The effects of language acquisition on immigrant societal participation

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Abstract

As immigration steadily increases in Iceland, a community of foreign-born individuals continues to grow. Whilst some of these foreigners may already have acquired the skill of English, most have not yet gained the ability to speak Icelandic at a culturally significant level. Iceland, being particular with the language and how it is utilized, manifests many invisible barriers to language acquisition, and hence participation in society. Individuals are hindered by their inability to communicate, affecting their ability to get jobs despite being qualified. Although not a hard requirement to be able to work in Iceland, the Icelandic language may open many more doors to higher paying jobs. Understanding the language at the highest level is also nearly required to participate in Icelandic politics. Some may be able to quickly get a synopsis of a political party's stance through the limited resources available, but direct participation is much more difficult to enter. Large communities of immigrants are also formed based on similar ethnicities and origins. This creates large diasporas of people who assist each other in day-to-day life, while also becoming a type of middleman in terms of translating resources for the larger group. This can provide a useful resource for newly settled individuals, but also decreases the likelihood that one ventures outside of the community. Children, being sponges for language, also begin to speak in English frequently, which poses a hindrance for their ability to learn the Icelandic language. Because of these barriers in the acquisition of the Icelandic language, many have difficulty participating in society in some facets.

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Icelandic has a strong cultural significance to its speakers as it has maintained its structure and vocabulary over hundreds of years. This means that speaking Icelandic is much more strict in terms of grammar, and because of this, many non-native speakers find it difficult to fully learn the language, therefore reducing their ability to communicate and participate in society. Many times immigrants come into Iceland already knowing English, but this may not be enough to fully participate in society, which we defined as having three major buckets - workforce, community, and politics. With barriers to language acquisition comes a reduction in the participation in these three aspects, and this study aims to uncover these barriers as well as find trends to the extent that these barriers hinder one's ability to find work, vote in elections, or find a group of like minded people. With this goal in mind, the team has created three guiding research questions:

Research Questions

01 What are the barriers to the acquisition of English and Icelandic by immigrants?

02 What resources are available for immigrants to allow them to effectively participate in society?

03 To what extent does the language acquisition of English and Icelandic affect immigrants' participation in society?

Through extensive surveying and interviews with experts, our findings have uncovered many barriers. About 33% of survey respondents said time was a major barrier to learning Icelandic, as well as the cost of classes and resources. Many also echoed that these resources were less than adequate. A majority of our interviewees stated that Icelandic is necessary to live in Iceland and be in touch with the community, and also necessary to advance your career, though English is enough to get by. As for politics, it is almost necessary to understand Icelandic at a culturally significant level, because of the high level used in political writing. We hope our research can be used by future teams to produce potential solutions to any of the problems we have uncovered.

Background

Icelandic: The Language of Resilience

The Icelandic language is perseverant and has been consistent throughout its long history. It remains the oldest Teutonic language that has written texts. The language is still similar to those old texts, which are easy for native speakers to read and understand. The language grew from the predecessor to modern Nordic languages, which was originally spoken in the Scandinavian region during the first millennium C.E., before splitting into two distinct branches.[13, 9] These branches later developed into other languages, the three largest of which being Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. Icelandic was similar to these languages up until 1400 AD. A majority of Icelandic settlers were Vikings originating from the collection of tribes that would later become Norway. A portion also arrived from Ireland, Britain, and Scotland, though the linguistic influence these settlers had on the language was much less than that of Norwegian. Modern Icelandic is more akin to the original Nordic predecessor than modern nordic languages. Overall, the language stands out amongst global trends due to its adherence to archaic principles.[9]

Figure A: An Icelandic manuscript representing Icelandic language

Because of its minimal change over time, the language preserved pre-Christian meaning. Christianity only began to touch the island around the 11th century, and speakers avoided Christianization of their language. During this time, Christianity was adopted by the chieftain society, but old Norse and Pagan ideologies still pushed through. The presence of Paganism in Iceland influenced the adoption of Christianity and fostered a syncretism not seen in much of Europe during the Medieval era. The church brought along the opportunity for learning and transcribing oral poetry and stories in the spread-out Icelandic society. Since the spoken language had a history rich in story-telling, several old poems and epics were preserved and transcribed with minimal Christian influence. Much of the preserved texts are mythical, describing the creation of the world, and the Gods of the Norse pantheon. Many of the texts did have mythological elements, even when the texts were describing things outside of mythology. Skalds, or professional Icelandic poets, were responsible for documenting current events in the Scandinavian region. The skalds wrote their poems as if the reader was acquainted with the mythology and history of the Icelandic ancestors. For example, a ship was described as, "Odin's horse

of the sea", in a stanza from Úlfur Uggason's "Hússdrá''. This promoted preservation of the language in a similar way to how the Catholic Church encouraged the widespread adoption of Latin. If the only way to get into the system is to conform to the doctrine, it becomes significantly harder to change the system.

Modern-day Icelandic still holds similarities in the adoption of new words. Icelandic speakers opt not to take loan words, and instead use existing vocabulary to describe modern advances, such as computers, electricity, and cars.[9] The word for computer (tölva) is an amalgamation of the words tala, meaning number, and völva, meaning predictor of things.[9] This trend of creating words out of existing vocabulary has become the norm in terms of expanding the Icelandic dictionary, and continues to preserve the language as a whole.

English: The Language of Immigrants

English has taken on a critical role in certain industries in Iceland.[1] As immigration and tourism has increased, the influx of English has as well. Many immigrants come into the country speaking their native language and English. This creates a problem for the immersion of an immigrant in the Icelandic language. In order to fully develop the nuances of the Icelandic language, an individual has to be immersed in a community of speakers. The complexities of Icelandic make it difficult to learn outside of immersion and specialized classes.[4,8] When Icelanders realize they are not speaking with another Icelander, they rapidly switch to speaking in English.This short term benefit of mutual understanding carries with it the long term effect of never fully acquiring the language. In this way, English has become the language of tourists and immigrants alike.[22]

The everyday utility of English has caused English skills to become more important to living a life in Iceland connected with the outside world. Exacerbating this effect is the fact that the University of Iceland requires proof of English proficiency for employment and admission. An investigation of the skill of young English learners in Iceland shows that English comprehension is above the expected educational benchmarks.[11] The elevated skills of younger learners may suggest that the passive (non-educational) level of exposure to English in modern Iceland is sufficient to engage the natural language acquisition of newer generations.[13]

Experts believe the exposure to English of immigrants is a driving reason for its continuous usage in younger generations. Young children are exposed to English earlier now than ever before, and its prevalence in media has gone up drastically in the digital age. Children—both native and migrant—are becoming more proficient with English earlier than Icelandic due to children's TV shows and streaming services such as Youtube and Netflix.[3]

Youtube and Netflix. These children will go to school, and utilize English when speaking with foreign born immigrant students. In coming years, this may pose an issue for immigrant children, as the formative early years are crucial for language acquisition, and not being immersed in Icelandic will make it very difficult to learn the language thoroughly.

