# Learning Insular Nordic Languages: Comparative Perspectives on Migrants' Experiences Learning Faroese and Icelandic

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores migrants' language learning experiences in two small language communities in the West Nordic Region. We provide a comparative perspective based on an online survey and ethnographic interviews conducted in Iceland and qualitative research conducted in the Faroe Islands. A major finding from this study is that investment in language learning is a highly situated type of activity, which is contingent on personal circumstances, and on structural conditions. Prevailing language ideologies, such as purism and authenticity, can pose constraints on the language learning process among learners who are initially motivated to learn the language. Results show that many migrants follow a utilitarian approach to learning and perceived usefulness of languages influences participants' linguistic choices. A lack of opportunities for language learning has been mentioned by learners in both places we investigate.

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## INTRODUCTION

What is it like to move to an island in the North Atlantic Ocean and become acquainted with a language spoken by a relatively small community? Language skills are often perceived as key to social inclusion of migrants in receiving societies (Duchêne, Moyer & Roberts 2013; Esser 2006), but little investigation has been done on how features of places and communities impact language learning. Notably, most studies on migrants' language learning experiences have been conducted in dominant language communities (Esser 2006; Norton 2013), but major and minoritised[1] language communities provide distinctly different environments for new speakers (Woolard 2016). We, therefore, wish to explore the dynamics of migrants' language learning experiences in two small North Atlantic communities. We discuss migrants' experiences learning Icelandic and Faroese, two small[2] North Germanic languages that are closely related, but not mutually intelligible.

Iceland and the Faroe Islands are situated in the Northern European periphery and are neighbours in the West Nordic Region. The unprecedented social and demographic changes taking place due to the intensification of transnational population flows (Blommaert 2010; Duchêne, Moyer & Roberts 2013) are increasingly more visible in these European peripheries, especially since the turn of the 21st century. There is a higher percentage of immigrants in Iceland (15%) than in the Faroe Islands (4%).[3] People move for similar reasons to both countries: The vast majority of immigrants in Iceland give work as their main reason, while following a spouse and family reasons come second (Hoffmann, Barillé & Meckl 2020). Most migrants to the Faroe Islands come on work permits or through family reunification schemes (Uttanríkis-og vinnumálaráðið 2019).

In both contexts, acquiring the state language (Icelandic) and sub-state language (Faroese) has been foregrounded as essential to integration, social cohesion and labour market participation (Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants 2007; Uttanríkis-og vinnumálaráðið 2019). However, while language is used as a gatekeeping mechanism for integration, studies in both countries show that government responses to the language learning needs of adult migrants do not match the actual needs on the ground. In relation to this reality, Simpson and Whiteside (2015: 5) have argued that '[a]n insight into how governments understand integration can be gained by examining how they invest in the participation of new members of society.'

In terms of linguistic context, Icelandic and the Faroese are closely related, but there is an additional layer of complexity in Faroe Islands due to the region's bilingual situation comprising two small languages, Faroese and Danish (Holm, O'Rourke & Danson 2019). This creates extra challenges for language learners and for policy making. Another difference is that Icelandic has had a long written tradition, while

1 Costa, De Korne & Lane (2018: 8) note that the term minoritised 'reflects the understanding that minority status is neither inherent nor fixed'. This applies in particular to the Faroese context where the current status of the language was an outcome of concerted language revitalisation efforts (Holm 2003, 2021). Thus, historically, Faroese is a minoritised language as it shares particular kinds of constraints with several minority language contexts.

2 Smallness is, of course, a relative concept. Our use of the term refers to the small number of speakers of Faroese and Icelandic (compared to dominant languages).

3 Migrants who have gained Faroese (i.e., Danish) citizenship are not included in this figure (Statistics Faroe Islands, p.c. 13 April 2021).

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there was no written language or standardised orthography of Faroese until a century and a half ago.

