

# Digitally Connected Migrants and Their Investment in Learning a Small Language: The Case of Iceland

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## Abstract

Migrants today, described by Dana Diminescu as connected migrants, sustain continuous ties across borders. This article examines how transnational digital connectedness relates to migrants' investment in learning smaller languages. Focusing on Iceland, a small-language context where English functions widely as a lingua franca, this study integrates digital migration research with sociolinguistic theories of linguistic investment. Using a mixed-methods design, we combine a descriptive, exploratory analysis of survey data from 2,211 immigrants with 11 in-depth interviews that investigate migrants' language-learning trajectories, inclusion, and transnational ties. Survey results show broad normative support for learning Icelandic alongside high levels of digital connectedness. However, qualitative findings reveal substantial variation in how migrants interpret and enact this expectation. We identify five orientations toward learning Icelandic in the interviews: enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants, pragmatic learners, frustrated learners, community-based learners, and globally oriented residents. These orientations can change at different stages of individuals' language-learning trajectories, reflecting different balances between global connectedness and local investment in language learning. These orientations demonstrate how digital connectivity can facilitate participation, e.g., by providing access to language-learning resources, but can also reduce the perceived need to invest in the local language. By linking digital migration studies with sociolinguistic theories of investment, the article advances understanding of how migrants negotiate language learning, belonging, and participation in small-language societies amid global mobility.

## Keywords

digital connectedness; Iceland; linguistic investment; migrants; small languages

## 1. Introduction

Digital media enable migrants to sustain personal relationships and professional networks across borders. Diminescu (2008) argues that nowadays, “connected migrants” inhabit multiple social and linguistic worlds at once. Diminescu defines a connected migrant as “a migrant equipped with at least one digitalized device which enables him/her to instantaneously switch between several lifestyles” (Diminescu, 2020, p. 74). Prior research suggests that such transnational digital ties are not detrimental to local embeddedness but can enhance migrants’ well-being and participation in their place of residence (Hoffmann et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2019). However, the affordances of digital connectedness also raise questions about migrants’ investment in smaller, less globally dominant languages, where the perceived benefits of learning the local language may be less obvious (Pöyhönen & Simpson, 2024). Investment in language learning, a term coined by sociolinguist Norton, provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding why, for example, learners who are initially highly motivated to learn a language might decide to engage or disengage from learning due to larger societal factors such as unequal access to language learning resources, attitudes of the receiving community towards new speakers, or the affordances provided by the lingua franca English (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Norton, 2013).

This article contributes to the literature by showing that digital connectedness does not simply compete with local language learning in small-language societies but reorganizes language learning into different orientations. The present study advances prior research on adult migrants’ language learning with an in-depth analysis of how digital transnational ties to migrants’ countries of origin relate to linguistic investment. Iceland is a particularly insightful case for this study: It combines a strong linguistic identity with widespread use of English in workplaces, education, and everyday life (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2013). We refer to Icelandic as a small language because of its comparatively small number of speakers (Hoffmann & Holm, 2025). Today, Iceland has nearly 400,000 inhabitants, of whom 17% are immigrants, with varying levels of proficiency in L2 Icelandic (Kristinsson, 2024). While public policy stresses the importance of Icelandic for participation in society (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024), many migrants, especially those planning to stay temporarily, find English sufficient for practical needs and everyday interaction (OECD, 2024). A recent report by the OECD found that the share of immigrants in Iceland who claim advanced proficiency in the local language is below 20%, the lowest among OECD countries (OECD, 2024).

The coexistence of a small national language, the dominant global lingua franca English, and sustained transnational digital connectivity creates a distinctive context in which belonging, participation, and linguistic expectations are continuously negotiated. Our central hypothesis is thus that digital connectedness reshapes migrants’ language learning trajectories.

This article examines how digital connectedness shapes migrants’ investment in learning Icelandic. Specifically, we ask:

1. How is migrants’ degree of digital connectivity associated with their attitudes toward learning a small language?
2. How do digitally connected migrants narrate and negotiate learning and using Icelandic in everyday life?

To address these questions, we adopt a mixed-methods design. Survey data from 2,211 immigrants reveal patterns in immigrants' language practices and transnational ties, while 11 in-depth interviews offer insight into migrants' thoughts and considerations about language learning and their social environments.

Our analysis draws on Diminescu's (2008, 2020) concept of connected migrants and Norton's (2000, 2013) concept of linguistic investment. Based on the interview material, we identify five recurring orientations toward learning Icelandic: enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants, pragmatic learners, frustrated learners, community-based learners, and globally oriented residents. By integrating quantitative data with narrative accounts, this study advances debates on integration and social inclusion in the era of digital mobility, clarifying when and why transnational digital connectivity functions as a resource for participation, a disincentive to local language learning, or both.

