefinition in a new society. We analyze adult immigrants' perspectives on education in Icelandic as a second language (ISL) by conducting a cross-analysis of a survey and various ethnographic studies. Many immigrants in Iceland report dissatisfaction with language courses and prefer to have courses better tailored to their practical daily needs. Teachers are evaluated positively, but curricular utility, concerns about in-class evaluations, unevenly prepared student cohorts, lack of opportunity to use class knowledge in further education, and a lack of availability of courses in rural areas are mentioned as challenges. This indicates that ISL education does not fulfil its "dual purpose" declared in the 2007 Icelandic immigration policy: Strengthening the position of Icelandic and speeding up immigrants' integration. We make suggestions for further development of ISL education based on learners' perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Icelandic; identity; inclusion; migration; second language learning

Acquisition of the receiving country's language is often described as a central step in immigrants' inclusion in a new community (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017) and attending language courses is a common way to accomplish this goal (Amireault, 2019; Reichenberg & Berhanu, 2018). Therefore, quality, availability, and organization of second language education play a vital role in immigrants' inclusion and identity redefinition in a new society. Language courses are places where learners add new facets to their identities by building relationships with their instructors and fellow students and engaging in course activities (Colliander et al., 2018). It is thus important to examine what immigrants expect from courses and how language training can efficiently respond to learners' needs. In order to further understand the role of language courses in immigrants' everyday lives in a new society, we analyze their opinions about Icelandic as a second language (ISL) teaching.

The rapid increase of immigration to Iceland in recent years creates a need for ISL courses. Iceland thus provides an interesting case to study the role of formal language education in a language community that has for a long time been considered homogeneous and purist but is undergoing social changes at present (Bade, 2019). ISL training is mentioned as an important aspect of immigrants' integration in the two most recent migration policy documents in Iceland: the immigration policy of 2007 and the Action Plan for Immigrant Matters (Alþingi, 2016; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007). According to the Icelandic immigration policy, Icelandic language education serves a dual purpose of "speeding up their [immigrants'] integration into society and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language" (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 6). In comparison to the other Nordic countries, the ISL education system is less systematized and there is less governmental oversight on formal language training in Iceland (Innes, 2015). This leads to significant differences and little

standardization in teaching methods between different language schools and teachers in Iceland (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016). This approach to language teaching gives agency to the schools and individual teachers, enabling them to adapt their teaching to the classes, giving them “more independence from the *de jure* policy than is found elsewhere” (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016, p. 68). At the same time, little standardization also results in relatively few uniform training opportunities for language teachers (Innes, 2015; Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016).

We examine whether the relatively recent history of ISL, little influence of the government, and little standardization between courses and language schools compared to other Nordic countries seem to have some influence on learners’ views. We analyze immigrants’ perspectives on language courses in Iceland by employing a cross-analysis of four studies, one quantitative and three qualitative, conducted among immigrants in Iceland. We begin with an overview of the literature on learners’ perspectives on language courses for adult immigrants and review the history and structure of education in ISL. We then describe our methods. Following this, we identify themes in adult immigrants’ attitudes to formal language training in rural and urban Iceland and analyze disparities and similarities in these data that speak to these themes. In the conclusion, we make suggestions for further development of ISL education based on learners’ perspectives.

Immigrants’ perspectives on the role of language courses in their involvement in the receiving society

Language courses can support immigrants’ inclusion in society by improving their language skills, equipping them with knowledge about local culture and society, and providing access to social networks and emotional support. A growing body of literature discusses language courses for adult immigrants as contact zones where societal norms, values, and ideological stances concerning the language being taught are presented and negotiated (Casey, 2014; Heinemann, 2017; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004). Learners’ identities are shaped through relations with teachers, learners and other participants (Colliander et al., 2018, p. 308). Language courses play an important role in helping immigrants become included in the receiving society. Amireault (2019) finds that Chinese immigrants in Quebec perceive French courses as a first step toward their linguistic and professional integration. In a study on immigrants’ perception of English language courses in the North Highlands of Scotland, Johnson and Berry (2014, p. 92) find that “learners come to invest in ESOL as a way of creating a new identity that provides a comfortable fit with their new life.” However, in order to achieve these goals, it matters how courses are structured and organized, and how they enable relationships between different participants to develop (Colliander et al., 2018, p. 308). Therefore, it is important to analyze immigrants’ perspectives about and satisfaction with courses.

Learners’ evaluation of the efficiency of courses depends on the adequate interplay of several components and sufficient tailoring of teaching to specific needs of the students. The curriculum is one factor influencing immigrants’ perceptions of courses. Within language schools, learners encounter characterizations of roles, activities, and social positions that textbook writers, curriculum developers, and teachers find to be appropriate for them (Canagarajah, 1999; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004). The teacher also is an important factor in immigrants’ perception of language courses. Reichenberg and Berhanu’s (2018, p. 287) analysis of learners’ perception of Swedish language courses shows that the teacher is a significant predictor of immigrants’ satisfaction with courses and “the more engaged, humorous and nice the teachers were the more satisfied the students were with their language learning.”

Based on these factors, learners form their opinions on language courses. Norton suggests that discrepancies between a student’s expected scenario for the course and the teacher’s curriculum goals can lead to dissatisfaction of students with the language courses (Norton, 2001). Students have agency in how they respond and react to the courses offered to them and can perceive the courses as positive and supportive (Tomi, 2001) but at other times also show resistance and outright hostility (Canagarajah, 1999, 2015), or non-participation (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Ultimately, the learner

develops new facets to their identity, new ranges of behaviors and ways of thinking, and expanded knowledge from which they can draw as they gain new experiences and process new ideas (Kramsch, 2009, 2013).