In examining the experiences of migrants learning Icelandic and Faroese, respectively, we draw on quantitative and qualitative studies in Iceland conducted by the first author, and on a qualitative study carried out in the Faroes by the second author. We contribute to research on migrants' inclusion into small (language) communities. This paper comprises the theoretical background on migrants' inclusion into smaller language communities, an overview of the Icelandic and Faroese contexts, the data collection methods, a discussion of themes emerging from our analysis and concluding remarks.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: MIGRANTS' INCLUSION INTO SMALL LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

Language skills are often perceived as central to migrants' incorporation in receiving societies (Esser 2006). In public discourses, learning the dominant language of the destination country is even seen as a *sine qua non* of integration and social cohesion (Simpson & Whiteside 2015), but the processes whereby adults learn new languages and become legitimate speakers of these languages are complex. Piller argues that language learning is a highly underestimated endeavour and claims that 'the ultimate outcome of second-language learning efforts is not purely an act of willpower or a result of the learner's personal choices' (Piller 2016: 49). In her research on migrant women in Canada, Norton also questions dominant assumptions about language learning being a matter of motivation, and notes that 'high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning' (Norton 2013: 6).

The relation between language learning and social inclusion in the receiving society is complex and is influenced by various factors, such as attitudes of the receiving society, conditions for language learning and access to resources in the target language. It is, therefore, important to consider the local context of migrants' language learning experiences. The characteristics of small and ideologically contested minoritised language communities pose specific environments for language learning. We understand language ideologies as 'socially, politically, and morally loaded cultural assumptions about the way that language works in social life and about the role of particular linguistic forms in a given society' (Woolard 2016: 20).

According to Woolard, the two main linguistic ideologies are authenticity and anonymity. Authenticity is typically associated with minority languages whereas anonymity is typically associated with majority languages. The ideology of authenticity assumes that 'a language variety is rooted in and directly expresses the essential nature of a community or a speaker', whereas the ideology of anonymity claims that 'language is a neutral vehicle of communication, belonging to no one in particular and thus equally available to all' (Woolard 2016: 20). Ideologies of linguistic authenticity can be a hindrance to new learners, because the idea of a language belonging to a specific group makes it harder for new speakers to become included into this language community. A recent study on migrants in two small countries, Andorra and Luxembourg, shows how societal configurations of languages in smaller communities influence the lived experiences of migrants. Language policies in these places are informed by strategic ambiguity and whilst the *de jure* policy acknowledges certain languages as 'official', the reality on the ground is far more flexible and negotiated in everyday interactions by migrants (Hawkey & Horner 2021).

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In terms of understanding changing demographics and increasing linguistic diversity in the wake of globalisation, Vertovec's (2007) account of superdiversity in the UK is a way to explain this phenomenon. Although explicitly relating to urban contexts, the concept is apt in explaining the recent changes taking place in the West Nordic Region. Inspired by Vertovec's concept, the adapted use of the notion of 'rural superdiversity' (Holm 2021; Pöyhönen & Simpson 2020) is suitable to explain recent changes observed in the context of small, rural and peripheral communities.

Along with increasing rural superdiversity, expectations to learn the local language are a major theme found across several studies conducted in rural areas (Søholt, Stenbacke & Nørgaard 2018; Villa 2019). A comparative study in Norway finds that inhabitants of rural Norway consider migrants' language skills more important than their urban counterparts do (Zahl-Thanem & Haugen 2019). Despite these high expectations to learn local languages, studies show that there are discrepancies between adult migrants' language learning needs, at different competence levels, and opportunities to learn the language (see, e.g., Simpson & Whiteside 2015, for similar discussions in the UK and beyond; Norton 2013; Holm 2021). Migrants in smaller communities face 'difficulties in accessing opportunities for both formal and informal language learning' (Holm 2021; Flynn & Kay 2017: 62) and the quality of language courses in small and rural communities in Iceland has been criticised by some migrants (Hoffmann et al. 2021; Kristjánsdóttir & Skaptadóttir 2018).

This literature review shows that it is important to consider the local context of migrants' inclusion in local language communities, and that smaller language communities provide distinct environments for language learning. With this study, we aim to advance insights on language learning in smaller language communities.

## CONTEXTS: LANGUAGE AND IMMIGRATION IN ICELAND AND THE FAROE ISLANDS

### ICELAND

Icelandic is the official language of Iceland, an island just south of the Arctic Circle with a population of 364,000 inhabitants and an area of 103,000 km$^2$, making it the least densely populated country in Europe. Iceland was part of the Danish Kingdom and gained independence in 1944. Icelandic is a North Germanic language and, while the language has developed over centuries, the changes are relatively small when compared to other Germanic languages and speakers of modern Icelandic 'can still read the ancient language of the sagas' (Hilmarsson-Dunn 2006: 296). Iceland 'has a strong tradition for language planning, preservation and prescriptivism' (Sigurjónsdóttir & Nowenstein 2021: 703). Discourses around language purism are frequent in Icelandic society and efforts to assure continuity of the Icelandic language come from both official bodies and grassroots initiatives (Hólmarsdóttir 2001). Recent developments, such as increased digitisation, have raised new questions and concerns regarding the future of Icelandic and led to the efforts to support the accessibility of the language in a digital age (Sigurjónsdóttir & Nowenstein 2021).