First, we present our theoretical framework and the key concepts. Then, we discuss prior studies on digitally connected migrants in small-language contexts and our methodology, followed by a presentation of the findings. Lastly, we discuss the implications of our study, presenting the multifaceted ways in which migrants negotiate investment in language learning and digital connectivity.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Connected Migrants and Linguistic Investment

This study integrates insights from digital migration studies (Diminescu, 2008, 2020) and sociolinguistic theories of investment in language learning (Norton, 2000, 2013) to explain how global connectivity reshapes migrants' engagement with small-language contexts. Rather than treating digital connectedness as either an obstacle to or a facilitator of inclusion, the framework conceptualizes it as a reality that reconfigures linguistic investment, especially in small-language contexts.

### 2.1. Connected Migrants

The digitalization of everyday life has fundamentally altered the experience of migration. Diminescu (2008, 2020) conceptualizes connected migrants as individuals who sustain social, cultural, and emotional ties across borders through digital media. Migration, in this view, does not entail a clear rupture between origin and destination. The emerging research field of digital migration studies scrutinizes how, while technology and migration have for a long time been discussed separately, these areas are in fact intertwined and "migration in its essence is fundamentally co-shaped by media technologies" (Leurs, 2023, p. 6). Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018) suggest that the concept of "connected migrant" reframes cosmopolitanism as an everyday, "banal" practice through which the rigid distinctions between online and offline, local and global, encapsulation and cosmopolitanization can be overcome. Communication today moves across online and offline spaces, as for example shown in Lyons and Tagg's (2024) study of Polish migrants living in London, finding that mobile messaging functions as a space where migrants share information but also align expectations and viewpoints as a means of preparation for an offline meeting. Empirical research shows that migrants' digital connectedness can coexist with, and even support, local participation and migrants' well-being by providing emotional support, information, and coping resources in unfamiliar environments, enabling everyday interaction in familiar languages and social contexts (Hoffmann et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2019; Smahina, 2026).

## **2.2. Investment in Language Learning**

Norton's (2000, 2013) concept of investment shifts attention from individual motivation to the social and structural conditions of language learning. Rather than asking whether learners are motivated (Dörnyei, 2009), the notion of investment foregrounds how expectations of symbolic or material returns, such as employment opportunities, social recognition, or a sense of belonging, shape the allocation of time, effort, and affective resources to language learning. Investment in language learning is thus contingent on access, power relations, and the perceived rewards of participation in specific social contexts. Motivation and investment are two distinct concepts: While motivation is a psychological construct that encompasses both conscious and unconscious factors, investment is primarily sociological and examines how histories, lived experiences, and social practices shape language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2021).

## **2.3. Connected Migrants and Investment in Language Learning**

We bring together the concepts of connected migration and linguistic investment to understand language learning in today's technological and digital realities. The intersection between digital transnational connectivity and linguistic investment remains underexplored. However, in a 2014 article, Darvin and Norton explore the pedagogical potential of building migrants' digital transnational connectivity as a resource for language learning. They write:

Digital storytelling, by allowing them to share their personal histories, their stories of migration and assimilation, and the material conditions of their lived experiences, holds great potential for enabling migrant learners to be fully invested in their transnational identities and to claim their right to speak. (Darvin & Norton, 2014, p. 55)

This theoretical synthesis of digital connectedness and linguistic investment provides the lens through which the present study interprets migrants' diverse orientations toward learning Icelandic. This theoretical framework helps us to conceptualize language learning as a strategic response to digitally mediated opportunity structures rather than as a linear outcome of motivation or integration pressure. For highly connected migrants embedded in English-speaking professional and transnational networks, the need to invest in Icelandic may be substantially reduced. For others, learning the local language is framed less as a functional requirement than as an ethical, symbolic, or affective act of belonging.

These dynamics produce variation that cannot be explained solely by individual motivation. Instead, differences in investment reflect migrants' positioning within global and local economies of language and value, including access to English-mediated workplaces, interactional norms, and transnational digital communities (van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009).

From this perspective, we hypothesize that digital connectedness reshapes, rather than simply diminishes, migrants' investment in the local language, showing that such investment is selective, situational, and contingent on perceived opportunities for use and recognition.

### 3. Literature Review: Prior Insights on Linguistic Investment of Digitally Connected Migrants in Small-Language Contexts

Research on language learning in small-language societies consistently shows that acquiring the local language is closely tied to social participation, employment, and a sense of belonging. In this article, small languages are understood as languages with comparatively few speakers and limited global reach (Hoffmann & Holm, 2025; Pöyhönen & Simpson, 2024). There are a few empirical studies examining migrants' digital practices or their language-learning experiences. However, the literature review reveals a lack of studies on how digital connectivity intersects with language learning in small-language contexts.

A key section of the literature on migrants in small-language contexts highlights the structural importance of proficiency in the receiving country's language for labor market access and civic participation. Learning smaller languages can strengthen migrants' agency and inclusion in the receiving community (Higham, 2024). Reichenberg and Berhanu (2018), for example, show that in Sweden, language skills are critical for employment outcomes and that structured language training programs are essential for acquiring them. Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) find that most individuals in Iceland learn Icelandic for instrumental reasons, and they "gain freedom in being able to communicate and understand what is happening around them in the country where they live" (p. 25). Thus, without sufficient proficiency in the receiving country's language, opportunities for stable employment, social connections, and active civic participation remain constrained for most migrants. Migrants learning minority and small languages can also play a crucial role in language revitalization efforts, as has been shown in studies in Ireland and Wales (Flynn, 2024; Higham, 2024).