While language acquisition is commonly seen as an important factor improving immigrants' position in the receiving society, it is not the only factor that determines immigrants' inclusion. Their position on the labor market and other factors, such as discrimination, play a part in immigrants' inclusion in receiving societies and affect various groups of immigrants differently (Heinemann, 2018; Hellgren, 2018). This article explores the role language courses play in the inclusion of immigrants in the receiving society, according to their own accounts.

We examine this by identifying themes in immigrants' attitudes toward language learning and formal language training in Iceland. To further shed light on our question we investigate whether immigrants find that language courses lead to increased involvement in the receiving society, as stated in the curricular guidelines developed by the Ministry of Science, Education and Culture. Previous work exploring how successful Icelandic language classes are in giving students tools to help them connect with Icelanders shows that there is variation in this, depending upon where learners take courses and how easy it is for them to operationalize new knowledge in real-world interactions (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). Except for Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) and a small number of learners' perspectives in a report on the curricular guidelines (Menntamálaráðuneyti, , 2015a), learners' evaluations of Icelandic language courses remain largely unexplored.

We assess whether the students believe that the courses help them to develop personal, social, and workplace skills, whether these are outcomes they desire from language courses, and whether there are areas for further development. We investigate whether language courses fulfil immigrants' expectations and determine what insights arise as a result of using a cross-analysis approach to these questions. In essence, we give voice to immigrants and discuss their reflections, which may in turn help to improve the courses offered in Iceland.

The context: Courses in Icelandic as a second language in Iceland

In 2020 about 15.2% of Iceland's inhabitants were immigrants,¹ whereas twenty years earlier, the number amounted to just 3% (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The majority of immigrants came from European countries and 37% of all immigrants came from Poland (Statistics Iceland, 2020). Informal conversational courses in Icelandic were offered from the 1980s onwards, for example, organized privately in people's homes (Innes, 2015, p. 188), and continue to exist today. More structured training in ISL began in the 1990s with companies providing classes for their employees and the Adult Education Centre (*Námsflokkarnir*) offering Icelandic courses. Schools for teaching ISL have existed since the 2000s. At that point, no official program or curriculum had been established. There were no formal requirements for teachers of ISL, so teachers had different educational backgrounds and professional experiences, were paid per course taught, and most teachers neither worked in this profession full-time nor had training in adult language education strategies (Innes, 2020). This continues to be the case, although recently steps were taken to improve teacher training, such as a Master's degree in Second Language Teaching, which was established in 2016 (University of Iceland, 2016).

Some governmental attempts to standardize teaching Icelandic were undertaken in response to introducing language learning as a condition for permanent residence and citizenship. Curricular guidelines for ISL were adopted in 2008 and 2012 (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2008, 2012). From the beginning, the Ministry expected these two documents to guide course content in order to prepare students to become active participants in Iceland's democratic society. This was to be achieved by having schools concern themselves with students' development of personal, social, and workplace skills (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2008, p. 3). However, studies showed that teachers only loosely followed the recommendations, and some teachers were unaware of the guidelines altogether (Innes, 2020; Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016).

In Iceland, language schools are funded by a combination of private funding and government grants. The criteria for language schools to receive government support is that courses have to be recognized by the Directorate of Education. In the application for grants, the focus is on the number of students and the length of the courses. In general, 10 participants must be enrolled, but exceptions are made for courses in sparsely populated regions of Iceland (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2015b; Rannís, 2015).

Language learning is a condition for permanent residence permits and for citizenship since 2007. The requirements differ for permanent residency and citizenship. Anyone from outside the European Economic Area seeking permanent residency must complete 150 hours of formal Icelandic training before applying. Those seeking citizenship must take a language test. The level of proficiency required to pass the test is equivalent to an estimated 240 hours of language training (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016), meeting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages levels A1–A2 (CEFR, 2001). A study of native Icelandic speakers indicates that they perceive the language test as a recognition of “language as an important component of Icelandic identity and citizenship” (Innes, 2020, p. 183).

Students in Iceland must pay language course fees in full before attending courses and then may receive full or partial refunds from their labour unions. Figures from 2019, show about 90% of the Icelandic population to be members of a labour union (Statistics Iceland, 2019). A few of the unions require their members to pay into the union for three or six months before they can apply for refunds. This means that members attending ISL courses in the first months after arriving in Iceland cannot get refunds through these unions. Some labour unions, such as Efling, one of the largest labour unions in Iceland and with a high membership of foreign nationals, make an exception from this rule for language courses (Efling, 2020). Quota refugees get courses for free as part of the orientation program for one year. Refugees who apply for international protection and get refugee status in Iceland can apply for grants that cover three Icelandic courses from the municipal social services (Westra & Egilsdóttir, 2019, p. 11). Those receiving unemployment benefits also can apply for a grant from the directorate of labour (Directorate of Labour, 2020).

To conclude, policies and curricular guidelines have increasingly focused on the topic of immigrant integration and Icelandic as a second language education in recent years. However, in contrast to the other Nordic nations, Iceland has not created a coordinated, state-governed program. This has allowed instructors more freedom to tailor their teaching to the needs of particular groups of students (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016), which would seem to have the potential to lead to high levels of learner satisfaction. This study is a first step in testing this assumption.