Policy documents such as the 2007 Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants (Iceland; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007) and the Action Plan for Immigrants 2016–2019 (Framkvæmdaáætlun í málefnum innflytjenda 2015) describe language as essential for migrants' integration in the receiving society and emphasises the

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importance of improving both quality and access to education in Icelandic as a second language.[4] Since 2003, language education in Icelandic for migrants has been directly linked with national immigration policies, and consequently has particular implications for those migrants seeking permanent residency or citizenship. The Menntamálaráðuneyti has developed curricular guidelines for Icelandic as a second language (Menntamálaráðuneyti 2008, 2012). In 2003, language learning became a condition for permanent residence permits and in 2007, for citizenship. Anyone seeking permanent residency must complete 150 hours of formal Icelandic training. From 2009, language tests have been administered to applicants for citizenship. The level of proficiency required to pass the test is equivalent to an estimated 240 hours of language training (Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016).

With increasing migration to Iceland, both formal and informal ways of Icelandic language teaching have been implemented recently. Today, Icelandic is for the most part taught at lifelong learning centres, funded by a combination of private and government funding. There are also university-level courses. There are no formal requirements for teachers of Icelandic as an additional language, so teachers have different backgrounds and experiences, although there is a master's degree in teaching Icelandic as an additional language.

Students need to pay a fee for Icelandic language courses, but can receive refunds from their labour unions. About 90% of the Icelandic population are members of a labour union (Statistics Iceland 2019). Refugees (Westra & Egilsdóttir 2019: 11) and people receiving unemployment benefits can apply for grants for Icelandic language courses (Directorate of Labour 2020).

## THE FAROE ISLANDS

Faroese is the first language of the vast majority of the population in the Faroe Islands, a small North Atlantic archipelago situated about halfway between Iceland, Norway and Scotland, with a total area of 1,399 square kilometres and a population just over 53,000. According to the 2011 Census, Faroese is the first language of 93.8% of the inhabitants (Statistics Faroe Islands); they are bilingual in Faroese and Danish, and many have added English to their linguistic repertoire.

With no written language or standardised orthography until a century and a half ago, today, Faroese is considered to be a fully-fledged national language (Holm 2021). As these islands have been subordinate to the Danish crown for many centuries, there is a long history of asymmetrical power relations in sociopolitical terms regarding status and usage of Faroese and Danish (Petersen 2010; Weyhe 2015). Since the end of World War II, the Faroese language has played a key role in the nation-building process. This change in the status of the language was the outcome of concerted language revitalisation efforts (Petersen 2010). With the Home Rule Act of 1948, the Faroe Islands became a self-governing polity within the kingdom of Denmark. The Home Rule Act stipulates that Faroese is the principal language, but also states that Danish and Faroese enjoy equal status (Petersen 2010).

4 'Second Language' is the common term used in both the Faroes and Iceland. Second in this respect is commonly understood as the main or official language in the receiving society (Svendsen 2021). However, we argue that the term 'second' does not capture the 'experiences of multilinguals who have had contact with three or more languages in their lifetimes' (Block 2003:5). 'Additional Language' recognises learners' multilingual repertoires.

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From being an institutionally marginalised language, Faroese has become the main public language. While the early years of language planning and corpus development were characterised by purism (Jacobsen 2021) and a focus on terminology development with Faroese neologisms instead of loanwords, there has been a certain shift in language policy and planning since the end of the 20th century. Despite opposing views and contradictory language ideologies among the local population, continuous investment in revitalisation measures has been key in terms of the sustainability of Faroese. A current challenge for the Faroese language community is the limited availability of digital resources in the local language (Holm 2021).

The number of newcomers of non-Nordic origin is on the increase in the Faroe Islands. In 2020, about 4% of the current population were migrants while this figure was 0.8 in 1996 (Kringvarp Føroya 2020). A typical scenario is that migrants move into relatively low-paid, unskilled work in fish factories or in cleaning positions. There are also gendered patterns of migration, including a new trend toward female marriage migration from Asia (Ísfeld 2019).