Other studies on digital connectivity among migrants in small-language environments emphasize the role of social environments in shaping language-learning trajectories. Van Tubergen and Kalmijn (2009) demonstrate that ethnic and linguistic networks can both facilitate and hinder host-language acquisition, depending on whether they provide opportunities for practice or reduce exposure to the local language. A recent study in Finland highlights that highly connected migrants often navigate between these dynamics, using digital platforms to maintain ties to people from their country of origin while also using digital spaces to construct belonging in their place of residence through meaning-making around work (Smahina, 2026). This study demonstrates that digital platforms allow migrants to negotiate identity and community belonging while managing emotional well-being (Smahina, 2026). Similarly, Cicénaite and Loftsdóttir's (2024) recent research on Lithuanians in Iceland underscores that digital tools facilitate social engagement, providing both emotional and practical support. During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital spaces enabled discourses outside official state institutions and strengthened multiple dimensions of civil society (Cicénaite & Loftsdóttir, 2024).

A third section of the literature on digitally connected migrants in small-language contexts shows that language learning often serves not only as a practical requirement but also as a symbolic marker of inclusion (Holm, 2023). In her research on the Faroe Islands, Holm (2023) emphasizes that adult migrants' multilingual practices are deeply intertwined with social identity and community participation. Learning Faroese, for example, is not only a practical necessity but also a symbolic act of becoming a "new speaker" within local society, highlighting the interplay between linguistic competence and social belonging (Holm, 2023). Hoffmann and Holm (2025) show that migrants in small-language contexts hold a spectrum of ideologies, ranging from linguistic purism to English as a lingua franca.

A fourth section of the literature discusses how migrants in smaller language communities might retreat from or disinvest in the language. When interlocutors readily switch to English or another major language, when professional and social life can be conducted largely in English or another major language, or when migrants face uncertainty of how long they'll be able to reside in a country, the perceived return on investing in small, local languages may diminish, regardless of individual motivation (Szabó, 2024). In his study of Hungarian adult migrants to Catalonia, Gergely Szabó describes the phenomenon of their unwillingness and refusal to learn Catalan as “diasporic boundary maintenance.”

Overall, existing research highlights that language learning among highly connected migrants in small-language societies cannot be explained by individual motivation alone. Linguistic investment is shaped by structural conditions, such as access to training, labor market opportunities, language ideologies, and relational factors. Digital connectivity alters how migrants balance engagement with local linguistic environments against participation in transnational social worlds.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining a large-scale survey with in-depth qualitative interviews. The survey provides patterns of language use, transnational ties, and social participation, while the interviews offer insight into how migrants interpret these conditions and negotiate language learning. Together, the two components enable an analysis that links structural patterns to migrants' lived experiences.

### 4.2. Quantitative Survey

The quantitative component of the study draws on an online survey administered to migrants in Iceland in 2018 ( $N = 2,211$ ). The survey was distributed through convenience and snowball sampling at language schools, via social media. To reach out to groups that are less likely to participate in surveys, in some regions, local assistants with strong ties to migrant communities were hired to encourage migrants' participation. It was made available in eight languages commonly spoken by migrants in Iceland at the time—Icelandic, English, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Arabic, Russian, and Thai—and was coordinated by the University of Akureyri Research Centre (RHA). Upon opening the survey, each participant could select their preferred language.

Participants received written information about the study and provided informed consent. No personal identifiers were collected, and given Iceland's small population, additional safeguards were applied, including recording regions of origin rather than specific countries. The survey collected data on demographic characteristics, educational and occupational background, self-assessed proficiency in Icelandic and English, language use across different contexts, participation in language courses, and the use of digital media for communication and information. It also included indicators of social inclusion, such as trust in institutions, community engagement, and perceived discrimination.

Descriptive statistical analyses were used to examine patterns and associations between language practices, language ideologies, and digital connectivity. These descriptive findings informed both the sampling strategy and the thematic focus of the qualitative interviews.

#### 4.2.1. Measurements

Media and social media use were measured using three survey items capturing migrants' transnational and co-ethnic digital connections. Following established distinctions in the literature, two items assessed home-country media use, defined as engagement with media and social contacts in the country of origin (Yin, 2013), while one item measured ethnic media use, referring to interaction with people from the same country of origin residing in Iceland (Yin, 2013). Respondents were asked how frequently they followed or interacted with people from their country of origin on social media, how often they engaged with compatriots living in Iceland, and how frequently they consumed news or current affairs media from their country of origin. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from *never or almost never* to *every day or almost daily*. Self-reported Icelandic proficiency was measured by asking participants to rate their ability in Icelandic. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from *do not speak it* to *fully proficient*. Attitudes toward learning the local language were measured using the statement: "Immigrants who come to live in our municipality should learn Icelandic"; responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from *agree totally* to *disagree totally*.