Methods

This study uses a cross-analysis of data collected through quantitative and qualitative research in Iceland. Cross-analysis involves looking across studies for similarities to be found within the cases in each (Hill et al., 1997; Ladany et al., 2012). Each of the authors reviews their materials, looking for core ideas, which we then examine collectively so as to develop thematic categories encompassing several core ideas. This procedure is followed multiple times, during which we hone each theme to ensure that it is directly applicable to the core ideas within it and that it is meaningful, given our data sets and research goal (Hill et al., 1997; Ladany et al., 2012).

Quantitative data were collected in a survey ($N = 2,139$) conducted in 2018 among immigrants in Iceland in the form of an online questionnaire using convenience and snowball sampling. The questionnaire was distributed via language schools, on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and in certain regions of Iceland through local assistants who distributed the survey to immigrants. A more detailed description of this study and the sample characteristics is presented in Meckl and Gunnþórsdóttir (2020). The first author analyzed these data. Immigrants’ attitude towards the importance of learning Icelandic was measured according to their agreement or disagreement with the statement, “Immigrants moving to our municipality have to learn Icelandic,” measured on a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (Agree strongly) to 5 (Disagree strongly). Immigrants’ satisfaction with language courses was measured with

the question, "If you have taken Icelandic courses, how satisfied were you overall with them?" Answers were measured on a five-point Likert-scale from 1 (very satisfied) to 5 (very dissatisfied). Immigrants' satisfaction with the availability of language courses was measured with the question, "How satisfied are you with the following: Where you live? Access to language courses," measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (not satisfied at all). Immigrants' frequency of use of Icelandic was measured with the question: "How likely or unlikely is it that you would use Icelandic for the following? (a) Shopping, (b) Informal discussions with friends, (c) Discussing matters of work, (d) When visiting a doctor, (e) When I'm at home with my family." These data were analyzed with descriptive statistics investigating frequencies. We further conducted a significance test in order to investigate differences in satisfaction with availability of language courses in rural and urban regions.

The qualitative data discussed here result from three studies conducted by the first three authors in various parts of Iceland, both in rural and urban areas. The fourth author's various qualitative studies also informed the analysis. Only the first author's project had as its aim evaluation of language courses from the learners' perspectives. However, such insights were offered with some frequency over the course of the other two qualitative studies. Knowledge of Icelandic was one of the predominant themes arising from the analysis of the interviews and ISL courses were commonly discussed by participants in the second and third authors' research. Standard ethnographic methodologies were used in all three studies, including individual interviews, focus group discussions, and participant-observation.

The first qualitative study, conducted by the first author, had as its aim to gain insight on immigrants' perspectives on Icelandic language courses for adult immigrants in Iceland. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with learners of Icelandic in spring 2021. In total, ten individuals took part: eight women and two men. Three of the participants were from Asia, one of the participants was from Western Europe, one of the participants was from South America, two of the participants were from North America, and five of the participants were from Eastern Europe. Participants were living in different regions of Iceland and had attended language courses in different regions. The interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

The second of the qualitative studies, conducted by the second author, had as its focus the views of language-school teachers and administrators on their ability to achieve the goals desired by the 2008 and 2012 curricular guidelines and those desired by their adult students. Participant-observation was carried out in four schools and three courses conducted by independent teachers in Reykjavík and neighboring communities in the spring of 2013 and again in 2016–17. During these periods some students from courses in each school were interviewed to gather information about student preparedness, attitudes, and engagement. Approximately 50 interviews were conducted with students, of which 23 were pertinent to the questions raised in this paper. Interviewees whose responses were considered here came from a range of countries, with thirteen from Eastern Europe, six from Asia, two from North America, one from South America, and one from southern Europe.

In the third qualitative study, conducted by the third author, interviews were held with immigrants from Eastern European countries in two coastal towns outside the capital region in September 2017 and April 2018 as part of the project, "Explaining regional differences in adaptation and satisfaction among immigrant population in Iceland." In total, 24 individuals took part in the study: 11 men and 13 women. The interviewees had been living in Iceland for various lengths of time, from a few months to several years.

Immigrants' attitudes towards aspects of Icelandic language classes

The themes identified from the interview and quantitative data that are examined here concern learners' attitudes toward their courses and components of them. In general, immigrants consider it important to learn the local language. In the survey, 70% of immigrants agree (Likert-scale of *Agree strongly* and *Somewhat agree*) with the statement, "Immigrants moving to our municipality have to learn Icelandic" (see Figure 1).