In 2021, a Postgraduate Diploma in Faroese as an Additional Language was launched at the University of the Faroe Islands, aimed at providing competence development to those who teach Faroese as an additional language to different target groups. Language classes in Faroese for newcomers are offered by different evening schools across the islands (Útlendingastovan 2016). The vast majority of these courses, which are free of charge, are short beginners' courses that run once or twice a week in the evenings. However, intensive language classes, taught in the daytime, were first offered in 2014 in the capital, Tórshavn, and since 2020, the Ministry of Education (UMMR 2021) introduced a new curriculum for these intensive daytime classes for adults who are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Uttanríkis-og mentamálaráðið 2021).

# METHOD

## RESEARCH IN ICELAND

Quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted amongst migrants in Iceland. The quantitative data were collected in the form of a survey ($N$ = 2139) in 2018. The sampling was convenience and snowball sampling. Respondents for the online questionnaire were recruited through language schools and social media. The qualitative part of this research is based on 10 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 to gain further insight into language learning processes. The interviews lasted from about 30 to 120 minutes, and were in English, the interviewees' chosen language. Participants, seven women and three men, were recruited through snowball sampling. They came from different regions of origin (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, South America and North America) and were based in different regions of Iceland and in both rural and urban areas.

## RESEARCH IN THE FAROE ISLANDS

A recent qualitative study comprising interviews with 29 migrants, most of whom were working in fish processing and cleaning, was carried out in the Faroes by the second author in the period 2016–2019. They came from 15 different countries (Africa, Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, North America). Research participants were either recruited through workplace supervisors or through direct contact between

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the researcher and migrant workers during periods of fieldwork undertaken in three different blue-collar workplaces: two fish processing plants and a cleaning company. Most interviews, which lasted from about 30–90 minutes, were in English, the interviewees' chosen language. A few were in Faroese or by drawing on both Faroese and English. Follow-up interviews were conducted with focal participants. Interviews were conducted both in interviewees' workplace and in participants' homes. Part of the second author's ethnographic fieldwork involved taking up work in a fish factory, making workplace observations, writing fieldnotes and thus spending extended time in the workplace with some of the workers participating in the study. The aim of this workplace ethnography was to get a better understanding of the actual interactional realities of people's daily lives in this type of blue-collar workplace setting, that is to focus in-depth on a small number of people, on their practices and their lived experiences, and on their "conceptual worlds" (Geertz 1973).

## LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ICELAND AND THE FAROE ISLANDS

When analysing language learning experiences among migrants in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, we identified several themes that cover different stages of the language learning process in order to reflect on the overall experience of being a learner in a small language community. As often the case with qualitative research, we aim not to make generalisations through our data (McCarty 2015), but we aim to identify commonalities between these two places. The limitation of our respective studies is that we use different methods to research migrants' perspectives on language learning, comprising a survey and interviews in Iceland, and interviews and workplace observations in the Faroe Islands. However, we were able to identify commonalities and shared themes, highlighting similarities across contexts. Our findings call for further research on the specific impact of context in language learning and particularly on the context smaller minoritised language communities provide for language learning. Our positions as researchers further allow us to explore the subject from various perspectives. We bring together insider perspectives from migrant communities and the receiving society. The first author has learned Icelandic as an adult migrant while the second author is a native speaker of Faroese. These positions provide us with a broad perspective on dynamics of learning languages in a smaller community and the two-way process of inclusion.

### MOTIVATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

About 82% of participants in the quantitative survey conducted in Iceland had taken a course, suggesting a general interest among migrants in attending formal language education and in learning Icelandic. The qualitative data reflected these findings, with many interviewees stating that they considered it important to learn Icelandic. The same was true for the Faroe Islands where most participants expressed interest in acquiring Faroese. Migrants were motivated to learn the language as a means to improve one's employment opportunities and to become included in local communities. Several participants mentioned learning Icelandic to communicate with their spouses' families. A woman who learned Icelandic while working in fish processing in a small village in North Iceland stated: '*during these courses, it helped with my Icelandic and so I was able to speak to the people in the community. And, speaking to the people in the community is the way I learned more Icelandic than*