#### 4.3. Interview Data

The qualitative material consists of semi-structured interviews with 11 migrants in Iceland. Interviews were conducted in 2021 and lasted between 30 and 120 minutes each. Participants were recruited from the survey pool using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in gender, country of origin, place of residence (rural/urban), and language learning experiences (some had received formal language training, others hadn't). The reason for this sampling strategy was that an open call for participants may have resulted in overrepresentation of migrants with a strong interest in learning Icelandic.

An interview guide developed by the research team structured the conversations while allowing flexibility to follow participants' individual experiences. Interviews addressed migrants' experiences of learning and using Icelandic, perceptions of language courses, motivations and challenges, social networks, and the role of English and digital media in everyday life.

Interviews were conducted in English (10) and German (1), recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. They took place at locations chosen by the participants, including online, at cafés, and in quiet spaces on an Icelandic university campus. The analysis followed a thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that combined inductive and deductive strategies. Initial open coding identified recurring themes related to language learning practices, barriers, and orientations toward Icelandic. These themes were subsequently examined in relation to established theoretical concepts from the language learning and migration literature. Through iterative coding and synthesis, five recurring orientations toward learning Icelandic were identified: enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants, pragmatic learners, frustrated learners, community-based learners, and globally oriented residents. This typology is not intended as a rigid classification but as an analytical tool for capturing variation in linguistic investment among digitally connected migrants. It highlights the interplay between digital connectedness, social positioning, and language investment, and provides a framework for interpreting both individual narratives and survey patterns. Triangulation between qualitative and quantitative data allows individual experiences to be situated within broader structural patterns of linguistic inclusion and exclusion.

## 5. Findings

The findings show that migrants' engagement with the Icelandic language is shaped by the interplay of digital connectedness, social positioning, and perceived necessity. Survey results indicate broad normative agreement that learning the local language is important (Norton, 2000, 2013). However, the qualitative interviews reveal substantial variation in how this expectation is interpreted and enacted in practice. Together, the findings demonstrate that agreement on the value of learning Icelandic does not uniformly translate into linguistic investment, but instead gives rise to diverse strategies of engagement, selectivity, and disengagement.

### 5.1. Survey Results

#### 5.1.1. Survey Participants

Table 1 provides information about participants' backgrounds.

**Table 1.** Survey participants by gender, age, and place of origin.

Gender					
Female			Male		
1,465 (66.3%)			738 (33.4%)		
Age					
18–25 years		26–40 years		41 or older	
275 (12.4%)		1,286 (58.2%)		638 (28.9%)	
Region of origin					
Central or Eastern Europe	Nordic Countries, Western Europe, or North America	Asia	Africa	South or Central America	Other
1,440 (65%)	483 (22%)	140 (6.5%)	40 (2%)	34 (1.5%)	67 (3%)

#### 5.1.2. Digital Connections

Survey results indicate high levels of transnational digital connectivity. Nearly half of respondents (49.4%) reported being in contact with people from their country of origin on a daily or almost daily basis. Contact with compatriots living in Iceland was also common, with 33.6% reporting daily or near-daily interaction. In contrast, frequent contact with immigrants from other countries of origin living in Iceland was less common, reported by 20.8% of respondents (Table 2). Overall, the data suggest that many migrants maintain dense transnational and co-ethnic networks, while cross-national immigrant contact occurs less frequently.

**Table 2.** Frequency of contact on social media.

	People from the same country as me	People from the same country as me, living in Iceland	Foreigners in Iceland, not from the same country as me
Every day or almost every day	49.4%	33.6%	20.8%
Once or twice per week	24.4%	25.4%	20.2%
Once or twice per month	10.9%	11.5%	12.3%
Once per month	6.4%	9.6%	12.5%
Never or almost never	8.9%	19.9%	34.2%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

### 5.1.3. Self-Reported Icelandic Proficiency

Levels of self-reported Icelandic proficiency varied considerably (Table 3). Almost half of the respondents (46.1%) reported not speaking Icelandic or speaking it only poorly. By contrast, 29.3% described their Icelandic as rather good or fluent, while 24.7% evaluated their skills as neither good nor poor.

**Table 3.** Self-reported proficiency in Icelandic.

Category	N	%
Don't speak it	280	12.8
Rather poor	730	33.3
Neither good nor bad	541	24.7
Rather good	435	19.9
Fluent	206	9.4
Total	2,192	100.0

### 5.1.4. Attitudes Towards Learning Icelandic

Despite variation in proficiency, normative support for learning Icelandic was high (Table 4). A clear majority of respondents (70.3%) agreed, to varying degrees, that immigrants who move to their municipality should learn Icelandic. At the same time, 18.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 10.9% expressed some level of disagreement. This pattern suggests a broad endorsement of Icelandic as a social norm, alongside a non-negligible degree of ambivalence or resistance.