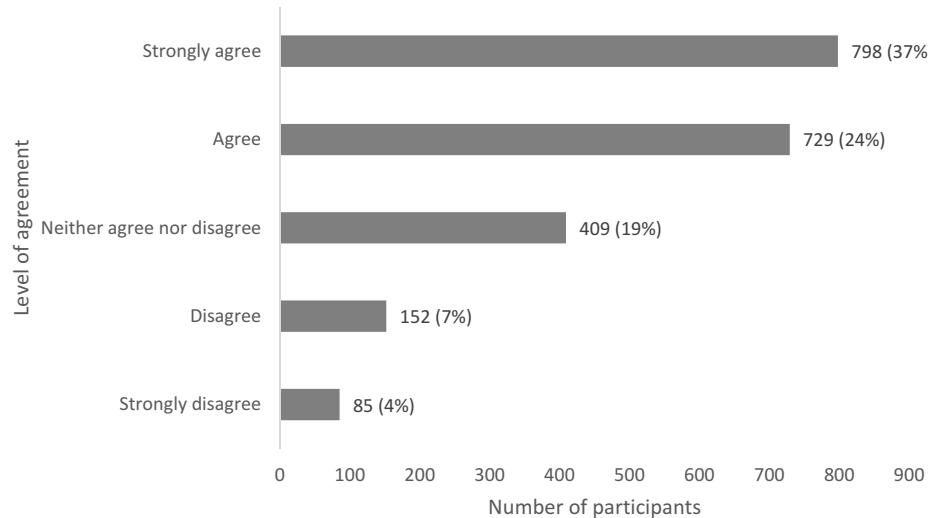


Figure 1. Responses to the statement, “Immigrants moving to our municipality have to learn Icelandic.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the high percentage who agree with the aforementioned statement, the quantitative study shows that about 82% of the respondents had taken at least one course in Icelandic. Interestingly, 66% indicate that they had attended only one course (Figure 2).

Of those who answered that they had taken at least one course in ISL ($N = 1,754$), we find that there is a significant percentage of people from EU and Schengen countries (Figure 3). People from EU and Schengen countries are not required to attend courses, indicating that many immigrants attend courses for reasons other than it being a requirement for permanent residence. This finding is supported by our qualitative data.

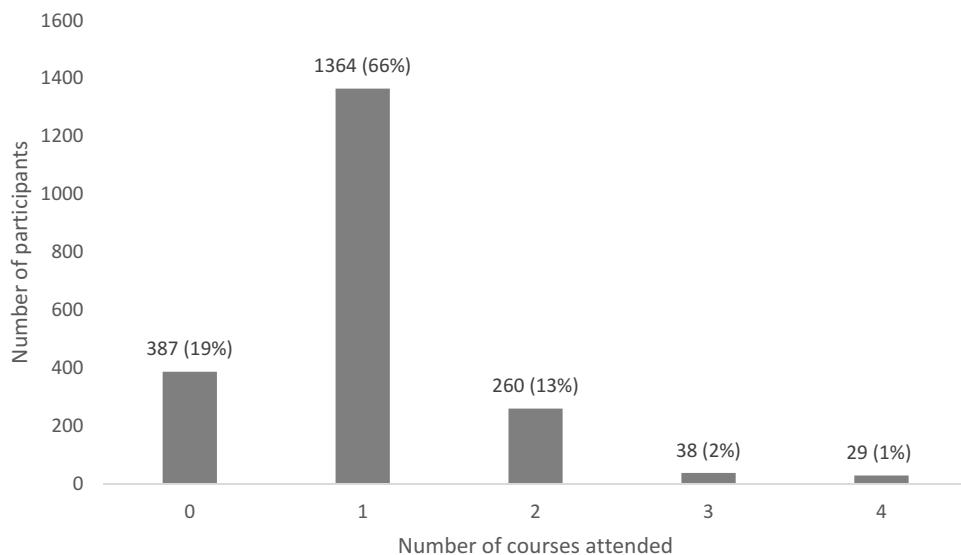


Figure 2. Number of courses attended.

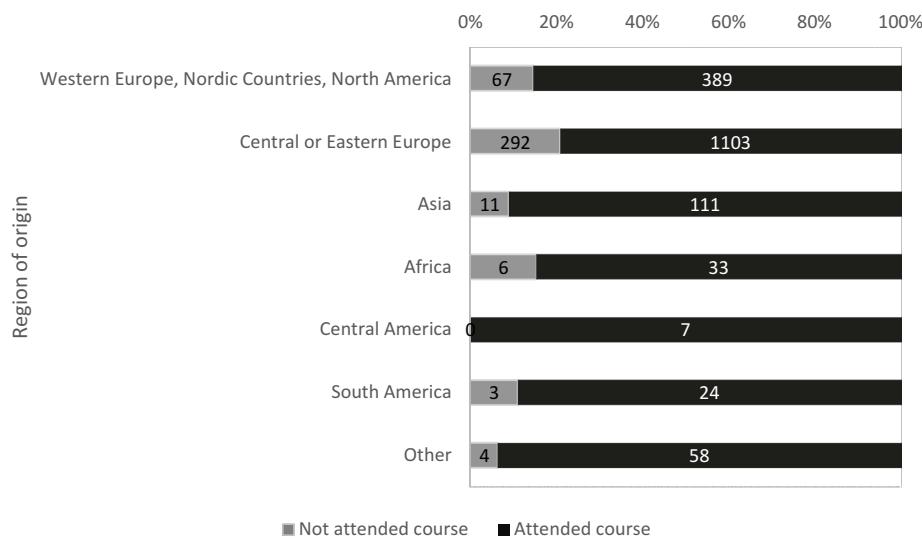


Figure 3. Course attendance by region of origin.

In light of these results, it is noteworthy that a considerable percentage of immigrants express dissatisfaction with language courses. In the sample of participants who had attended an Icelandic class ($N = 1,754$), 60% of immigrants state that they are *rather* or *very dissatisfied* with the courses (Figure 4).

The findings of the quantitative study caused us to examine the qualitative materials for elements of the courses described by interviewees either positively or negatively. Exploring immigrants' perspectives on Icelandic language, we realized that a number of specific themes were frequently the targets of their evaluation of courses. These themes, arranged below, begin with those that were most often described as areas of dissatisfaction and end with those that interviewees found to be most satisfying. Five main themes emerged within our data: a) concerns with availability of classes, b) unequally prepared students, c) difficulty in determining progress and obtaining further education, d) inclusion in the speaking community, and e) the role of the teacher.