Immigration in Iceland

Net external migration from 1986
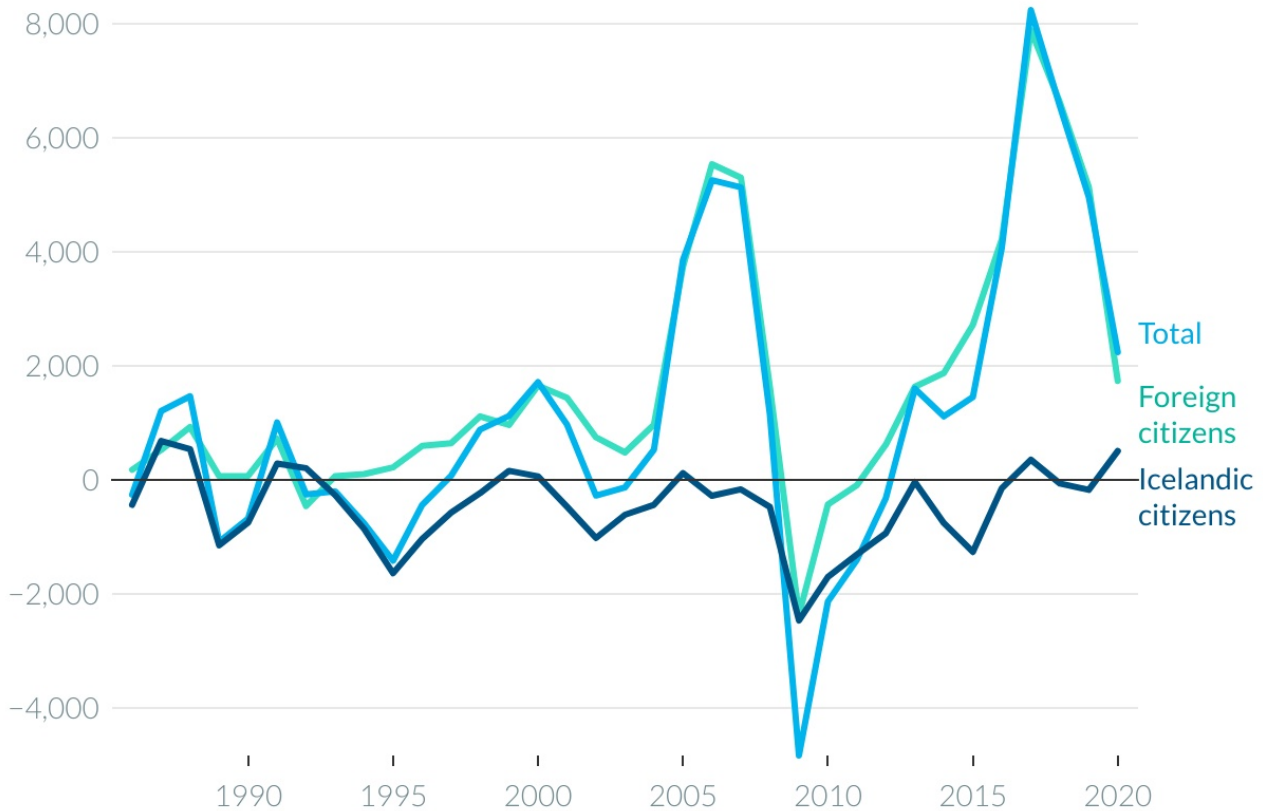
Figure B: Visual representation of an increase in immigration to Iceland with noticiable peaks happening in 2005 and between 2015-2020[21]

Iceland was a homogeneous society until the late 20th century. In 1996, the government approved and signed the Schengen Pact and became a part of the integrated European Economic Zone. As a member of the Schengen Pact, citizens of any EU country can migrate to and work in Iceland without need for a specific work

permit. This is the primary cause for the explosive growth of immigration in the early 2000's.[5] The ballooning of the economy in the early 2000's was another driving factor for immigration to Iceland. Numerous companies were understaffed, and hundreds of workers came to fill the open positions. The growth continued to increase until 2008.

Migrants chose Iceland for a variety of reasons: the seasonal and expanding tourism industry, the availability of jobs, the value of the Icelandic Krona, and the existence of small communities and family owned businesses. Tourism in Iceland kickstarted in the early 2000's, and the growing industry brought many jobs to Iceland that can still be seen throughout Reykjavik and the surrounding areas. Airports, nature tours, local cultural shops, restaurants, and more all flourished in the years following the introduction of tourism to Iceland. In addition, for many migrants both in and outside of the Schengen pact before 2008, the Icelandic Krona was a currency of greater relative value than the currencies of their home countries. People could come to Iceland and be satisfied with a low wage job. In the early 2000's, there was a lack of jobs in other parts of Europe and an excess of workers. This prompted many people to migrate to Iceland to work. Lastly, pre-existing communities of immigrants made it easier for more to come. Polish communities welcomed Polish immigrants, and made open job listings and opportunities more accessible to incoming Polish migrants.[3] This resulted in a snowball effect that bumped the number of immigrants higher and higher every year.

2008 was the year that the event referred to in Iceland as "The Collapse" occurred. The market crashed and the rest of the economy crashed with it. The value of the Icelandic Krona dropped by 50% in a single year. Companies shut down and many natives and immigrants lost their jobs. During this time, many immigrants left, and immigration to Iceland slowed. It wasn't until the mid 2010's, at the tail end of restructuring the economy and the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, that immigration boomed once again. Into the 2020's immigration to Iceland has been higher than ever before, even through the pandemic.

2.4 Barriers to Learning Icelandic

Icelandic is among the most complex languages a migrant to Europe could learn. Its ancient roots result in grammatical structures that many modern languages have not employed in centuries. Despite similarities to Scandinavian languages, the natural drift of spoken word means that even the cousins to Icelandic are not mutually intelligible with it. With these complications come a slew of difficulties for new immigrants learning the language. Immigrants have to deal with finding adequate resources to learn, immersing themselves in, and understanding the importance of the Icelandic language in order to
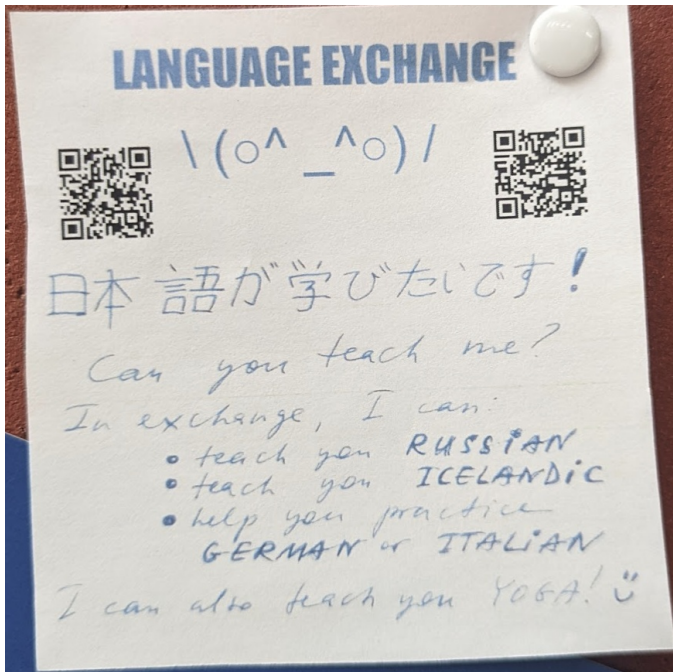
Figure C: A tutoring advertisment at the University of Iceland

become fully integrated into Icelandic society.[4,14]