**Table 4.** Attitudes towards immigrants learning Icelandic.

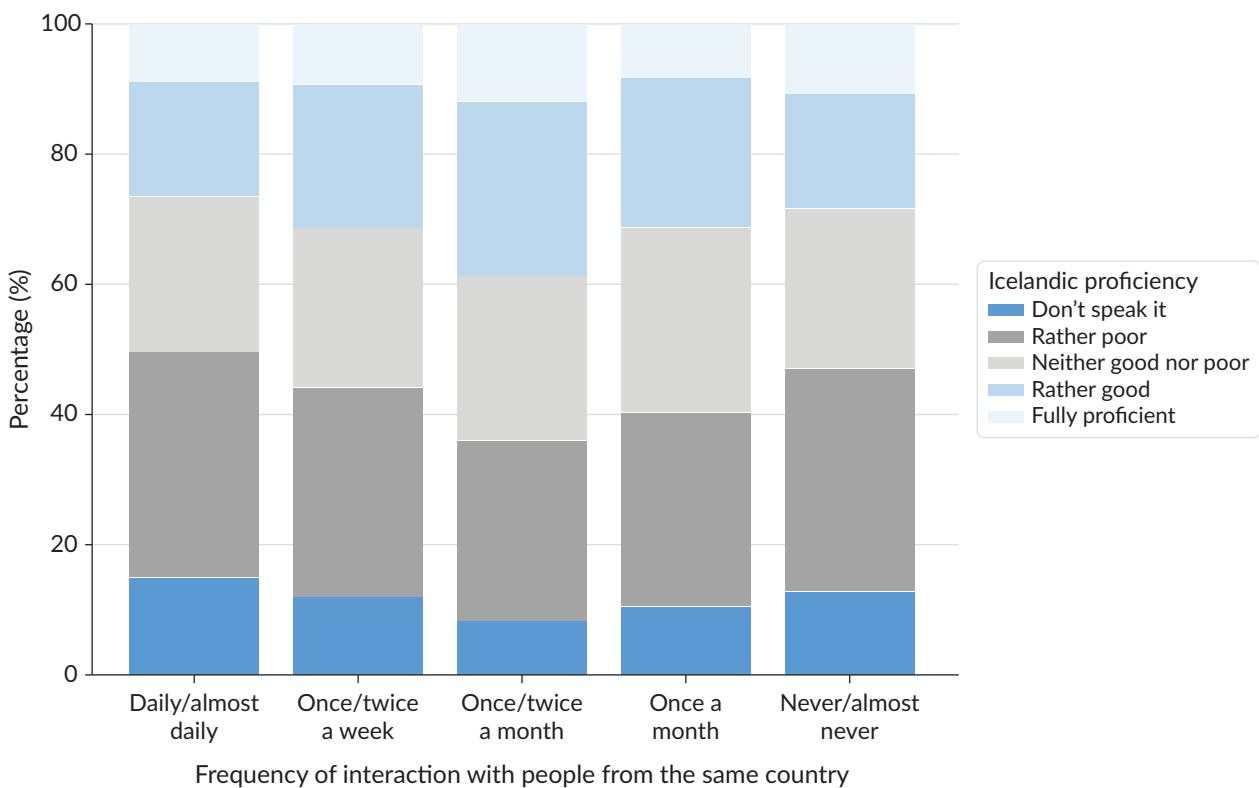
Category	N	%
Fully agree	798	36.7
Rather agree	729	33.6
Neither agree nor disagree	409	18.8
Rather disagree	152	7.0
Fully disagree	85	3.9
Total	2,173	100.0

### 5.1.5. Cross-Tabulation Analysis: Self-Reported Icelandic Proficiency and Frequency of Interaction

To explore the relationship between digital connectedness and language proficiency, we examined self-reported Icelandic proficiency in relation to the frequency of interaction with people from the same country of origin (Figure 1). The results indicate an association between intensive home-country contact and lower self-reported proficiency in Icelandic in our sample. Among respondents who interacted with compatriots daily or almost daily, a higher proportion reported not speaking Icelandic or speaking it rather poorly, compared to those with less frequent contact.

As the frequency of home-country interaction decreases, the distribution of Icelandic proficiency becomes more balanced, with larger shares reporting intermediate or higher proficiency levels. Notably, however, fluent Icelandic speakers are present across all categories of home-country contact, indicating that frequent transnational interaction does not preclude high levels of Icelandic competence.

These findings suggest that intensive transnational connectedness may be associated with lower host-language proficiency, while also highlighting substantial variation within each category. The results, therefore, point to a relationship shaped by factors beyond contact frequency alone, underscoring the need for qualitative analysis to understand how migrants interpret and negotiate language learning in conditions of digital connectivity.



**Figure 1.** Cross-tabulation analysis: Icelandic proficiency by frequency of home country contact; self-reported Icelandic proficiency (y-axis) and frequency of interaction with people from the same country of origin (x-axis). Notes: N = 2092; percentages are row percentages.

## 5.2. Interview Results

The qualitative analysis identified five recurring orientations toward learning Icelandic: enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants, pragmatic learners, frustrated learners, community-based learners, and globally oriented residents. These orientations capture distinct ways migrants negotiate language learning at the intersection of local participation and global digital connectedness, illustrating how migrants balance normative expectations for learning Icelandic with the practical affordances of English and digitally mediated transnational networks. Rather than representing fixed categories, these categories reflect responses to differing opportunity structures and interactional experiences, which also change over time in migrants' language-learning journeys. Thus, while the quantitative data have indicated an association between language proficiency and the frequency of contact with immigrants' countries of origin, our analysis of interview data highlights factors informing the interview results. The sections that follow describe each orientation in turn.