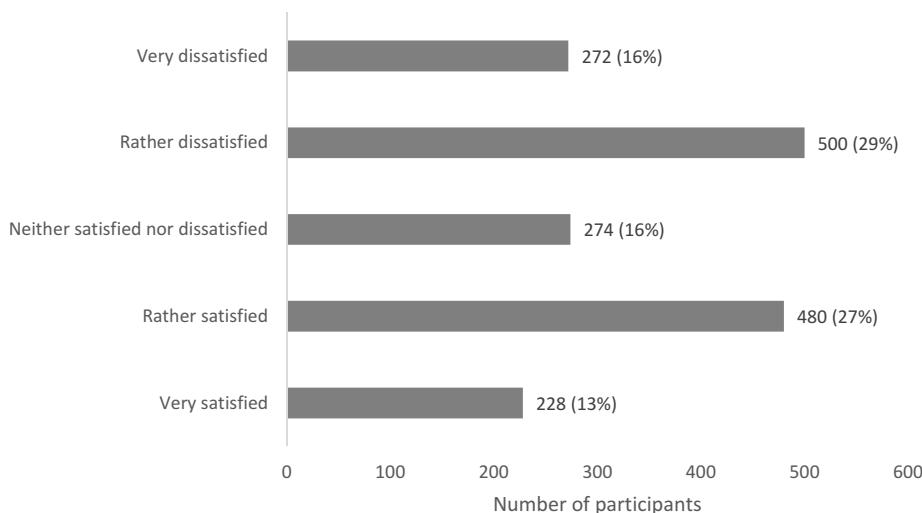


Figure 4. Satisfaction with Icelandic courses.

Concerns with availability of classes

One of the most commonly cited items identified as a shortcoming of the courses was the availability of classes. Cases where interviewees found the times and locations of courses to provide grounds for negative evaluations of the courses were identified in the data through either direct reference to such issues or through discussion about transportation, tiredness, or child-care issues having affected the respondent's satisfaction. A Mann-Whitney U test showed that there was a significant difference ($W = 4063585$, p -value $< 2.2e-16$) between satisfaction with availability of courses among those living in rural and urban Iceland. Those living in rural Iceland were less satisfied with access to language courses than those living in urban Iceland (Figure 5).

The fact that there are fewer courses offered in the rural areas and public transportation between towns and villages in rural Iceland is limited may explain the dissatisfaction. Some language schools serve large areas, requiring some students to commute to courses, which may not always be possible, especially in the wintertime. Thus, arranging transportation to the classes held in another town within the same municipality can be a problem. This is particularly challenging for those who do not have a car.

The challenge to access language courses is, however, not limited to rural areas. When asked about her reasons for not attending courses in an interview, a woman living in an urban area stated, "Yes basically for me transportation, I was biking and walking, and it was difficult to find courses. And the busses are really bad in Reykjavík [the capital of Iceland]."

Further, many of those interviewed by the second author pointed to problems with the times and places where classes were held. Each of these individuals were employed and had to either get permission from employers to attend classes during the workday or attend after they got off work. Every one of these interviewees spoke about tiredness or concern about what they would encounter when they got to work as items negatively affecting their progress and all thought that their school should find a way to better accommodate working students. One of them said, "The classes I see are during the daytime, when I am working. Why they [schools] cannot hold more classes at night, or weekends, when I could come without asking permission from my boss?" This shows that, even though the students were motivated, they encountered practical challenges when attending courses.

Satisfaction with availability of courses: rural and urban

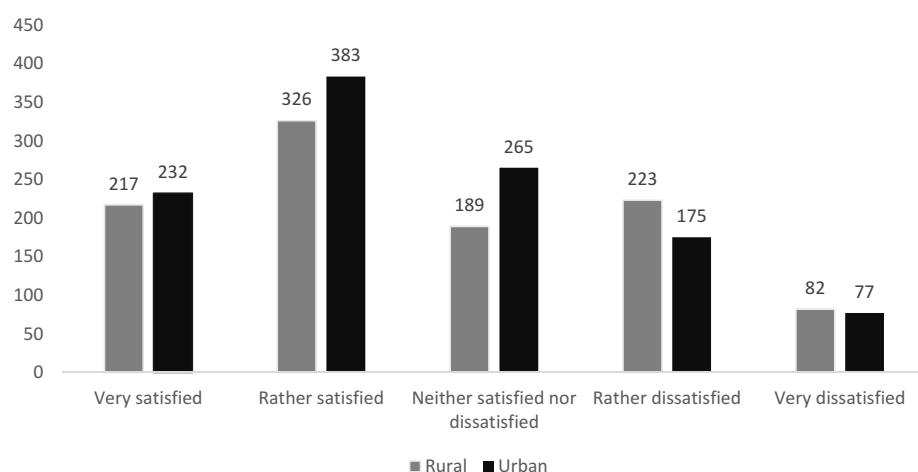


Figure 5. Satisfaction with availability of courses: Rural and urban residents.

Unequally prepared students

Frequently, in different parts of the country, immigrants complained about a limited number of courses. In some cases, the challenges to offer courses, especially in rural areas, had an impact on the composition of student cohorts. Placement of students in classes has been identified previously as an area of concern from the perspective of teachers and school administrators (Innes, 2015; Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016). In the second author's data, many ISL attendees expressed frustration at having to take the same level of course repeatedly because they had reached the highest level offered in their location and either needed further hours for government purposes or wanted to continue honing their language skills.