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*through the courses.*' This statement demonstrates that inclusion in the local community grants entrance to the local language and vice versa. This echoes Norton and Toohey's statement: 'It is through language that a learner gains access to, or is denied access to, powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak' (Norton & Toohey 2011: 417). Through language, several of the participants perceived that they could be heard in the speaking community. We find that learners made linguistic choices based on local contexts, for example, based on the possibility to use English in daily interactions. In Iceland, migrants living in rural places remote from the capital region were especially motivated to learn the language. One participant stated that: '*I feel like in Reykjavik [...] I don't have to use Icelandic, but here in the Westfjords sometimes I feel like I have less of a choice [...] their English is not so good here.*'

In addition to inclusion in local communities, employment opportunities were one of the major motivations to learn the local languages. When asked whether they thought attending courses had improved their employment opportunities, seven of the participants in the qualitative study agreed with this statement and two others claimed that improving their Icelandic skills would improve their employment opportunities in the country. However, the impact of language on employment opportunities was highly dependent on the area of work. A participant employed in a highly specialised sector mentioned that Icelandic language skills did not affect his job opportunities in Iceland. This shows how individual and societal conditions, for example, area of work and economic condition of the country, affect to what extent learning the local language is needed for social mobility (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafs 2011).

Learners were well aware that the smaller languages Icelandic and Faroese have limited practical utility value outside of Iceland and the Faroes, respectively, which informed their linguistic choices. As one participant in Iceland stated: '*It's not like something that you can pick up and go with into the world*'. Accordingly, migrants' perception of their opportunities to stay in Iceland and the Faroes informed their choice to invest in the language. One participant who had initially studied Icelandic stated that she and her spouse decided to move away from Iceland due to limited opportunities for further development of their careers and they stopped investing in learning the language and primarily used English, which she considered sufficient for daily life in Iceland. In the Faroese study, English was also emphasised as having an important role; it was widely used as a lingua franca and even as a 'tool' in the process of learning Faroese. While reasons for potential non-investment in language learning were not investigated, there was evidence in the Faroese study that showed that structural conditions impacted migrants' language learning investment. One of the fish factory workers, who had to apply for a new work permit every year for seven consecutive years before having the legal right to apply for a permanent residence permit, recounted how he chose to invest in learning English rather than in Faroese in case he did not succeed in being permitted to stay. This indicates that migrants' legal status, insecure and precarious conditions are not without significance in relation to language learning motivation and investment.

We found that while migrants in Iceland and the Faroe Islands were motivated to learn the local language, they experienced constraints on their language learning. Constraints comprised highly situated, and even emotional barriers that appeared to be linked to migrants' lived realities in language marginal jobs, physical exhaustion caused by this type of work, limited exposure to the target language, limited access

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to language courses that matched learners' needs, and the lack of an infrastructure in place which could support migrants both in their language learning endeavour and in utilising their un(der)used capabilities and resources. This brings to mind Busch's (2017) notion of 'Spracherleben', referring to the lived experience of language, focusing on the emotional and bodily experiences of language learning that are observed in contexts of migration and relocation (Busch 2017; Kramsch 2009; Pavlenko 2005). As one of the interviewees in the Faroes said: '*it takes a lot of energy to constantly motivate oneself*'. Some participants mentioned being shy or feeling nervous when trying to communicate in Faroese, which suggests links with bodily experiences of language learning (Busch 2017; Kramsch 2009; Netto et al. 2019). The emotional and self-based aspects of language learning played a key role in understanding the language learning journey. Some learners in Iceland expressed frustration and resignation when trying to learn the language, finding it hard to find a space to practice the basics of the language. As one learner in Iceland stated: '*it would be nice to have like some sort of speaking groups for the very fucking beginners*'.

Interviewees' motivation to invest in language learning came to the fore in a wide range of ways; for example, in conversations in which they charted out 'preferred futures' (Pennycook 2001: 8). Such preferred futures involved jobs commensurate with their qualifications and where they could improve their Faroese and demonstrate their professional skills. In contrast to her own preferred future, a well-educated blue-collar worker stated that in terms of language learning, working in a fish factory was '*A kind of dead-end street because you don't get to speak the language*'; thus, clearly indexing how she understood her possibilities for future employment and language development if remaining in this type of job.