There are a limited number of resources made for immigrants to learn the Icelandic language. A majority of immigrants are allotted two free courses in Icelandic. Some immigrants are provided Icelandic language instruction through their workplace, and some others through their university studies. A majority of immigrants will have a difficult time attaining fluency in Icelandic, as many are unable to afford Icelandic classes beyond the free ones. In addition, immigrants that work blue collar jobs often do not have time in the day to attend Icelandic classes. Spending time with their families or communities along with working their everyday job leaves little availability to pick up another language.[17] Despite working alongside Icelanders, many immigrants find minimal success in picking up the language in their workplace.

The government regulates the Icelandic language. The regulation results in negative attitudes towards anything perceived to be slang or informal Icelandic. There are no major accents or changes in dialects based on region in Iceland. Nearly all TV appearances by anchors and officials are scripted, and deviation from the script is harmful to one's public image. An immigrant's accent often results in switching language to English, even if the immigrant's vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure conforms to the language standard. The many language barriers faced by immigrants pose harsh difficulties to becoming integrated into the Icelandic workforce, politics, and community.
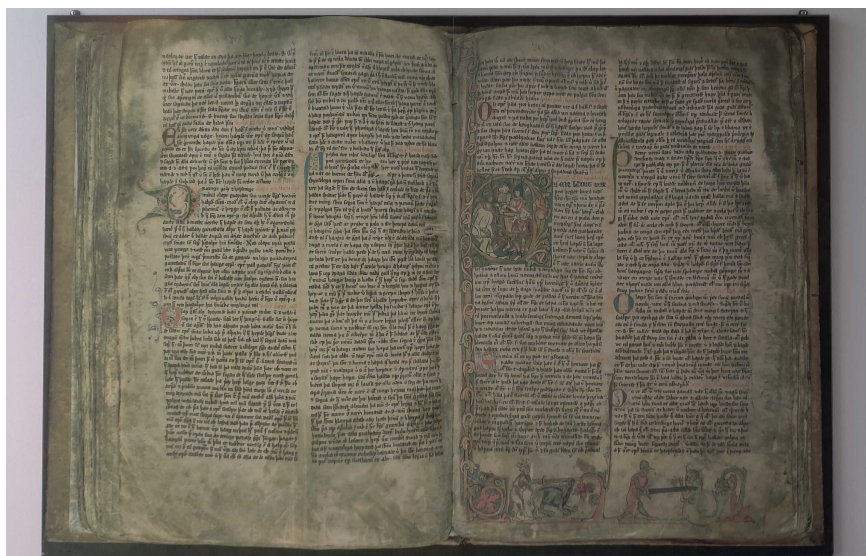

Figure D: A picxture of the oldest mythology book that is used as a golden standard of fomral Icelandic that remained unchanged.
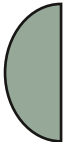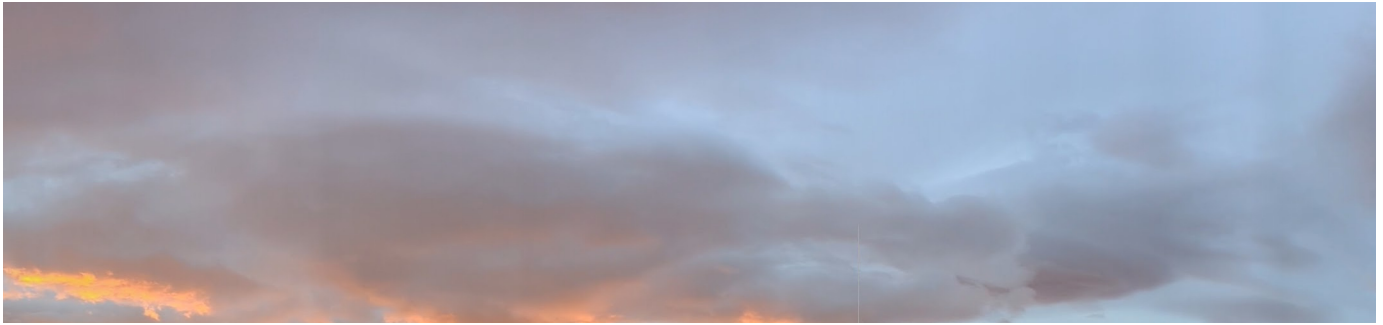
Methodology

Problem Statement

"Language acquisition poses many barriers to immigrants moving to a new country which hold back their participation in society, reducing their social footprint."

Introduction

We defined participation in society in three main buckets: political involvement, activity in the workforce, and community engagement. We assembled a series of research questions to better understand the applications of the problem statement. These research questions guided the preliminary research and expansions of research during our time in Iceland.

Research Questions

01   What are the barriers to the acquisition of English and Icelandic by immigrants?

02   What resources are available for immigrants to allow them to effectively participate in society?

03   To what extent does the language acquisition of English and Icelandic affect immigrants' participation in society?

To answer each of these questions, we designed a mixed methodology research study. We gathered data from survey respondents, stakeholders, subject matter experts, and personal stories.

Research Goals

01   Create a comprehensive network map of stakeholders in Iceland. This would include those who are doing work in or are connected to issues of language acquisition, democratic participation, social inclusion, and immigrant/refugee support.

02   Collect and analyze data about language acquisition within immigrant communities, as well as understand the barriers immigrants face as they obtain new languages and how it affects their social presence.

Outreach

At the start of the project, we found the Modeling the Linguistic Consequences of Digital Language Contact (MOLICODILACO) project that focused on researching the interactions of Icelandic online. The project consisted of several professionals in the field of language acquisition affiliated with the University of Iceland. Because much of the project revolved around understanding how language acquisition can pose barriers to participating in society, we believed that these professors would help point us in a direction that uncovered these barriers. Upon meeting with these professors and reviewing their work, we found more professionals in the field, dealing mostly with immigration. We contacted many of these experts to establish relationships, as well as to conduct interviews.