Learners interviewed by each of the authors of this article voiced disappointment with the range of abilities of fellow students in their classes. As one participant from the Philippines stated,

Yes, my classmates, we are from different countries and different levels of education. [...] For some Thais that could not write it's very difficult for them to do the writing exercises. It's easier for those who are higher educated to follow lessons which are more advanced.

In a course observed by the second author, in which one female student was illiterate, learners felt cheated by the amount of time and effort that the teacher took to explain texts to her. They also felt their entire class had not progressed as much as they might have because some activities, like line-by-line reading exercises, were discontinued once her illiteracy became evident. The opposite was also true, such as in the studies conducted by the first and third authors who found that some learners complained that the teacher was going too fast through the material. As has been discussed in Innes (2015), schools and individual teachers are concerned with accommodating all those who desire entry to language classes and attempt to sort students into courses with others at a similar level of skill. Fiscal and manpower limitations have prohibited most schools from instituting a rigorous or standardized form of evaluation prior to class placement, however.

Difficulty in determining progress and obtaining further education

Critical comments about evaluation methods and whether learners gain access to further educational opportunities are common in the interviews, which caused us to identify these as two further themes on the negative end of the evaluation spectrum. The majority of participants in our studies were disturbed by the focus in schools on the hours of attendance rather than testing language achievement of students, and even teachers have voiced concern about this (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017, p. 79). The participants desired course-end tests with grades clearly marked, allowing them to determine what they got right and wrong. Three of them identified this as a means through which they could focus on grammatical and lexical problem areas. Still others suggested it would be helpful for schools to include entry- and exit-tests for each course as a means of allowing students to chart their progress. One even said that such a test might be helpful for those working, as they could present both sets of test results to their employers, demonstrating that their courses have been effective.

Participants in our studies also pointed out that completion of 150 hours of ISL coursework is insufficient to be able to attend any educational program in Icelandic and our studies showed that many immigrants were dissatisfied with lack of more advanced courses (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). ISL courses taken at continuing education centers or to satisfy the permanent residency requirements do not open the gateway to higher education. Participants also complained that taking language courses did not prepare them to take continuing education classes in other subjects that could enhance their job or promotion opportunities. Two interviewees taking classes as part of their unemployment benefit schemes noted that they were ineligible to take career development classes because their language skills were deemed inadequate, despite having taken Icelandic courses at the second and third levels, respectively.

Inclusion in the speaking community

As Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) reveal, successful access to the speaking community depends on the learners' willingness to extend themselves and upon the kind of response they get from their interlocutors. Immigrants in Iceland often work and live with other immigrants and often have limited possibility to practice their Icelandic, which can further discourage them from learning (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). In the survey we find that 30% of immigrants indicate that they are highly or rather unlikely to use Icelandic at work, and that 36% of immigrants are highly or rather unlikely to use Icelandic to talk to friends (Figure 6).

Most immigrants report that they attend language courses because they wish to become included in Icelandic society while at the same time recognizing the limitations of language to lead to inclusion. One participant from Russia stated, "Personally, I don't believe that you can be part of society without the language, but I also know that the language wouldn't make you part of society, especially not in Iceland." This participant also mentioned speaking Icelandic at work, at the doctor's office, and in many relevant situations in daily life, sometimes only speaking Icelandic for an entire day. This shows that there are still limits to inclusion for immigrants, experienced even by fluent speakers. Linguistic homogeneity and purity, which have been identified as central characteristics of the Icelandic community, create obstacles for non-native speakers (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010; Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016; Kristinsson, 2018; Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017).

When asked in the quantitative questionnaire whether the courses support immigrants' participation in the speaking community, immigrant learners' replies showed a more even split between those who felt disappointed and those satisfied by the amount that their courses promoted access to Icelandic society. In the qualitative studies, several participants answered that the exercises and the courses in general did not increase their interactions with Icelanders, though some emphasized their own responsibility to apply the skills used in class.

One participant mentioned that the course had not significantly improved her Icelandic but that this was mainly her fault because she did not use the language enough outside of the classroom. She said, "For me the most important thing for language is practice, of course. And, when you're just attending the course hoping the teacher will put the knowledge into your head [...] you will never get the results." Activities that drive students to utilize their newly learned skills in real-world interactions with Icelanders were applauded by many of the interviewees. As one woman taking an introductory course put it,

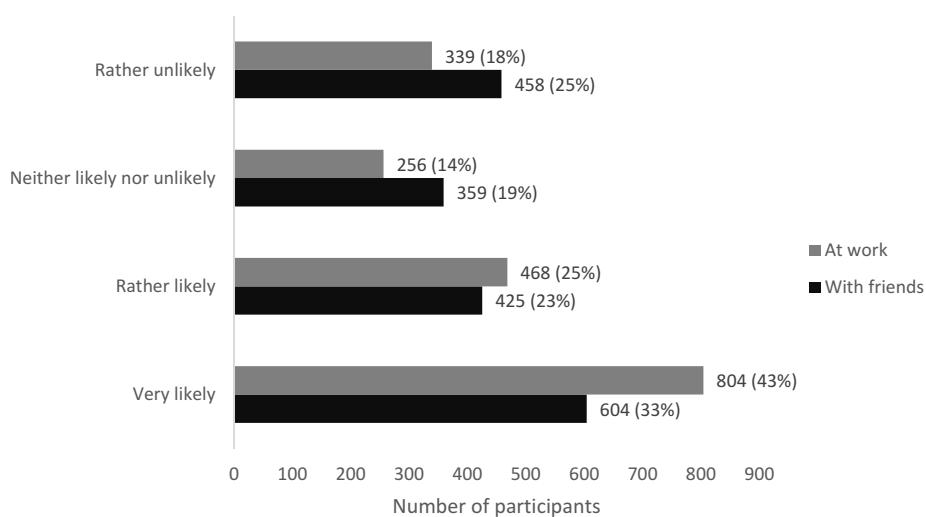


Figure 6. Reported likelihood of using Icelandic in different situations.

