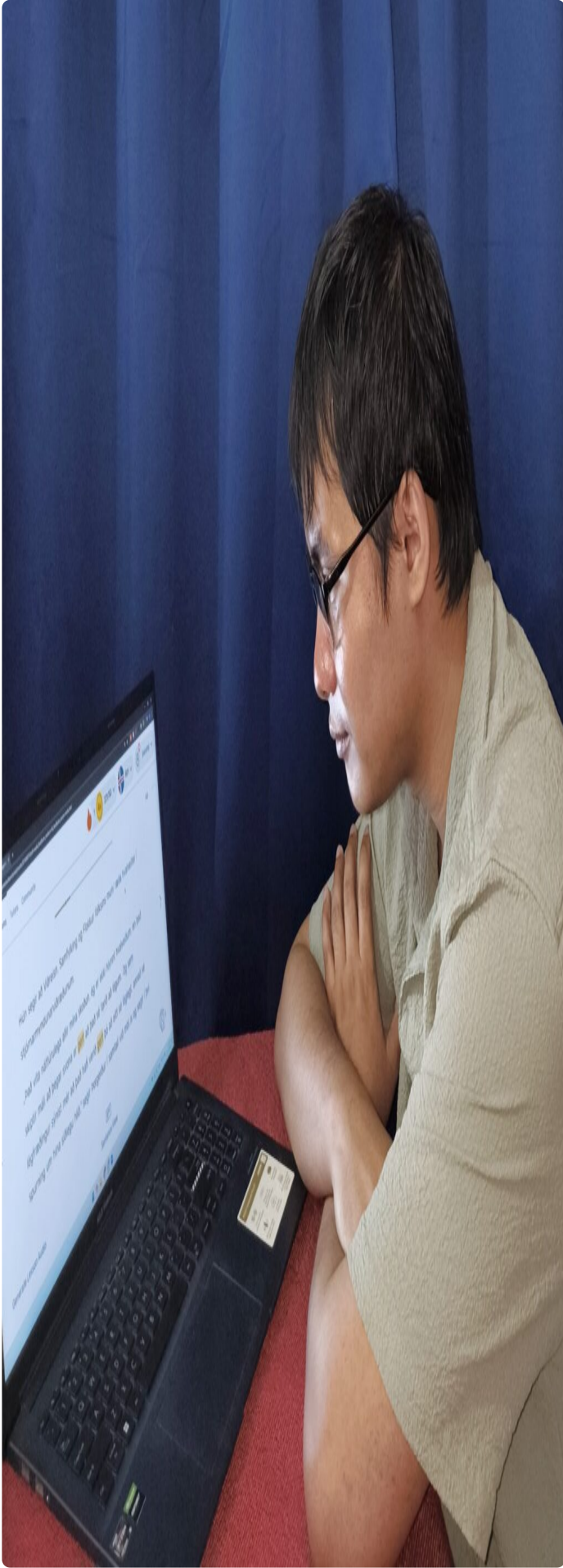


Eyjafjallajökull sparked an interest in learning Icelandic in Northeast India



Aristide is a young man from Northeast India whose first language is Karbi, which is a Tibeto-Burman language with about half a million speakers, and whose second language is English. He decided to share his unusual story about learning Icelandic in an interview on Zoom from his home country. What may seem like an extraordinary task at first is, for Aristide, an exciting exploration of a new culture, history, and language.

His interest in learning Icelandic came about in 2010, when the volcanic eruption of Eyjafjallajökull caused air traffic disruption across Europe, consequently drawing the attention of global news channels to Iceland. “Back then, I thought, ‘Did people actually live there?’” One year later, Iceland once again came to Aristide’s attention. It happened through YouTube, where he came across Hrafna’s channel that presents the life and culture of Iceland along with some basic facts about the language, and then the channel Ecolinguist that compares languages such as Old Norse, Icelandic, Danish and Norwegian, which piqued his interest. “I found it so interesting that I started learning a bit of Norwegian first and then Icelandic later on”.

Unlike his peers, who chose to study more widely spoken languages such as French, German or Spanish, Aristide decided to learn something truly unique. “I wanted to be different,” he says. “Why not Icelandic?” He adds that, among his peers “pretty much no one would dare to learn [it]”.

The learning journey

Aristide’s personal commitment to learning Icelandic did not begin until 2022. “Because of that Ecolinguist channel, I began to follow Óskar Bragi, an Icelandic tutor, on Instagram and YouTube and learned a few words from him”. Since then, he has been enjoying taking more lessons and is still in the process of learning Icelandic. He also found the app Drops useful for learning the basics of the language, and the website LingQ for reading Icelandic texts with English translations. However, with the help of his learning partner – a friend from Portugal who shares the same interest in Icelandic – he can occasionally practise reading and translating small pieces of text and news articles. “Sometimes we understand only three percent of the context,” Aristide says with a smile, demonstrating his positive attitude towards learning despite the long journey that lies ahead.

These challenges in learning primarily involve Icelandic cases and gendered structures. “The structure is quite new to me. For example, you have the article at the end, not at the beginning of the word, which makes it confusing”, he explains. However, vocabulary and pronunciation are relatively easy for him to learn due to similarities with other Germanic languages. He maintains his motivation by watching YouTube channels about travel and the history of Iceland because one of his dreams is to visit the country and speak to the people in Icelandic.

Icelandic music, TV series, and history

Besides grammar and vocabulary, Aristide is also interested in cultural and historical connections with Iceland. He listens to Icelandic music, with his current favourite song being Bríet’s “Hann er ekki þú”. He also finds it very interesting to watch the TV series Fangar (“Prisoners”). Although his comprehension of spoken Icelandic is quite limited, watching the series entirely in Icelandic helps him to maximise his language exposure.

The Netflix series Vikings also contributed to Aristide’s curiosity about Icelandic history and legends.

Despite the series being in English and the historical accounts not very precise, he has learned about important figures like Erik the Red and Leifur Eiríksson and their roles in Iceland's past. He explains, "Watching the series made me hungry to learn more about Viking culture". Aristide would recommend that anyone curious about Nordic culture watch it. Occasionally, he also follows the RÚV Instagram page with news about Iceland, which helps him get more exposure to the language and learn a bit more about the local contemporary society.

Why learning Icelandic is worth it

In a world where speakers of larger languages are common, Aristide sees a unique opportunity for himself as a speaker of Icelandic, doing something not many others are doing. Learning Icelandic introduced him to a culture thousands of kilometres away— one he can connect with through the language. "Learning Icelandic made my life more interesting. Instead of being bored, I became curious to know more", he admits.

When asked about his future goals with Icelandic, Aristide's ambitions are practical yet inspiring. "I would like to visit Iceland one day—not just to talk with the locals, but also to be useful; maybe assist others who don't speak the language, to interpret," he says.

For anyone hesitant about learning Icelandic, Aristide offers simple but thoughtful encouragement: "If you want to visit Iceland, you have the number one reason for learning Icelandic" and adds, "If you want to add speaking rare languages to your skills, then I'd say why not—it's worth it".