While exploring the process of learning Icelandic digitally, we found a large Discord server (Hópur Íslenskunema) that was built to create a community of both native Icelandic speakers and those who are learning. This large community of prospective learners (and potentially immigrants) was a clear choice for early surveying. We reached out to a multitude of groups on Facebook, including study groups, student unions, tutoring organizations, and immigrant assistance communities. We chose these groups to get a diverse pool of respondents. We reached out to the Red Cross, student Refugee center, Multiculturalism Center, and office of Foreign Affairs at the University. These organizations were chosen to reach communities of immigrants and provide a closer look at the process of integration in Iceland.

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews which informed the direction of our research. The semi-structured nature was chosen because it gave us the liberty to insert or remove questions based on the expertise of the interviewee. We used a survey to understand the extent of language barriers and their effects on one's participation in society. Surveying was an efficient method through which we could gather statistically significant data to support or refute trends we observed

Interviews

Our target for interviewees consisted of subject matter experts and immigrants. The goal for interviewing subject matter experts was to acquire contextual information about immigration trends, attitudes towards the language, barriers to acquiring Icelandic, and how these barriers affect an immigrant's ability to participate in society. Upon scheduling an interview, we met and formulated specific questions based on the interviewee's area of expertise. We pulled from a set of general questions, adding and removing questions by relevance. Our 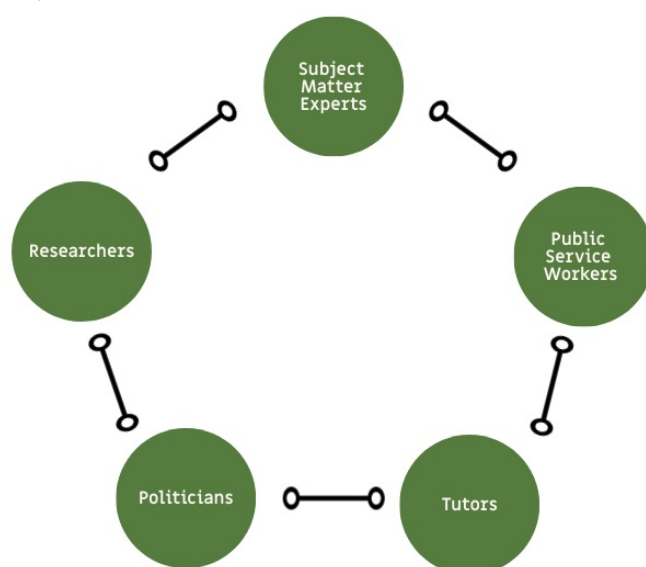general set of questions reflected the survey questions. By asking consistent questions, we could code and analyze our data more effectively and with less bias. During each interview, at least one member of the team was taking notes.

Figure E: A comprehensive overview of all the groups that we reached out to during our project

After we concluded our interviewing, we summarized and assessed the transcriptions of interviews for common trends. We were given permission to record audio for several interviews, and these audio recordings were used to corroborate the notes we took. After a rigorous review, we utilized a codebook to turn our qualitative data into quantitative data. The data was then analyzed and interpreted into graphs, charts, and tables.

Survey

Our survey was distributed in three ways: QR codes on flyers in public spaces, an anonymized link distributed through online groups, and through interviewees distributing it through their network. Our minimum goal was 30 responses, and our stretch goal was 100 responses for improved statistical significance. Despite initial plans to distribute in multiple languages for accessibility reasons, the survey was distributed in English as well as a crude translation into Icelandic via Google Translate. This was necessary due to the lack of an available translator.

We put up our flyer in many locations across Reykjavik, including the university, a library, coffee shops, restaurants, the Red Cross, and

language houses. The collection of locations we placed our flyer proved to be ineffective, as our QR codes only produced a single response. We also distributed our survey online using an anonymized link. Online distribution was utilized in order to expand the scope of our survey outside of the capital region. The survey link was distributed on the Discord server, immigrants in Iceland Facebook groups, International Student Facebook groups, and the Iceland subreddit. Our survey was also distributed through our network of interviewees and stakeholders.

The survey

Figure F: Picture of a survey we hung up at Downtown Reykjavik Apartments to get QR code responses

collected demographic data to help organize responses based on groups. The main demographics of interest were age, nationality, and citizenship in Iceland. The demographic data collected was used to determine which questions were relevant to each participant. The questions consisted mostly of scale-based answers. There were also free response questions to provide room for people to express their opinions. Every survey question was completely optional, with the exception of the consent form, to not overwhelm the respondents.

Ethical Concerns

Since our topic deals with sensitive information we have taken steps to ensure that everything is confidential and secure. We used Qualtrics to conduct surveys. The software ensures that only we have access to the data. The survey did not include any personal data about the participant. For our interviews, we ensured that each participant was aware they could remain anonymous or remove themselves from the project at any time. Any and all quotes from interviews have been

used with permission from their speakers, and all interviewees were assured that they are under no obligation to allow us to use their direct quotes. The interview data, like the survey data, was only accessible to us and our advisors. All data will be destroyed upon completion of the project in October 2022. As we collected personal and identifying data, we utilized the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of the individuals' privacy and prepare our survey to be up to

institutional standards.

A major concern for our survey, as well as interviews, are biases. Our method of convenience sampling resulted in biases in respondents. We also have data skewed towards certain demographics. For instance, our survey was distributed by a tutor working in Spain, so a disproportionate amount of our data comes from native Spanish speakers. Another obstacle in terms of biases is the personal assumptions we have. It was important for us to carefully word questions to not bring up any traumatic experiences, and to allow the participant to accurately portray their stories without filtering.

Data Analysis

4.1

Difficulty of Learning Icelandic

4.2

Politics

4.3

Workforce

4.4

Community

4.5

Data Analysis Conclusion

Introduction

From the semi-structured interviews and conversations we were able to better understand the landscape of language acquisition as it relates to immigrants. We kept track of common themes, especially those that arose without our direct prompting. We conducted followup interviews during weeks four, five, and six in order to further our understanding of the trends we assessed from our initial interviews and the survey results as they came in.

The survey responses included some groups that were not relevant to our scope including respondents that had never lived in Iceland and those who are native Icelanders.

These responses were filtered out before analysis continued. Since we used Qualtrics, the multiple choice selection questions were automatically processed and tallied. For free response questions we first observed the range of answers then decided on categories and themes to group the answers by. After grouping, we tallied the count of all answers that fell into the category. Any answers that did not fit well into a grouping were added to an "Other" category which was also displayed. In total, we amassed 20 interviews with subject matter experts, interviews with immigrants, and 96 survey responses, with 65 complete and filtered responses.