It was a simple talk, to ask a shop keeper, “where is the bread?” but it made me ask. I would not have done this before. I was so happy when he understood me and took me to the bakery section of the store!

This respondent later said that she followed each of the speaking exercises thereafter and enjoyed the positive responses she got from Icelanders.

In the second author’s study, almost half of the interviewees complained about a lack of practical applicability of the content learned in the language courses and the vocabulary and grammar they were learning. A woman from southern Europe found it to be of little help to her at work and in social interactions, saying,

I know food and how to cook, so do not have to talk about that with people, I just do it. And why do I have to know about so many rooms in the house? When am I ever going to describe all rooms to someone? It is stupid.

Others also were concerned that the grammatical forms they were learning were used so infrequently in their lives as to be useless. Dissatisfaction with learning about Icelandic songs and history, instead of learning phrases that could be used practically, was mentioned by two people interviewed in the ethnographic research done by the first author.

The role of the teacher

As might be expected, the teacher is a central factor in immigrants’ perspectives on language courses. For the most part, learners expressed favorable opinions about their instructors, finding them to be dedicated, interesting, and informative. Students reported satisfaction when teachers used different strategies, such as a woman from the Philippines who had attended about five Icelandic courses and had observed differences in teaching practices. She stated,

Some teachers they are using different strategies. It was effective as in it was less boring, the course. But for those who mainly use worksheets and just repeated books and very, very, how do you call it, predictable exercises they use over and over again it’s a little bit dull to attend the same exercises over and over again. But for teachers who use different exercises it was more interesting.

In other interviews with students, the teacher’s willingness to skip or modify vocabulary building exercises that students deemed unimportant or not applicable to their circumstances were appreciated, as in this statement from a Polish learner:

When we got to talking about cars and taking them to the shop, [...] she asked how many of us have a car? Nobody had one, so she skipped that. From there we talked about how to call 112 and ask for help for anything, any kind of accident. That, we would use.

In both the Filipina and Polish students’ statements, the teacher’s willingness to vary the activities and offer novel forms of practice were appreciated.

For some, like this student from Vietnam, a teacher’s particular focus on exercises promoting pronunciation processes was valued. The student said, “She really helped us, all of us, to get the sounds just right. Other teachers just passed me along, but she listened and taught me to say the words correctly.” This learner and others from Asian countries identified pronunciation difficulties as the biggest problem for them in holding conversations with Icelanders. Among immigrants from Asian countries, teachers who utilized various types of pronunciation drills and exercises were rated highly and their courses were thought to be very satisfactory.

Those who reported having teachers who did not vary their methods said they were often bored and did not pay attention when asked to participate in the activities. One learner said, “My class played the same kind of game over and over. It was like [teacher] knew about this one and used it a lot. By the third week, I knew to expect we would use it again.” In saying that the teacher “knew about this one,” it appears that the learner expected there were other exercises available that the teacher was either unaware of or chose not to use. This statement also makes an implied critique of the school as well, for not having shown other options to the teacher, who was evaluated positively otherwise.

While there many positive accounts about the teachers, some of our interlocutors questioned the quality of their professional training. A woman from southern Europe living in North Iceland described her teacher as “very nice but not a good teacher,” indicating that even though she responded positively to the teacher, she did not find the teaching effective. A Polish woman living in a small fishing town portrayed her teacher as lacking professional training and critiqued the teacher’s reliance on English in this statement:

The course was not very interesting. Because, first of all, it was taught in English all the time by this woman, I say “a woman,” because she was not even a teacher, but a normal woman. And instead using Icelandic, she was talking English all the time. And others were asking in English. So I was asking a friend by my side to translate for me. So why was I attending?

Since the woman quoted did not know English it made her uncomfortably dependent on fellow students, which made her doubtful about the utility of attending. In the classes observed directly by the second author, students came from a diverse set of national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers in these courses often used English when explaining advanced or difficult content, rather than offering guidance in Icelandic. Some students appreciated such code-switching, while others did not, showing this to be a case where specific needs of students were not necessarily met by the training provided.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we took the perspectives of adult immigrants in Iceland who have taken ISL courses as the focus of our analysis in order to explore the role of formal language education in adult immigrants’ lives in a new society. Approaching these topics through a cross-analysis of different studies conducted by the authors helped us to identify themes in immigrants’ attitudes towards learning and using Icelandic. The quantitative research showed that notions of dissatisfaction with the quality and the availability of courses were widespread within the immigrant population in Iceland, while the qualitative data provided a more nuanced picture of immigrants’ perspectives on language courses.