Other forms of motivation were demonstrated in a few cases where migrants in the Faroes – at different periods – had taken time off work in order to attend a full-time intensive language course and consequently had to forego their income while studying. While, on the one hand, consciously investing in language learning, these interviewees, independent of each other, pointed out a factor that they experienced as highly de-motivating: that the same class comprised students with limited literacy skills and students with advanced literacy skills. This 'one-size-fits-all' approach, one participant argued, was not a viable way of spending limited resources. They felt that this factor affected their language learning investment in a negative way, that the 'returns' for their investment weren't as high as hoped for. As argued by Norton Peirce (1995: 17), 'if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources'. Added to this, one participant recounted that she was highly motivated to learn Faroese, but as she had to function as the translator for a fellow student who did not understand English, the teacher's auxiliary language, she felt she did not derive much benefit from the course in terms of the time spent on it and the associated loss of income. While expressing high motivation to begin with, what actually happened in the classroom was perceived as holding back her own learning. This lived experience resonates with Norton's (2013: 3) findings when she says that 'a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community'. Sometimes, challenging emotional situations can arise in the classroom that aren't necessarily connected to the language itself, such as in the case of one participant in Iceland who shared the following experience: '*I mean it's not about the course but there was some creepy guy who was spoiling the atmosphere*'.

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One of the participants narrated that her motivation for taking a break from her job as a fish factory worker in order to focus full-time on an intensive language course was '*in order to fit in*'. Another one expressed the following as one of many reasons for why she wanted to improve her fluency in Faroese: '*I didn't want to be one of those ladies that have lived here for decades and don't speak Faroese*', thus consciously positioning herself as someone motivated to learn the local language in contrast to some of her fellow factory workers who have not acquired Faroese. Yet another fish factory worker, who claimed to aspire to become more fluent in Faroese as her dream was to study nursing, said about attending language classes in the evenings after long hours of work in the factory that '*It is too tiring. I am interested to learn but it is just so tiring. No time*'. When she later learned that most learning materials for the nursing programme at the University of the Faroes are in Danish, she exclaimed '*but Danish as well, is like Oh My God! I could not. […] that is a second barrier also*', thus highlighting the additional or dual language learning barriers that are specific in the Faroese context.

Although participants in the Faroese study were a highly diverse group, their language learning narratives index many shared challenges. For example, several of the interviews showed that 'investing in a new language in the context of migration may be contradictory, in a state of flux, involving both resistance, desired incentives, contradictory emotions and ad hoc opportunities' (Holm 2021). This is in line with Norton's (2013) finding where she contends that motivation is no guarantee for successful language learning.

Migrants to Iceland and the Faroes need a job in order to learn the local language and to sustain themselves, but the only jobs available to newcomers who do not know the local language are often the type where opportunities for language learning range from being literally non-existent to limited. Thus, the lack of fluency in the target language combined with limited language learning opportunities become the main barriers to accessing skilled jobs. As stated by a well-educated woman with master's level qualifications who worked as a cleaner in the Faroes: '*Employers could use us, but they don't*'. In her cleaning job, which she had had for more than six years when first interviewed, exposure to language, she recounted, ranged from limited to none. This calls for proactive policy initiatives, in both contexts, both in relation to formal language learning provision and labour market access and participation.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE LANGUAGE LEARNING JOURNEY

In the quantitative survey conducted among migrants in Iceland, 60% said that they were very dissatisfied or rather dissatisfied with Icelandic language courses, indicating that they did not think that the Icelandic language courses they attended were sufficient in meeting their needs to learn the language. We further found that 58% of participants were rather satisfied with their access to Icelandic language courses and those living in the capital area of Iceland were the most satisfied with the availability of Icelandic language courses. In the qualitative research of the first author, several participants stated that they learned Icelandic primarily outside of the language classroom when interacting with native speakers. This is in line with prior findings showing that immigrants often experience formal Icelandic language education as insufficient, which is discussed in detail in (Hoffmann et al. 2021).

In most cases, participants in the Faroes Islands expressed interest in acquiring Faroese, but their narratives comprised lengthy, complex and challenging language learning journeys, showing that investment in language learning is a highly situated

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type of activity, which is contingent on personal circumstances, and on workplace and structural conditions. Therefore, we argue that the complex factors that shape migrants' investment in language learning need to be considered. Several of the workers who the second author met at random in a fish factory, some with good qualifications, were still at a very basic level in terms of acquisition of Faroese, even after many years in the islands. This raises questions that relate to the shaping of migrant workers' identities and language learning in such sites. Most of those who had acquired Faroese described language learning as a challenging and lengthy process. As one of the fish factory workers reflected: '*there isn't a professional way to learn Faroese [...] like Faroese as a foreign language. [...] There's just the beginner's course*'. This was echoed by another fish-factory worker, who concluded that '*when I come again in the evening school, also the same class again with the beginner, so again stuck in the same [...] like beginner Faroese, so that is why I think [...] I don't improve*'. Expressions like being 'stuck' and claiming that 'I don't improve' index this woman's awareness of the constraints on her agency as a language learner (Kramsch 2009; Miller 2014; Netto et al. 2019; Norton 2013).