4.1 Difficulties of Learning Icelandic

Icelandic is a difficult language to learn. Throughout our investigation we found threads on online forums lamenting the complexity of the language, and observed similar sentiment on the Discord server. Two professors we connected with from the Language Department of the
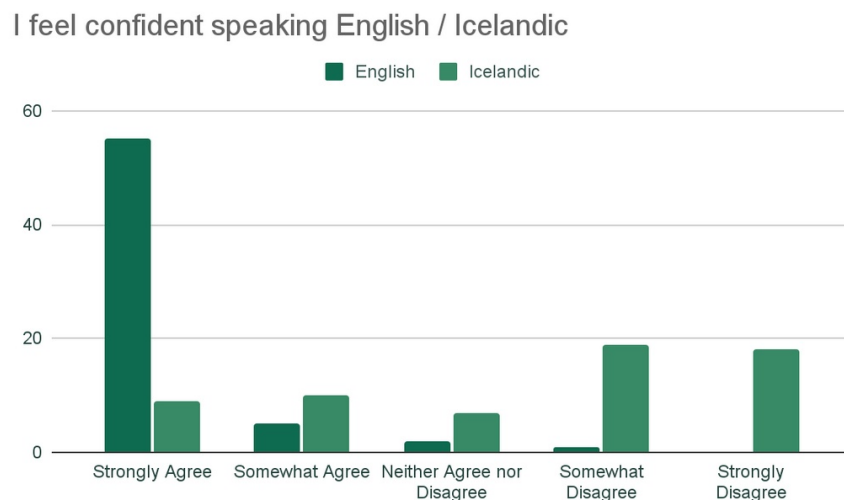

Figure 1: Confidence in speaking Icelandic as compared to English

University of Iceland spoke of the massive dropout rate of language students primarily due to a lack of Icelandic skill. The Icelandic tutors we interviewed gave details about the difficulty of the language including the grammar structures and relative isolation during the language's development.

The difficulty of learning the language is further evidenced by the lack of confidence immigrants have in speaking the language (Figure 1). When asked what barriers they experienced to learning Icelandic, most survey respondents cited factors besides the intrinsic difficulty of the language (Figure 2). The most common category of barrier was a lack of resources. Some responses cover resources that should be available that are not, others mention currently existing resources—such as the classes available at the University of Iceland, other language schools, internet programs, and private tutors —then elaborated on why these resources were lacking or insufficient. Responses in the time category mentioned either a lack of time or an incompatible schedule. A specialist in intercultural affairs at the Grófin City Library in the Communications and Innovation Department suggests that "time here translates to mental energy. You do have the time, but it does not feel that way when you have a difficult job, are exhausted, and then have to spend free time learning a language that feels a bit like it's kept between closed doors." Cost encompasses all responses that mentioned a financial restriction. The final category was the ability to practice Icelandic being a barrier. Of the 13 responses that mention this barrier, 10 specifically include the point that Icelandic speakers will frequently switch over to English when they notice that their Icelandic is flawed or accented, instead of allowing them to practice speaking. The consequences of the difficulty of learning Icelandic can be seen in the levels of societal participation of immigrants in three main categories: politics, workforce, and community.

Category of Barrier	Count	Example Quotation from Survey Responses
Lack of Resources	27	"No resources available in little towns outside Reykjavík"
Time	19	"Lack of time to work and learn simultaneously"
Cost	18	"Expensive lessons, at awkward times for people doing shift work with irregular schedule"
Ability to Practice	13	"If speaking Icelandic and making slight mistakes, Icelandic interlocutors will immediately switch to English and sometimes continue the conversation in English even though I keep talking Icelandic"
Aspects of Icelandic	9	"The pronunciation of vowels. Especially the rhotics, my native tongue (or dialect I guess) doesn't nearly have the same sounds the Icelandic language makes. Grammar itself is doable, but there is a lot of it."

Figure 2: Categories of barriers experienced when learning Icelandic

Politics

Respondents generally agree that knowing Icelandic is necessary to be able to fully participate in Icelandic politics (Figure 3). We asked a city council member, Icelandic politician, and Polish immigrant what he thought about the importance of the Icelandic language in politics. He said "it's hard to say that it isn't important. Generally the Icelandic political system does not assume language, but the running of politics is always in Icelandic, such as meetings, minutes, discussions, and platforms, meaning participating without Icelandic would be hard." In an effort to reach non-Icelandic speakers, political parties and independent groups have been translating materials such as speeches and debates into English and, to a lesser extent, other languages such as Polish. One such group that came up multiple times during interviews was the Reykjavik Grapevine. Our data suggests that despite the existence of these groups, the work they do does not appear to be enough to fully inform non-

I feel it is necessary to know English / Icelandic to be able to fully participate in Icelandic politics
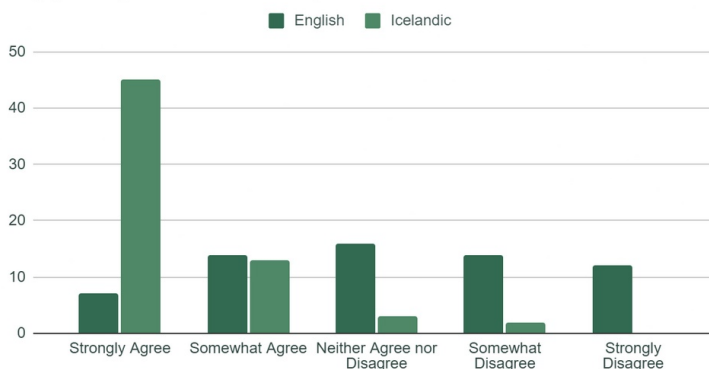
Figure 3: Opinions of the necessity of English and Icelandic to participate in Icelandic politics

Icelandic speakers (Figure 4). The near even split in opinion on this matter implies that though resources exist, perhaps access to, knowledge of, or scope of these resources is too limited to account for the influx of immigrants that Iceland has seen in recent years.

Less than 10% of the immigrants that responded to the survey agreed to the statement "I feel represented in the Icelandic government" (Figure 5). While our survey data cannot conclusively prove whether the lack of translated resources is the driving factor of this statistic, corroboration with our interview data suggests that the lack of translated resources makes political participation more difficult. What is clear, however, is that language serves as a major barrier to entry in the Icelandic political system. Considering the role of politics in society, this barrier should not be overlooked.