Language is not only a central aspect of Icelandic culture and identity, but language learning plays a central role in the everyday lives of many immigrants in Iceland. Language issues emerge as a central theme in all qualitative studies for this article and the quantitative survey indicates that immigrants are generally motivated to attend courses and consider learning Icelandic important. In immigrants’ accounts of learning Icelandic, the language is not explicitly described as a way to develop a new identity as comments remains largely at a pragmatic level. Language is, however, recognized as a tool to become included in the receiving society. The outcomes that most immigrants desire from language courses are participation in society, becoming included, and improving their employment opportunities. This utilitarian relationship to the language of the receiving country is observed in prior studies conducted in other places (Amireault, 2019; Johnson & Berry, 2014).

This approach to language learning also becomes evident in immigrants’ feedback on the courses where they frequently prefer to have courses better tailored to their daily needs and more focused on practical content. And even though language is seen as a way to become included in Icelandic society, some immigrants voice doubt about the extent to which learning the language provides access to the local community and leads to a sense of belonging. Observations like these indicate that even after learning the language, non-native speakers still face challenges to feeling themselves a part of Icelandic society, for example, by being recognized as non-native due to a foreign accent (Bade, 2019).

As expected, our study shows significant differences across language courses in Iceland, demonstrating little standardization of courses because the ISL education system is not systematized and there is little governmental oversight on formal language training in Iceland. This allows instructors more freedom to tailor their teaching to the needs of particular groups of students (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016). Our assumption that this might lead to high levels of learners’ satisfaction has to be answered negatively due to the high levels of dissatisfaction with the courses among students. From the perspective of the learners, the lack of standardization seems to lead to a perceived lack of structure as exemplified by

a lack of evaluations at the start or the end of courses. Learners complain about the lack of evaluation at the start of courses, finding that students of different levels of proficiency learning together can lead to challenges. Learners also state that they wished to receive a certificate at the end of their studies that stated their level of Icelandic that they could use in job applications, demonstrating once more the utilitarian approach to language learning followed by many immigrants.

The curriculum has a significant impact on learners' perceptions, with students appreciating tasks that they perceive as being applicable to their everyday lives. However, the overall dissatisfaction with language courses and the themes associated with negative evaluations indicate that many of the participants do not perceive the courses they attended as empowering and efficacious. Challenges that are not confined to the classroom also emerge from the data in that many respondents feel difficulty in accessing the Icelandic speaking community and struggling to develop a new identity in the new language. A perceived inability to speak about topics important for everyday activity, in conjunction with a sense that the courses do not facilitate connections with Icelandic speakers, diminishes the potential for courses to empower learners. This supports Heinemann's finding that courses that do not adequately meet students' expectations can be perceived as patronizing and constraining rather than empowering (Heinemann, 2018).

Teachers are generally perceived positively but some immigrants question whether their professional training is sufficient. We find that teachers who use a variety of activities and focus on content and routines that students feel are useful to them are rated highly, while those who repeatedly use similar exercises tend to be rated more negatively. This is in line with the findings of Reichenberg and Berhanu (2018) who find that characteristics of teachers matter statistically and suggest that positive feelings toward the teacher seem to cancel out negative aspects of the courses. While participants' views on their teachers are often quite positive, we do not find evidence that the high regard given to teachers outweighs disappointments in other areas and our study indicates that additional knowledge and training in teaching Icelandic to foreigners is needed. The working conditions of teachers of Icelandic as a second language can be mentioned as an additional challenge, with most teachers not working full-time in the profession and being paid by course (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016). Such conditions appear to neither provide enough incentives nor opportunities for teachers to improve their teaching skills.

In addition to general opportunities for more training in Icelandic as a second language, there seems to be a particular need to improve teaching for specific groups of students. Comments from classmates of illiterate students, for instance, portray them as burdensome and as lowering the learning potential of the class. Their statements align with Colliander et al.'s (2018) discussion of the importance of offering appropriate language courses for illiterate students and the implications of illiteracy on learners' identities in the Swedish context. Another group facing challenges are learners who do not speak English. These individuals wish to develop identities as Icelandic language speakers but are impeded by some teachers' reliance on English as a language through which explanations are offered. The diversity and heterogeneity among immigrants wanting to learn Icelandic requires that ISL courses be made suitable for different groups of learners and that more training opportunities be provided for teachers.

Our findings show that the courses do not always fulfil immigrants' expectations in terms of availability and quality. In this, then, the current organization of the courses does not seem to meet the statements made in the migration policy from 2007 nor the Action Plan to improve quality of and access to language courses. Based on our analysis, we offer some recommendations for language courses in Iceland: Continued development and refinement of curriculum; critical evaluation of courses; and inclusion of methods for assessing student learning in classes. Another aspect that should be improved from the perspective of the learners is the accessibility of courses in rural areas. The current method of funding and overseeing language schools would need to be changed in order to accomplish all of these improvements. Most schools run without guaranteed yearly support and are reliant on student fees to meet their budgets. Alienating some percentage of learners who are dismayed by their test results, for instance, could create difficulties in smaller schools. Related to this, but also applicable to the question of increasing courses in rural areas, the threshold for funding courses could be lowered. The question of which institution(s) should be

responsible for assessing curriculum and its implementation also arises. Dialogue between the Ministry of Science, Education and Culture and the many language schools and teachers will be required to determine this and will take some time, but learners are likely to be highly supportive of such measures.

Note

1. Statistics Iceland defines *immigrants* as “a person born abroad with both parents foreign born and all grandparents foreign born” (Statistics Iceland, 2020).

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