

Icelandic for Anyone (Even Humans)

by George Ivey

With inspiration from an unlikely source, George Ivey renewed his quest to learn Icelandic. Through a variety of experiences, he has taken a humorous path toward his goal of fluency and concludes that anybody can learn Icelandic.

There's nothing like a 280-pound gorilla to get you back to your Icelandic studies – especially when she knows three different languages.

I had my first encounter with Koko the gorilla during a study break. I was making the latest of several attempts to finally learn Icelandic – a task equivalent in mind to trying to climb Mount Everest. At this particular time, the vast array of Icelandic verb endings were overwhelming me. I decided to relax for a bit before going any further.

I flopped onto the couch, picked up the remote, and turned on the television. I flipped through several channels before settling on a program about gorillas. But this show wasn't set in the jungles of Africa, where you would expect to see these apes. The scenes included only a set of indoor rooms and large outdoor cages in California. The star of the show was Koko, a female western lowland gorilla who knows between 500 and 1,000 words of American Sign Language, understands spoken English, and of course, communicates with other gorillas – in whatever language it is that gorillas use.

The show ended all too soon, and I sat there on the couch, dumbstruck. After all, back here in the southeastern United States, it's rare to find a *human being* that has a working knowledge of three different languages, much less any of our cows or dogs or chickens. I looked back at the Icelandic books on my desk, and I thought to myself, "Well, if a gorilla can learn a foreign language, then maybe I can too."

No Time like the Present

Of course, the key to learning languages is starting when you are young. Several studies have shown that we can pick up a new language much more easily in our early years than when we are in our late teens or even older.

In that respect, Koko had a distinct advantage over me. This edge came in the form of researcher Penny Patterson, who brought Koko into her care in the early 1970s when Koko was about one year old. For almost 30 years since that time, Dr. Patterson has been teaching Koko American Sign Language and English as part of a very significant study about interspecies communications.

Although I am a couple of years older than Koko, I did not have a full-time tutor to expand my language knowledge beyond English. My mother was born and raised in Iceland, but I grew up in the United States of America, and I was taught only English.

My only early exposure to Icelandic occurred when my mother was occasionally angry – like when we returned home from shopping and the house key wouldn't turn the door lock. But I did not understand the words she shouted at the key and the lock, much less the real reason she chose to use a different language at those times.

I suppose I first started to learn Icelandic on my second visit to Iceland, when I was five years old. During that trip I learned only the most necessary words, like *súkkulaði* (chocolate) and *tyggigúmmí* (chewing gum). I also learned to count, and as a young boy, I was delighted to get away with saying *sex* (six) whenever I recited the numbers in Icelandic. Actually, even as a grown man, I still find that number funny to say.

Those early trips to Iceland were always too brief, and I never learned more than a few basic words. My best language-learning years just slipped away.

At the same time, however, language studies are not a lost cause for older students. As I have heard several times, “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, and the second best time is right now.” I think you can say the same for learning a foreign language. If you haven't started yet, start now.

Resources for the Language Student

Regardless of your age or your language of interest, there are numerous resources to help get you started. From traditional items like grammar books and language tapes to new media like CD-ROMs and web sites, a wide variety of language aids is available.

I think Koko would agree that the best resources are people who know the language better than you do. Koko has Dr. Patterson and several other researchers who work with her daily to help her learn sign language and English. Through regular instruction and practice with her instructors, Koko has made excellent progress.

Here in the southeastern United States, Icelandic speakers are few and far between. In fact, I don't know of any within 100 miles. I can talk to myself – and often do – in both English and Icelandic, but I have no one nearby to force me to use the more difficult Icelandic words and phrases and to correct my errors.

My closest human resource is my Icelandic mother – 200 miles away. I now call my mother frequently in order to practice new vocabulary or to clarify word usage or hard-to-translate phrases. When I travel to Iceland, I am fortunate to have several aunts and uncles and cousins who are eager to help me.

Even my youngest relatives lend a hand, including my cousin Gulla's three-year-old daughter, Anna Júlía. Before my recent visit, Gulla tried to explain to her that I speak a different language made up of a completely different set of words than Icelandic. Anna Júlía was confused by this concept, so Gulla gave her daughter an example: “When George wants to say ‘*Ég er svangur,*’ he instead says ‘I am hungry.’” Anna Júlía pondered this idea, but was silent. Gulla then asked her, “So, will you help George learn Icelandic?” Anna Júlía replied, “Yes, and

I will give him something to eat.” Sure enough, as soon as I walked in the door, she offered me some food.

School Days

Although cookies from a three-year old provide great moral support, some people need a little more structure in their language studies. In that case, school is really the best option. Koko attends “school” virtually every single day, and she has obviously benefited from the regular class schedule.

For those seeking Icelandic classes, such day-to-day instruction can be a bit hard to find. However, if you look hard enough, you will find that Icelandic courses are offered in scattered areas around the globe. Of course, the best place to study the language is in Iceland. In Reykjavik, there are programs that range from evening classes for two weeks to a degree program at the University of Iceland lasting several years.

In the summer of 1999, I timed my visit to Iceland to take advantage of an intensive four-week course at *Námsflokkar Reykjavíkur* (Study Groups of Reykjavik). For three hours a day, five days a week, I did my best to improve my Icelandic.

Koko has only one or two other gorillas in her “school,” but I had a diverse group of a dozen or so people in my class. My schoolmates included two nuns – one from India and one from the Philippines, two sisters from Kazakhstan, and others from Vietnam, the United States, and various countries in Europe. Some are in Iceland for work, some to study languages, some to study the sagas, and others because they have married Icelanders and now live in Iceland.