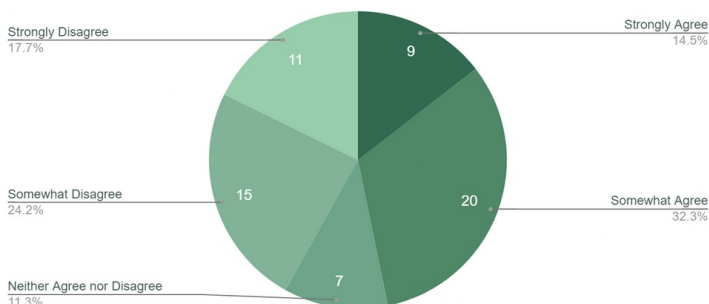I have the resources to understand the platforms of current politicians in Iceland

Strongly Disagree
17.7%

Strongly Agree
14.5%

11

9

Somewhat Disagree
24.2%

15

20

Somewhat Agree
32.3%

7

Neither Agree nor Disagree
11.3%

Figure 4: Availability of resources that allow for understanding of current political platforms

I feel represented in the Icelandic government

Strongly Agree 1.6%
Somewhat Agree 7.9%
Neither Agree nor Di… 28.6%
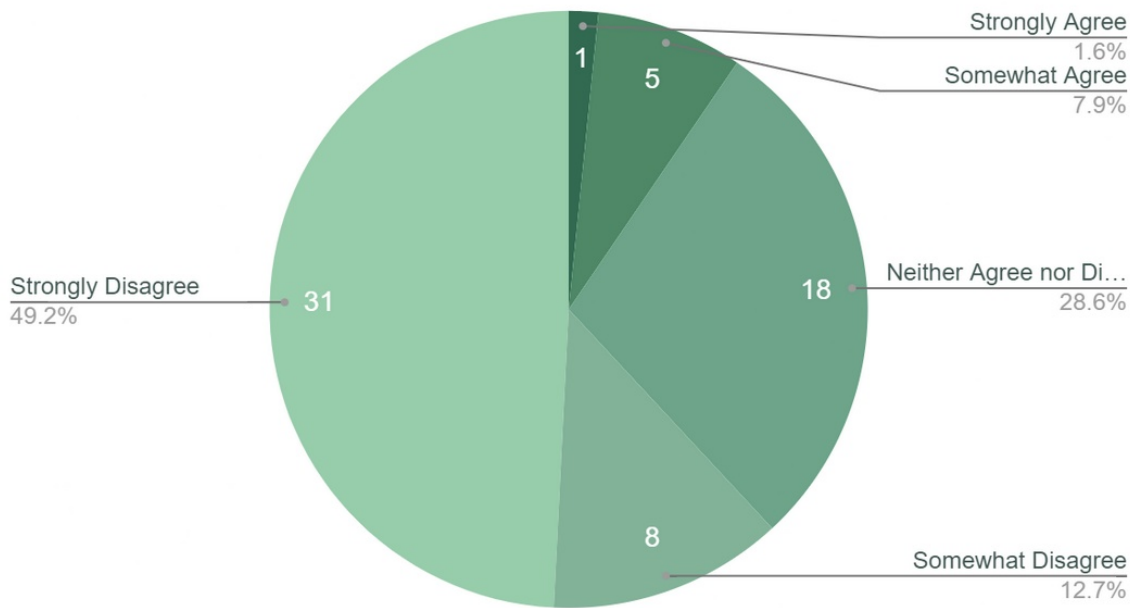Somewhat Disagree 12.7%
Strongly Disagree 49.2%

Figure 5: Feeling of representation in the Icelandic government

4.3 Workforce

Both Icelandic and English are used in many workplaces in Iceland. English is more commonly used when the worker is in contact with a large number of tourists, as is the case for many seasonal and hospitality workers, although most job listings state that Icelandic is required and English is a plus. Over half of our survey respondents indicated that the usage of English and Icelandic in their workplaces was near universal. (Figure 6). Our interview data suggests that strong knowledge of Icelandic is required for many upper-level positions, and many traditionally high-paying industries such as law, healthcare, and upper management. Icelandic is considered more important than English in terms of career advancement (Figure 7). Both languages hold a significant amount of weight, but the data
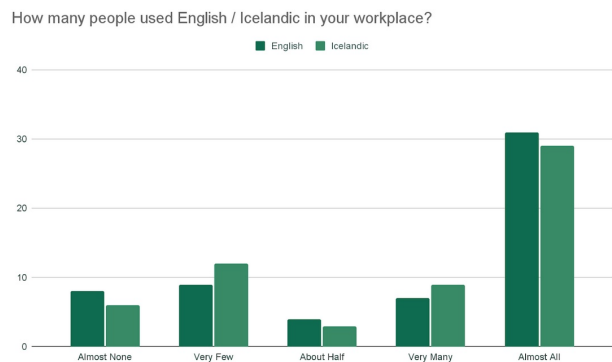

How many people used English / Icelandic in your workplace?

■ English ■ Icelandic

Figure 6: Use of English and Icelandic in the workplace

suggests Icelandic is more significant.

It is a widely held misconception that nearly all immigrants work in low-wage jobs in industries where native Icelanders do not want to work—such as construction, tourism, and fishing. We were told by a native Icelandic tutor that some time ago the word for a Polish immigrant was synonymous with "worker, like someone who would fix your bike". It is true that a disproportionate amount of these

workers are immigrants, but that is not the complete picture. Immigrants are able to find jobs in nearly every industry in Iceland (Figure 8). However, the positions they are able to hold does not often carry over from their native countries. In two separate interviews, we were told stories of immigrants who came to Iceland with PhDs who went on to work low wage, blue collar jobs. An Icelandic politician we interviewed commented that this distinction was "100% a language barrier".
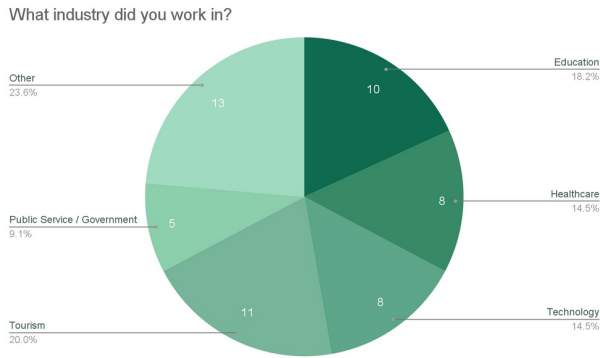

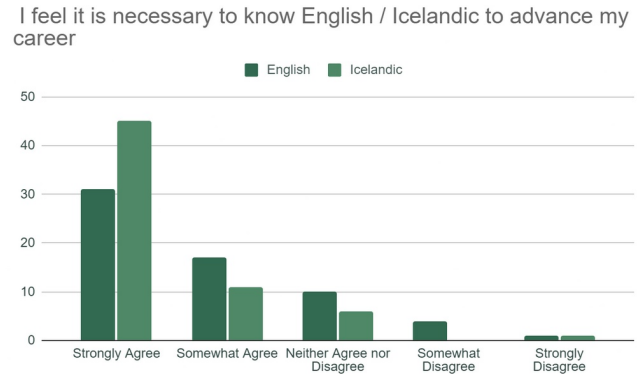*Figure 8: Distribution of immigrant workers among industries*

Figure 7: Opinions of the necessity of English and Icelandic to advance one's career

4.4 Community

An important part of participating in society is to find and participate in a community. Communities provide certain advantages to people who make up the community such as collective bargaining power, distribution of ideas and information, and giving a sense of belonging. That being said, not all immigrants will want to "integrate" in this way. However, if the opportunity to join a local community is denied or made difficult, it can have long-lasting effects on new immigrants.

