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Paper title:

Where you learn matters: Laborers' experiences learning Icelandic

Paper to be included among those in the panel "The Rhetoric of Immigration: Labour, Integration and Exclusion"

Where you learn matters: Laborers' experiences learning Icelandic

The city of Reykjavík and some employers began providing Icelandic language classes for adults in the early 1990s. In the early 2000s, the state government instituted language requirements for foreigners seeking long-term visas and citizenship in Iceland, asserting that strong Icelandic language skills are necessary for integration. Policy documents governing language pedagogy for adult foreigners have led to development of materials to teach simple conversational, reading and writing skills so learners can become active social participants. Potential language learners used to be directed to municipal offices and employers but are now directed to private schools and independent tutors as the means of developing linguistic knowledge. Interviews with language teachers and school administrators show that they believe the curricula they work from allow students to integrate into Icelandic society, despite the fact that learners often only have rudimentary knowledge of the language after finishing the required course hours (Innes and Skaptadóttir, under review). However, interviews with language learners in Reykjavík and its suburbs suggest that the best efforts of teachers and schools do not necessarily ease learners' interactions with Icelanders or provide them with sufficient interactional comprehension to feel that they are accepted. Several of those interviewed found work-based language courses to be more helpful and meaningful than the school-based classes because the linguistic forms and their content were immediately relevant to their lives, both inside and outside of the work environment. This paper will discuss what employed adult learners say they desire from Icelandic language classes and how attention to their wishes can enrich and improve school curricula.