### 5.2.1. Enthusiastic Integration-Oriented Migrants: Language as Belonging

Enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants view learning Icelandic as essential to social participation and belonging, echoing prevalent language ideologies (Hoffmann & Holm, 2025). Their orientation is closely aligned with Norton's (2013) depiction of investment as identity work. For these migrants, learning Icelandic is not primarily instrumental but rather a moral and affective commitment to understanding Icelandic culture and ways of seeing the world, rather than a technical skill. One interviewee perceived Icelandic as "the key to understanding Icelanders":

The Icelandic language is just a way to understand Icelanders, and I want to understand Icelanders to understand their culture, how they look at the world around them, and the nature, or like in the even in the political and economic way, it is all interesting for me, so I believe that this is the language is the key for understanding.

Another participant emphasized that living in Iceland without speaking Icelandic would severely constrain one's social life, describing language proficiency as fundamental to feeling socially embedded:

I think it is the most necessary part. I personally don't believe that you can be part of society without the language. But I also know that knowing the language wouldn't make you part of society, especially not in Iceland. I do feel quite comfortable, ahm, I know I wouldn't feel comfortable without speaking the language. I can't even, I really can't imagine my life living this safely without speaking the language, I just don't know how it would work. I feel it will put you in a very very little world even. And will limit your life.

Enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants actively seek opportunities to use Icelandic, combining formal instruction and informal interaction. Several participants described the language as "beautiful" and expressed pride in using it:

I learned Icelandic when I first came here....I always thought it was a very beautiful language, and uh, I just was very eager to practice and talk it, so I wasn't very shy, I wanted to, just, go out in the world

and just speak Icelandic. And I had like a big motivation because I thought it was beautiful, and I really like languages as well.

Digital connectedness does not undermine this orientation. Instead, transnational ties coexist with a strong commitment to local linguistic participation and Icelandic media. Digital learning tools are used to support language acquisition, and digital connectivity serves as a resource for language learning. For example, some interviewees either started learning Icelandic online before arriving or left Iceland temporarily and continued studying the language online. This orientation thus demonstrates that high levels of digital connectivity are not inherently incompatible with intensive investment in language learning (Lyons & Tagg, 2024).

### 5.2.2. Pragmatic Learners: Language as a Tool

Pragmatic learners approach Icelandic primarily as a functional tool for complying with institutional or occupational demands. Their orientation corresponds closely to what Gardner and Lambert (1972) describe as instrumental motivation. One participant explained that, while he was initially not motivated to learn Icelandic, a job offer motivated him to learn the language:

I never really learned Icelandic in [language] school. I hardly learned anything there....I never feel like I need to learn Icelandic, but it would be fun just to learn a little bit things like *goðan daginn* [good day] and *takk fyrir* [thank you] just, like, little bit a nice touch to speak up a little bit during the shopping, but when I got a job offer in 2020 last year, my boss just told me that I have to speak Icelandic and I had to also read report in Icelandic as well.

Several interviewees, as the one cited above, described limited engagement with Icelandic until external requirements made it necessary. In this sense, investment is reactive rather than aspirational. In survey responses, this group aligns with migrants who reported using Icelandic primarily in professional contexts, while English dominates informal and social interactions. Pragmatic learners thus often draw clear boundaries between linguistic domains. One interviewee working in a kindergarten emphasized that English was preferred for urgent or complex communication to avoid misunderstandings, and questioned expectations to speak Icelandic during breaks:

If there is something really urgent and important, I prefer them [coworkers] to say it in English so we are on the sure side and I don't have a problem with that. But then, at the cafeteria, for example when we are just drinking coffee or something, I don't see why the conversation could not be in English as well. It's not for work. I have a...she works in an international environment, but she has been told from the older colleagues, Icelandic colleagues, that they are now in Iceland and she should speak Icelandic. And she is having argument with them like "Why? This is our free time. I am not at work, we can speak in whatever language we want, this is our free time."

This account illustrates how language choice is negotiated in relation to relevance and fairness. Digital connectedness reinforces this selective investment. English-mediated workplaces and transnational professional networks reduce dependence on Icelandic beyond specific institutional contexts, while digital resources provide practical support for learning when needed. For pragmatic learners, investment in Icelandic remains contingent on utility, making language learning a situational response to concrete demands rather than a sustained project of integration.

### 5.2.3. Frustrated Learners: Language as Exclusion

The frustrated or discouraged learners embody a notion of limited investment (Norton, 2000). Although they may begin with motivation, their enthusiasm diminishes due to negative experiences: repetitive teaching, scarce opportunities for practice, or Icelanders frequently switching to English. Several interviewees reported feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, or infantilization when speaking Icelandic and described feeling excluded from conversations or workplaces.

One participant, who had lived in Iceland for two decades, reflected on early experiences of being perceived as speaking “like a child,” which discouraged spontaneous use of the language:

Like when my pronunciation is not right. There were different people and then what struck me is that I talk Icelandic like a child. I should have spoken Icelandic spontaneously because it's part of the learning process. I didn't know back then....It stopped when I started to speak Icelandic well. People started to appreciate my Icelandic skills.