It was notable that about two thirds of the interviewees in the Faroese study had some form of higher or tertiary education. What these educated blue-collar workers of migrant origin had in common was that (1) in the factory context, they were not perceived as having any identity other than that of fish factory worker; (2) they had not been able to utilize their educational qualifications in the course of many years in the islands; (3) they experienced identity disruption, that is, the loss of professional identities, and faced the long-term implications of deskilling due to downward occupational mobility; and (4) they felt stuck in blue-collar work. There was also evidence showing that the conditions for language learning, settlement and employment, and the constraints, can prove to be insuperable, even for those who were best placed to exercise agency in defining their futures, who were most committed to learning the local language. On this note, an interviewee dismally concluded that '*if they [employers] don't know you, or your family, or if you don't have the right connections, they're not going to employ you*'. Learners' agency may thus be conceived of as context-dependent (Miller 2014), that is, the situated conditions may either constrain or enable a learner's language development. Also, there may be clashes between a learner's agency and his or her desire to learn and practice a target language, especially in linguistic contexts that are characterised by ideologies that inhibit a person's possibility to act or to take action.

As Icelandic and Faroese are closely related but not mutually comprehensible, it is crucial to investigate people's impressions of these languages, their difficulty and aesthetic aspects. When interviewing people in Iceland, two of the respondents indicated that they found the language beautiful. One participant who according to her own account hadn't started learning Icelandic yet explicitly mentioned that she found it interesting that Icelandic was such an old language, and this made her more interested in learning the language. Although Icelandic language learners commented on the aesthetics of the language and for some it seemed to have an impact on the language learning process, as has also been shown by Kramsch (2009), this aspect did not surface in the Faroese study. Added to this, several participants referred to Icelandic as difficult and almost impossible to learn. Similar perceptions of the complexity of the language came into view in the Faroes. One participant claimed the common discourse of Icelandic being difficult would be a hindrance to learning it.

'*We create a mountain of a language [...] But I think people should, you have to separate, umm, fear of climbing the mountain from the actual facts.*'

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What this learner described are underlying images and ideologies of the language, showing how narratives about languages shape learners' experiences and the efforts made to maintain especially Icelandic linguistic purism makes people interested in the language but poses challenges when they are actually trying to use and speak the language. Linguistic authenticity is, in smaller language communities, 'a quality that contributes to language survival under conditions of subordination' but 'can become a limiting factor when acquisition and use by a larger population is a goal' (Woolard 2016: 21). This means that language ideologies that were beneficial in the context of those smaller communities can pose a hindrance to newcomers wanting to learn the language and lead to less investment and lower motivation amongst learners.

## PARTICIPATION IN THE SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The Faroese and Icelandic nations have undergone far-reaching processes of change as a result of globalisation, increased mobility, transnational flows, new technologies and a changing political and economic landscape (Blommaert 2010; Simpson & Whiteside 2015). In the wake of globalisation, more languages are spoken in these small communities. Migrants actively negotiate the use of different languages based on the perceived utility value of these languages: what Bourdieu refers to as linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991). In Bourdieu's understanding of capital, linguistic resources are unequally distributed and therefore play a role in the (re)production of social hierarchies (Darvin & Norton 2015: 44). We found that navigating the complexity of the sociolinguistic landscapes of these smaller languages communities entails numerous challenges for learners. Smaller language communities provide a specific context for language learning, as has for example been recognised by Woolard (2016). Migrants in both places were generally happy to share their experiences learning these languages and, while many expressed challenges and also negative experiences in the learning communities, there were also accounts of learners whose interaction with the speaking community had been very positive, such as a migrant in Iceland who stated: '*I cannot say that I have negative experience. I have quite the opposite actually. I often get praised for my Icelandic, but I think it's not good. At work they are all supporting*'.