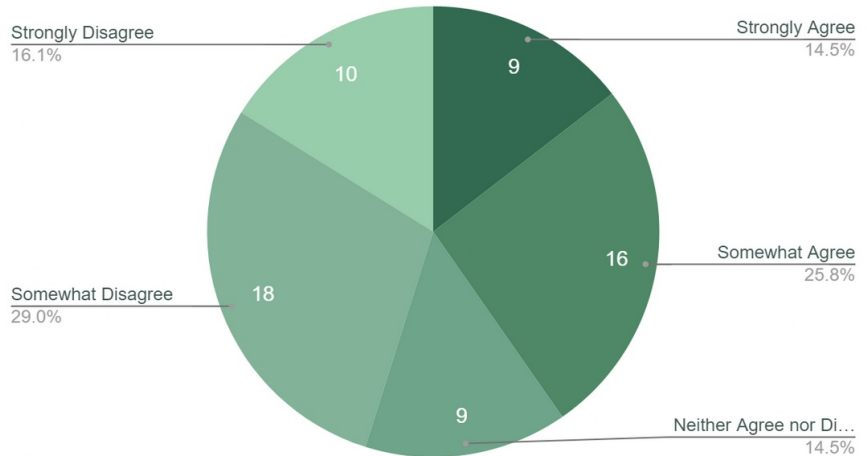Unfortunately, it appears that this barring from communities does seem to exist for immigrants to

Figure 9: Feelings of inclusion in local communities

Iceland. This is primarily evidenced by Figure 9, which shows that feelings about inclusion in a local community are incredibly varied with an approximately even split between agreement and disagreement. While this is not directly indicative of

barring, we would expect these responses to be more skewed towards agree than disagree if all immigrants that wanted to integrate into at least one local community were able to do so without barriers. Additionally, we asked about the barriers experienced when integrating into a new community and only received 4 out of 55 total responses that said they experienced no barriers (Figure 10). Also apparent in this figure is the

not wanting to interact with immigrants specifically. We did not directly tackle xenophobia or acceptence in our investigation since it was outside of the scope of our project, but the data is hard to ignore in this regard. In some of our interviews with immigrants we heard stories of how they were humiliated and made to repeat sentences in Icelandic until the native speaker was satisfied with the execution. Later,

"Official Icelandic government policy is 'language is the key to society,' but language is also used as an exclusionary tool to keep people out" ..." they want to show everyone that if you don't understand, you don't belong here"

overwhelming opinion that language served as a major barrier to integration.

   Insider / Outsider mentality is also often alluded to in the responses. Many responses include the phrase "closed circle" or mention Icelanders

these immigrants would be hesitant to speak and practice Icelandic with natives because the humiliation caused a loss of will to learn. This is not to say this is the universal experience of immigrants, nor that all Icelanders, or even most, act this way. We also heard stories of natives that were kind and patient with new language learners and helped them practice. As one of the immigrants we interviewed said "they are definitely the minority, but they are a loud and angry minority that gives the impression of a majority".

   An unexpected finding was that far

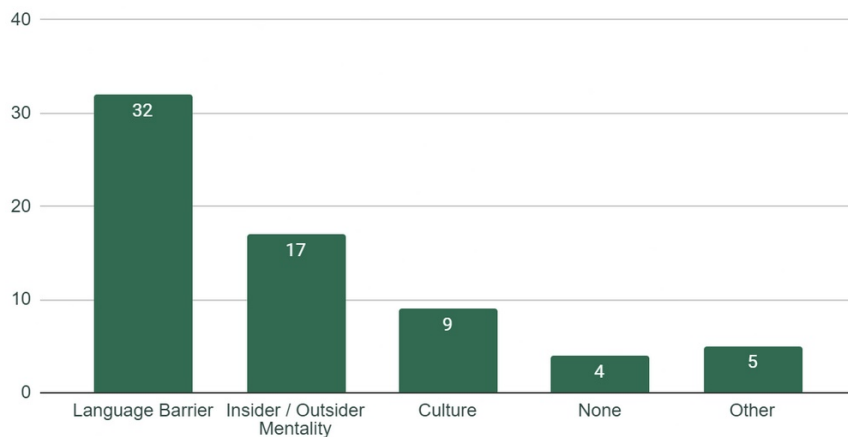What were the barriers that you experienced when integrating into your new community?

Figure 10: Barriers experienced when integrating into a new community

fewewr immigrants than we thought had no or little interest in finding a place in a local community of people who spoke their native language (assuming their native language was not English). We had assumed that a somewhat large proportion of immigrants would want to find members of their own ethnicity and create communities based on that commonality. This assumption is contrary to the data. Figure 11 shows that Icelandic, and to a lesser extent English, are considered to be necessary to connect with members of the local community, whereas the native language was slightly skewed
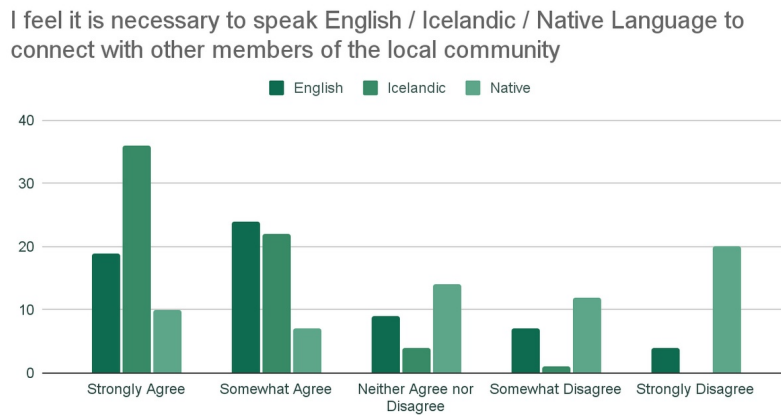
I feel it is necessary to speak English / Icelandic / Native Language to connect with other members of the local community

Figure 11: Opinions of the necessity of English, Icelandic, and Native Language to connect to local community

towards disagreement. Furthermore, when asked if there are any organizations where they can connect with members of their ethnicity 9 of the 55 responses said that they would not be interested in such an organization regardless of whether or not it existed. To elaborate, this was not a part of the question, these responses made this point unprompted.

There is a great deal more to learn about community inclusion and belonging for immigrants in Iceland. However, from the data we collected it is evident that learning Icelandic plays a major role.

4.5 Data Analysis Conclusion

Language acquisition is a major barrier to societal participation. Language barriers are disproportionately felt by immigrants. Some of the consequences of this are shown by the data we collected, but this is far from the whole story. In the topics we covered in our investigation, the role of language acquisition in societal participation is complex and entangled with many other factors. We can be certain that language acquisition does significantly affect the ability of immigrants to participate in society.

This is not to say that the difficulty of learning Icelandic makes participation impossible or that immigrants are not capable of participation—we have multiple examples of the opposite. Our data suggests that the barriers to language acquisition—as found from our interviews and surveys—hinder the ability of an immigrant in Iceland to participate in the workforce, become politically involved, and integrate with their local communities.