Importantly, this participant noted that social recognition emerged only after her proficiency improved, suggesting that appreciation was conditional on near-native performance rather than on effort or participation. This can be explained by investment theory, which “recognizes that even though one can be ready and willing to participate in L2 contexts, one can be refused entry into these spaces or positioned as inadequate” (Darvin & Norton, 2021, p. 32). In the case of the person cited above, this dynamic delayed active language use and contributed to prolonged insecurity.

For frustrated learners, the problem is not a lack of motivation but the absence of supportive interactional environments that validate partial competence. Frequent recourse to English further reduces opportunities to practice Icelandic, while simultaneously offering an exit from uncomfortable encounters. Interactions in which Icelanders switch to English illustrate power relations and, as investment theory emphasizes, that learners are not always able to shape or determine the conditions in which their language learning takes place (Darvin & Norton, 2021).

This orientation highlights how limited language acquisition can result from social and structural conditions and inequalities rather than individual deficits (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2021). Frustrated learners thus expose the relational dimensions of linguistic investment, showing how recognition, patience, and access to meaningful interaction are crucial for sustaining migrants' investment in language learning.

### 5.2.4. Community-Based Learners: Language(s) as Connection

Community-based learners prioritize social connection over grammatical mastery. Rather than viewing language learning as a classroom-based process, they acquire Icelandic primarily through everyday interaction and immersion in social contexts. This orientation resonates with Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice, in which learning occurs through participation in shared activities rather than through formal instruction alone.

One participant explained that, after initially working with a book for learning Icelandic, continued progress felt more effective through “just speaking,” listening to Icelandic media, and engaging with others in everyday settings. Materials such as children’s books, audiobooks, and films were mentioned as accessible entry points that supported comprehension without the pressure of formal correctness:

Researcher: And yes, have you attended any type of formal language education in Icelandic?

Interviewee: No, no, unless we consider the [book] *Íslenska fyrir alla*....I enjoyed it a lot; it was very fun to go through....I don’t know why I dropped it. I guess I felt after the first book it was more efficient to go on my own, you know, just speaking and so. And also listen to things in Icelandic....Mostly children material though. Movies and stuff like that in Icelandic.

Community-based learners frequently emphasized that “using the language” mattered more than speaking it accurately. They advocated for conversational groups and informal social settings as spaces where partial competence is accepted and encouraged. For these migrants, digital connectedness plays a supportive but secondary role. Online platforms facilitate contact with other learners and Icelandic speakers and help sustain social networks. This orientation highlights a collaborative form of linguistic investment, in which learning Icelandic is embedded in social practice rather than pursued as an individual achievement.

#### 5.2.5. Globally Oriented Residents: Language as Optional

Globally oriented residents approach learning Icelandic as an optional investment rather than a necessary condition for participation or a sign of a lack of motivation (Dörnyei, 2009). These migrants recognize the symbolic value of Icelandic but see limited practical or personal returns given their professional trajectories, anticipated length of stay, and reliance on English-mediated environments.

Most globally oriented residents work in international or English-speaking settings and maintain strong transnational digital ties. Their narratives strongly reflect common narratives of neoliberal governments constituting them as “subjects whose life trajectory is shaped by the imperatives of a labour market in which they will become mobile and flexible workers with multiple careers and jobs” (Bansel, 2007). Interviewees often described initial efforts to learn basic Icelandic upon arrival, followed by a decline in investment as professional demands intensified and English proved sufficient for everyday functioning. One highly educated professional noted that while an introductory Icelandic course was useful, sustained engagement was difficult to justify amid work pressures and short-term plans:

When they hired me, I tried to check out some Icelandic just to arrive here, some sentences and some phrases....I joined a course at the university, it was just one semester for Icelandic, and it was quite useful....I haven’t been so much into Icelandic because I have been busy.

Importantly, this orientation does not reject Icelandic in principle. Several interviewees explicitly distinguished their own situation from that of long-term residents, emphasizing that learning Icelandic would become essential if they planned to remain in Iceland permanently. As one participant said:

I think Icelandic is useful for people that are going to stay here, that plan to stay here for long time, if not then it is not that useful, but the basics are always good so you have to know some basics.

Another participant emphasized that the decision to stay “for the rest of my life” would warrant a serious investment in the language. In this sense, disengagement is conditional and temporal rather than ideological. The participant said: “If I decided, ‘Oh my god I want to be in Iceland for the rest of my life,’ then I would just really like to put my effort into this and like learn it by myself.”