Some participants reported challenges when connecting to the Icelandic speaking community and identified a sense of gatekeeping amongst the members of the receiving society. In both contexts, migrants expressed discouragement due to being spoken to in English when trying to practice the local languages. One participant in Iceland reported an incident where she was told she spoke Icelandic like a child leading her to not use the language for several years after this experience: '*there was this woman who said that I speak Icelandic like a child. […] So that's why it took me 7 years to speak Icelandic.*' In the words of Norton and Toohey, this participant was 'actively resisting practices in which they occupied unequal relations of power vis-à-vis' (2011: 421).

Another participant in Iceland mentioned patronising behaviour, which was meant not to actually help people improve learning the language but rather expressing the position as native speakers: '*I mean you always encounter that person that is trying to correct you but more into a patronizing way you know sort of looking down, not correcting you because they want you to improve but correcting you because they want to express their superiority in the language*'. Iceland and especially the Faroe Islands share particular kinds of constraints with other small languages, which is mainly due to the small number of speakers and lack of resources in the language. Interestingly, much effort (relatively speaking) has been put into cultivating and developing Faroese into a modern language that can be used for all purposes in

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society; likewise, much effort is put into developing Icelandic for use in an increasing digitised world. At the same time, little attention has been paid to developing Faroese and Icelandic as additional languages to learn for those who have not acquired Faroese or Icelandic through family transmission. As we show in this section, lack of investment in developing provision for Icelandic and Faroese as additional languages has implications for migrants' language learning and labour market access and participation. This also shows how experiences in the speaking community can negatively affect the linguistic self-esteem of learners, which has shown to be an important factor in learners' experiences (Noels et al. 1996).

The ideology of authenticity, often observed in minoritised language contexts (Woolard 2016), makes it harder for migrants to enter the prospective speaking communities as it is associated with native speaker ideologies such as those of linguistic authority and authenticity (Woolard 2016). An increased emphasis is called for on meeting the actual need of migrants on the ground to accompany the demographic changes in the two West Nordic Island communities discussed in this case study. Proactive initiatives are needed. Therefore, we argue that by addressing migrants' lived experiences, and thus recognising disadvantage and discrimination on the basis of language, Faroese and Icelandic authorities have opportunities to create conditions that are conducive to the creation of more inclusive societies.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed language learning experiences of migrants in the context of smaller communities based on comparative studies conducted in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Context-specific characteristics of these small and minoritised languages have shaped linguistic ideologies that affect learners of the languages. We find that migrants' experiences in both places are similar. Newcomers are generally motivated to learn Faroese or Icelandic but tend to follow a utilitarian approach to language learning. Perceived usefulness of languages influences people's language choices, negotiating for example whether learning English or the local language is more useful.

Participants in both contexts encounter ideologies prevalent in smaller language communities, such as notions of linguistic authenticity and purism. Such ideologies are significant as they shape migrants' experiences in receiving societies and can create unequal power relations between native and new speakers. This creates clashes between learners' agency and their desire to acquire and practice a target language. Some of our examples show that linguistic gatekeeping can lead to low linguistic self-esteem or loss of motivation to continue learning the language. This may pose constraints on the language learning process among learners who are initially motivated to learn the language.

A major finding from our study is that investment in language learning is a highly situated type of activity, which is contingent on personal circumstances, and on workplace and structural conditions. These findings have implications for the inclusion of migrants and research on migration as we highlight the multiplicity of factors shaping the language learning experience and how linguistic contexts can either foster or pose obstacles to the learning experience.

With both North Germanic languages currently investing in developing the languages for use in an increasingly digitised and globalised world, less attention has been paid

to developing Faroese and Icelandic as additional languages. The lack of opportunities for language education have been mentioned by learners in both places, but this issue is especially prevalent in the Faroes. Formal adult migrant language education is further developed in Iceland than in the Faroe Islands and more collaboration between those teaching and planning language provision in these two places might be beneficial to migrants in both contexts within the West Nordic Region.

While each language learning journey is individual, knowledge about commonalities found in this comparative study can help understand the experiences of migrants in smaller language communities in a context of 'rural superdiversity' (Pöyhönen & Simpson 2020). As most research on migration is undertaken in urban contexts and the body of research on migration to small islands, peripheral and rural areas is limited and remains a neglected research topic, this study contributes to advance understanding of migrants' language learning experiences in peripheral contexts.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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