Recommendations

Recommendations

During our research, we found several new questions and branches in our project that fell outside of our original scope. We feel confident issuing several recommendations for future teams pursuing these avenues of research. A future team could draw comparisons between Icelandic language barriers for immigrants and language barriers for immigrants in the United States. This could focus on our three buckets, and how they compare across countries. What obstacles do immigrants face globally? What obstacles are unique to Iceland? These questions have ramifications for both Icelandic and American immigration studies.

A future team could research how racism and the elitism of the Icelandic language play a role in the engagement of an immigrant in society. Formal Icelandic is incredibly difficult to learn properly, and any trace of an accent will be met with condescension and disdain. How can an immigrant integrate if Icelanders will not let them? This question is one that is coming to bear in the political sphere of the country, and one that a future team from WPI could further investigate.

A future team could elaborate on our research and dive deeper into researching an immigrant's experience with any of our three buckets of societal participation. This future team could propose methods to mitigate immigrant exclusion or promote immigrant integration. They can look into how an immigrant feels about Icelandic politics, and how political resources can be made more accessible to immigrant communities.

The team could research and work alongside Icelandic unions in an effort to assess how unions are mitigating the language barrier between immigrants and integration in the workforce. We have heard first hand from politicians and professors how language barriers in the workforce and politics is becoming an increasingly difficult issue to confront. A WPI team could be at the forefront of future research into this project.

A future team could research the difference between first and second generation immigrants and their participation in politics and the workforce. We have heard from politicians that several incoming migrants and refugees come from regions distrustful of democracy, and for that reason choose not to vote. Research could be done on how to restore faith in democratic systems, and how the perceptions of these first generation immigrants differ from those of their children. We have been told most children vote with their parents, and if their parents do not vote, how does that affect the democratic participation of their children? These questions are some that have been minimally researched, and would have ramifications for several European countries.

This project is just in its early stages. During our research, we came across numerous new questions and avenues for future projects. While they fell outside the scope of our current project, future teams could build entire projects around these research questions. We feel comfortable endorsing any such projects.

5.2
Interview Limitations

Subject matter experts and public workers dominated the pool of interviewees. Due to the time constraint of reaching out to a variety of persons and organizations, we were not able to get in contact with immigrants working outside of the capital region. Based on interviews, it is difficult even with time and resources to get in contact with immigrant workers and communities outside of Reykjavik. Our data skews into the perceptions of subject matter experts and politicians, which introduces a bias. In the future, teams will want to get in contact with researchers across the country to get access to communities outside the capital region. A comprehensive list of such stakeholders can be seen in our network map. Connecting with communities outside of Reykjavik would allow for a diverse pool of participants.

A majority of our interviewees were native speakers, introducing another bias. These interviewees were able to shed light on the processes through which an immigrant can learn Icelandic, but were unable to provide anecdotes. In the future, teams may be able to utilize the resources we provide to get in contact with more individuals of Icelandic as a second language (ISL) background.

5.3
Survey Limitations

The survey data was skewed due to the distribution methods of the survey and participants' backgrounds.
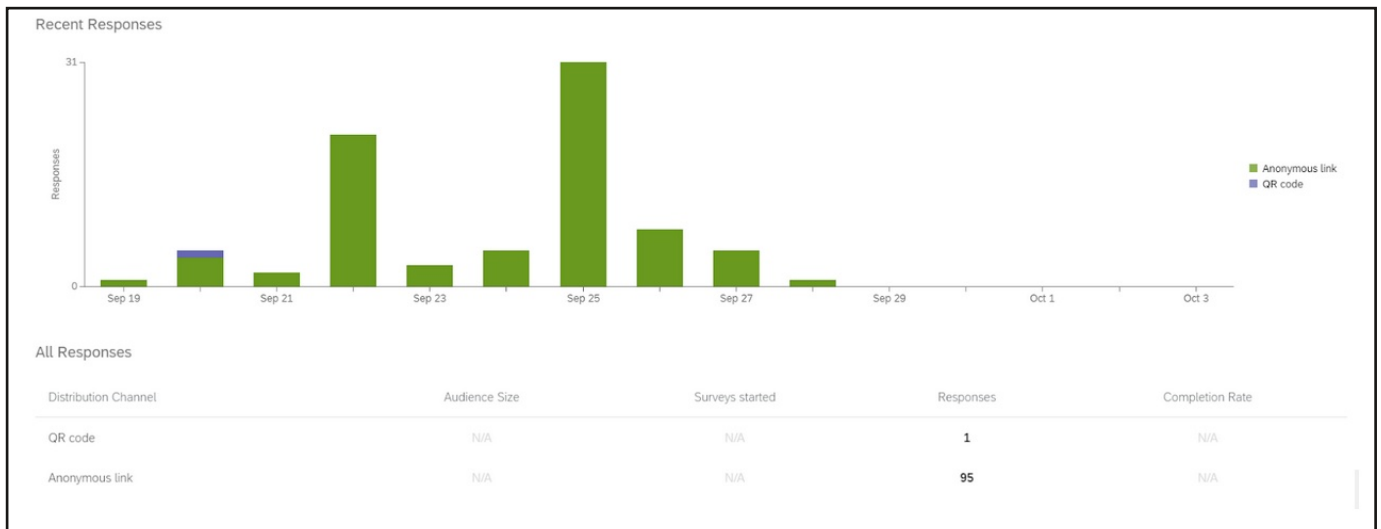(Figure 12: Survey responses on a day to day timetable, separated by color. Notice that green denotes a link, and blue denotes a QR code.)

Based on Figure 12, only one survey was taken by the QR code despite an abundant number of physical copies across public spaces in Reykjavik. Upon analysis of the data, we found two major spikes in survey responses. These spikes can be attributed to an Icelandic language tutor currently teaching and residing in Spain, and a relevant researcher currently working with immigrant populations in Vik, distributing the survey to their network. Only three responses were those of native Icelanders, so there is insufficient data to represent that population. Finally, due to the nature of the communities distributed to, we had a disproportionate amount of quantitative data related to an immigrant's role in the workforce, and minimal quantitative data regarding an immigrant's role in politics. To avoid such biases in the future, teams should distribute the survey across more locations and attempt to reach both native Icelanders and immigrants. A wider

variety of distribution methods would assist future teams in getting data, and assure that several data skews are addressed.

Immigrants are not one people. There are immigrants that come from a multitude of countries for a multitude of reasons and with equally numerable personal stories and perspectives. All the data are aggregates of many different groups of people. While there is certainly some consensus found between these groups, this is not always the case. However, we believe that certain prevalent and consistent patterns can still be extracted from the aggregation and hold important insights. Responses that have achieved this level of prevalence and consistency we have assumed to be representative of a common shared experience.

Figure 12: Survey responses on a day to day timetable, separated by color. Notice that green denotes a link, and blue denotes a QR code

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