For globally oriented residents, digital connectedness reinforces a cosmopolitan mode of belonging that transcends local linguistic boundaries. English and digital infrastructures enable professional participation and social life without sustained engagement with Icelandic, making language learning a strategic choice. This orientation exemplifies how global mobility and small-language environments interact to produce selective disinvestment. Across the five orientations, digital connectivity emerges as both an enabling and constraining condition for linguistic investment. The Icelandic case illustrates how the coexistence of a small national language and a dominant global lingua franca reshapes traditional models of integration. Learning Icelandic is no longer a uniform prerequisite for social participation, but a selective and strategic choice shaped by migrants’ social positioning, anticipated futures, and access to English-mediated networks. These findings underscore that language learning among connected migrants cannot be understood solely through motivation, but must be analyzed through the lens of investment, encompassing emotional, symbolic, and structural dimensions.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined how migrants in Iceland negotiate language learning and social participation in the context of global digital connectedness. Drawing on Diminescu’s (2008, 2020) concept of the connected migrant and Norton’s (2000, 2013) notion of linguistic investment, we show how digital mobility reshapes the relationship between language learning and integration in a small-language context where English functions as a lingua franca. By combining survey data with qualitative interviews, we link broader patterns of digital connectedness and investment in language learning among migrants in Iceland to in-depth insights from migrants’ own accounts of their language-learning trajectories. Some participants with stable, skilled employment felt free to deprioritize Icelandic in the interviews, but those facing economic insecurity described the language as vital and framed their limited skills as a significant challenge.

The first research question we aimed to answer was: How is migrants’ degree of digital connectivity associated with their attitudes toward learning and investing in a small language? Our findings show that while most migrants normatively endorse the importance of learning Icelandic, with 70.3% of immigrants fully or somewhat agreeing that migrants who move to their municipality should learn Icelandic, actual investment in language learning is mediated by migrants’ social positioning, everyday linguistic environments, and plans for the future (e.g., whether they plan to stay permanently or temporarily in the country). These findings align with prior studies on adult migrants’ language learning in smaller language contexts (Higham, 2024; Holm, 2024; Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). Language learning, particularly in contexts where English or other languages are widely spoken, is a highly non-linear and situated activity. Individuals, despite normatively agreeing that language learning is important, might, for a multitude of reasons—such as perceived lack of return on investment, unstable residency, and plans to move to another place in the future—not invest fully in the language of their place of residence (Holm, 2024; Pöyhönen & Simpson, 2024; Szabó, 2024).

A pattern observed in the quantitative data is that those in daily or almost daily contact with people from their countries of origin report lower Icelandic proficiency than those in contact once or twice a week or once or twice a month. However, among those who are never or almost never in contact with people from their countries of origin, the number of people who report poor or weak Icelandic skills and fluent or good Icelandic skills is similar to the numbers reported by the group who are daily or almost daily in contact with their countries of origin. However, as these insights are based on descriptive analysis, they should be interpreted with caution.

To answer the second research question—How do digitally connected migrants narrate and negotiate their investment in the Icelandic language in everyday life?—our qualitative analysis identified five orientations toward learning Icelandic: enthusiastic integration-oriented migrants, pragmatic learners, frustrated learners, community-based learners, and globally oriented residents. Across these orientations, digital networks and English proficiency simultaneously facilitate participation and reduce the perceived necessity of Icelandic: Migrants embedded in English-speaking workplaces or transnational professional networks often perceive limited practical returns on learning Icelandic, whereas others associate language acquisition with social recognition, security, and emotional belonging. As shown in prior studies, migrants' online and offline encounters are linked, and participation in digital networks can facilitate offline encounters and help migrants prepare for them (Lyons & Tagg, 2024). These results, together with the quantitative analysis, support our central hypothesis that digital connectedness to countries of origin reshapes, rather than diminishes, linguistic investment by altering its perceived benefits.

Investment in language learning thus emerges as a selective and strategic practice rather than a uniform expectation, shaped by social involvement, linguistic attitudes, recognition, and anticipated futures (Norton, 2013). These findings challenge linear models of integration that equate linguistic assimilation with social participation. Rather than passive recipients of demands to integrate, migrants appear as agents navigating digital connectivity and local incorporation. Consequently, Icelandic constitutes one possible, but not universally required, resource for connection. From a policy perspective, this suggests that appeals to obligation or national identity alone are unlikely to sustain language learning. More effective approaches would link Icelandic acquisition to tangible opportunities for participation, such as workplace inclusion, civic engagement, and community-based interaction, while acknowledging the multilingual realities of contemporary migration. Furthermore, migrants' transnational digital connections can also be incorporated into language teaching to strengthen their confidence in learning (Darvin & Norton, 2014). At the same time, our analysis highlights stratified migration regimes and inequalities within the migrant population and how language functions as a tool of inclusion and exclusion (Darvin & Norton, 2021): Some migrants in more privileged positions, in stable, English-speaking jobs feel free to deprioritize learning Icelandic, while some in less stable jobs and those facing underemployment (working outside of their area of expertise) experience linguistic demands as a means of exclusion.

Our analysis of the Icelandic case highlights a structural dilemma faced by small-language societies in a globalized, digitally mediated world: how to sustain small languages when English enables access to global mobility and social participation. Belonging in digitally networked societies is continuously renegotiated through shifting combinations of languages, identities, and forms of social engagement. By exploring connected migrants' linguistic investments, this study reframes social inclusion as a situated process of ongoing negotiation rather than assimilation.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

## Data Availability

The survey data used in this article are available in open access at <https://datice.is/is>

## LLMs Disclosure

We used ChatGPT and Grammarly minimally to refine language and phrasing. All substantive content, analysis, and interpretations were developed by the authors.

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