Each day we reviewed different lessons, expanded our vocabulary, and learned about adjective and noun endings and verb conjugations. Our teacher, Valdís, guided us through all the rules of grammar, and she patiently explained all the words and phrases we didn’t understand.

Every now and then we would also get a little bit sidetracked, like when Valdís referred to the sound a dog makes as *voff, voff*. With input from our international collection of students, we soon found out that every country seems to interpret the bark of a dog a little bit differently. While a dog says *voff, voff* in Iceland, it says *woof, woof* or *arf, arf* in the United States; *goff, goff* in Kazakhstan; and *woo, woo, woo* in Vietnam.

Although this was merely the human interpretation of the bark of a dog, I think Koko would have appreciated our brief attempt at international, interspecies communication. For better or worse, however, we spent most of our time learning the words and phrases necessary to communicate with other humans.

Two for One

Just when you think you are making progress with your Icelandic studies, you will find one more hurdle to cross. To be truly fluent in Icelandic, you really have to use two languages – one for writing, and another for speaking.

Koko actually faces a similar situation. She hears with one language (English), and then communicates with another (American Sign Language).

Through persistence and repeated exposure, I eventually discovered a few tricks for interpreting Icelandic's second language. First, you have to get a feel for the speed and inflection that Icelanders use in their speech. For example, each sentence is the equivalent of a pole-vaulter's run, breaking immediately into a rapid pace, getting faster and faster, and then leaping high into the air, pausing over the bar, and quickly coming to a stop. At first, you are lucky to understand only the one slow word on top of the bar; the rest is a blur. You have to hope that you can understand enough "jumps" to at least figure out the subject of the conversation, if not the direction.

Icelanders also have a curious habit of inhaling words. Most people speak as they *exhale*. However, almost every Icelander can – and usually does – say *já* (yes) and *nei* (no) and a few other words while breathing in. My cousin Ásdís is able to inhale entire sentences, a phenomenon so amazing that I can hardly pay attention to what she is saying.

In between sucking in words, Icelanders of all ages also throw in lots of extra words into spoken Icelandic. It's ... uh ... a practice that's ... you know ... well ... similar to spoken English. Before I learned to screen out these extra Icelandic words, I would actually pay attention to them and get very confused. For example, *hérna* (here) is commonly inserted into spoken sentences, usually several times at once. I would listen and think to myself, "Okay, there's something going on *right here*, but I have no clue what else that man just said."

You are also likely to hear a few non-Icelandic words thrown into the conversation. Although there is an official policy of discouraging the use of "foreign" words in Icelandic, many words, especially English words, are still used. Personally, I don't mind the practice, because it makes "Icelandic" much easier for me to understand.

However, most Icelandic speakers tend to know several other languages, and they occasionally borrow from these tongues as well. I have a Danish uncle, Jens, who speaks *danska* (Danish), *íslenska* (Icelandic), and *enska* (English). Somehow, I actually find him easier to understand than some of my purely Icelandic relatives. However, my cousins complain that he mixes his *danska* and *íslenska* together too much; they refer to this amalgam as "*jenska*."

Once you learn to listen and speak at a furious pace, catch the words that people try to suck in, screen out the extra words, and translate the foreign words, spoken Icelandic is really quite easy to master.

On Your Own

Of course, at some point, you will have to leave your language books and CD-ROMs behind, and venture into the real world without family, friends, or teachers to help guide you in your understanding and use of Icelandic.

From what I gathered from the television program, Koko is never exposed to the potential trauma of trying to communicate with total strangers in strange situations. But I can just imagine her venturing out for a walk down a road near her California home, sampling the vegetation as she goes, and then trying her best to use sign language to communicate with the first human she encounters. I suspect that both sides would walk (or run) away, totally confused and a bit worse off for the experience.

I, on the other hand, have taken my chances using a ‘foreign’ language in the outside world, and I have lived to tell about it. More often than not, it is actually a pleasant experience. (Maybe Koko *should* give it a try...)

My favorite place to practice my Icelandic is in the shops in downtown Reykjavík. Most shopkeepers know several different languages, and they are used to tourists who may or may not speak understandable Icelandic. Plus, the conversations are usually brief – often just a quick question and answer like *Hvað kostar þetta?* (What does this cost?) and *Fimm þúsund krónur* (5,000 crowns). Successful little interactions like these give you the confidence to venture into more substantial Icelandic conversations later on.

Many of the people in the smaller shops are very pleased when I make the effort to speak Icelandic. They listen patiently while I struggle to find the right words and attach the correct endings, and they respond s-l-o-w-l-y in Icelandic, giving me a chance to understand them too.

Some cashiers and salespeople will respond in English as soon as they hear a British or American accent. Even if you continue to speak Icelandic, they will continue to speak English. It seems to become a battle of wills, with each person trying to avoid their native tongue, or else trick the other person into using their own. I think it’s actually because the sales clerks like to practice their English whenever they get the opportunity, just like I try to use my Icelandic whenever possible, and, I suppose, just like Koko uses sign language whenever she can.

The Final Or! (Word)

Although I can’t help comparing my language skills to those of Koko the gorilla, she really serves as a source of inspiration rather than a point of reference. Through her experiences as well as my own, I am now convinced that anyone can learn a new language – even Icelandic – no matter what your age, no matter what your ability, no matter what language resources you have available – and no matter what your species.