



## How minority pupils in Estonia view and cope with studying Estonian and via Estonian

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*In those secondary schools in Estonia, where Russian has been the language of instruction, a lengthy process of reforming the language of education has taken place. In 2012, the obligatory study 60 % of content subjects in Estonian was introduced for upper secondary levels (years 10–12). In the elementary levels, the teaching largely still takes place in Russian. Such minority schools constitute 17 % of all secondary schools. The main group influenced by this change are pupils, since it has an impact on the quality of their education. How they cope with studying in the second language depends on their motivation, the methodology and study materials used as well as the support and counselling they get. In this writing, the current situation, its achievements and shortcomings are discussed from the pupils' view.*

### The language reform in education

Within the last two decades the Estonian skills of the non-native speakers of Estonian have improved considerably. Nevertheless, the results of secondary school graduation exams show that language skills acquired by the end of secondary education are often not sufficient for managing in the Estonian society, education and work. The implementation of the language reform in education for Russian medium schools has been slow in Estonia, both for political and practical reasons. It was first planned for 1997, but then postponed until 2007. The changes were launched gradually and the reform was completed in the school year of 2011/2012. The elementary schools may decide whether and how they teach subjects in Estonian. The national curriculum determines that on the upper secondary level all pupils have to study Estonian literature, history, geography, music and citizenship in Estonian. In addition, the schools can choose what other subjects they teach in Estonian, so that pupils get the total of 60 % of their subjects in Estonian. The preparation for the transition included teacher training courses in the fields of teaching Estonian as a second language and CLIL, teachers' summer schools, Estonian courses for teachers, regional monitoring and counselling centres for teachers and publishing study books, worksheets and methodological materials for teachers. There are still, however, many shortcomings that would require careful planning. (Metslang et al. 2013.)

### Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)

Globally, various educational programmes have been developed to ensure effective language learning and

teaching. Contemporary language education specialists find that to learn a language one needs to use it in numerous communicative situations. Therefore the programmes that contain not only language learning, but also studying subjects in that language, are regarded as more effective. In the context of Russian secondary schools' transition to Estonian-medium study, the awareness and use of CLIL methodology has notably increased among school communities. The national curriculum also recommends schools to use CLIL in supporting the pupils – the experts in Estonia find that CLIL is a suitable tool for ensuring a smooth and less painful transition to studying in Estonian on these levels. The pupils study content subjects such as maths, science, art or economics in a language that is not their mother tongue on whichever educational level or even in the kindergarten. The multiple foci of CLIL-based learning are the following: all content lessons support language learning; language lessons support learning the material of content subjects; the content of different subjects is integrated; cross-curricular topics and projects are widely in use; pupils analyse their learning process. Safe and enriching learning environment, authenticity of materials and activities, active learning, support structures and cooperation are all seen necessary in securing good learning outcomes, too. (Mehisto et al. 2010.)

CLIL has been in use in Estonia for quite a long time – one of its varieties, the language immersion programme was launched in Estonia already in 1998. The language immersion experience has revealed that for teaching pupils in a language that is not their native tongue, teachers usually need to implement far-reaching changes in their everyday practices.

## Methodology

This study is based on a questionnaire survey and focus group interviews with 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> year pupils in eight schools. The questionnaire survey was carried out in four schools in Tallinn (a multilingual environment), three in north-eastern Estonia (where the Russian minority is dominant) and one in other regions (predominantly Estonian language environment). There were 4 focus groups with 22 participants in total led by the author and other members of the research team. Both early and late language immersion schools as well as non-immersion schools were studied.

## Results

### *Lessons of Estonian as a second language*

The questionnaire results suggest that the pupils are learning Estonian rather for instrumental than integrative purposes. The cluster analysis of the questionnaire responses suggests that girls have a higher motivation to learn Estonian. This is also the case for children from families where more than one language is spoken, for children who have gone to an Estonian kindergarten, who studied in a language immersion class or in an Estonian language medium school or who studied a few subjects in Estonian already in the elementary school. Pupils who wish to continue their studies in Estonian courses/curricula at Estonian universities also have a higher language learning motivation. High motivation is also a characteristic of pupils who think that their Estonian skills are developing well and who communicate almost every day in Estonian out of school. However, for these features, it is hard to determine causality.

Pupils that regard Estonian lessons useful do so because they find that the lessons develop their Estonian skills. About half of the respondents claimed that they like Estonian lessons and find them interesting. On the other hand, only a third of pupils regard Estonian lessons as easy.

According to the pupils, Estonian lessons take place almost completely in Estonian. The pupils had to assess a set of 16 different language lesson activities and respond whether they are used frequently, rather

frequently, rather rarely or rarely. The responses indicate that the more frequent language lesson activities are related to developing speaking, listening, writing and reading skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary. However, also traditional teaching activities (teacher's monologue, taking notes, translating texts, doing written exercises in the workbook and worksheets) are very common in language lessons. If such methods are overused language learning becomes more monotonous and engages the pupils less well. Various active learning activities that would ensure the quality, diversity and effectiveness of language learning occur seldom in the respondents' lessons. For improving their language learning quality and ability to cope in the complex content lessons of upper secondary school the pupils need to develop their study skills to be more effective in the study process. According to the questionnaire, activities aimed at developing study skills are rare.

A little over half of the respondents do not regard Estonian lessons' activities as relevant for their lives. Although the pupils usually consider the study materials useful and having a right target language level, only 40% find them interesting. 66% of the respondents agreed or rather agreed with the statement that Estonian lessons help them to cope with content subjects in Estonian. Closer links between language lessons and content lessons would be beneficial for the pupils' language learning (cf. Mehisto et al. 2010).

#### *Content lessons in second language in upper secondary school*

The pupils have both positive and negative experiences with starting studying in Estonian. Many of them find that content lessons in Estonian enrich their vocabulary skills and make it easier to study in Estonian-medium higher education in the future.

The pupils' negative experience is especially related to the fact that it is hard for them to understand the lessons and whole subjects in Estonian. The new language requirements cause worries about the final year's state exams and opportunities for further studies. The pupils fear that their content subjects' knowledge suffers and therefore this impedes their chances in applying for a university and studying in Estonian in higher education. Focus group interviews also reveal the problem that in current conditions and in the way that Estonian-medium lessons are currently carried out, the pupils' content subjects' knowledge only improves very little. According to the questionnaire results the development of Estonian skills in Estonian-medium content subjects is also lower than expected.

The respondents report that the lessons that are officially in Estonian are, indeed, conducted in Estonian to a considerable extent. Therefore the doubt that perhaps some teachers ignore the requirement to carry out their classes in Estonian was not confirmed.

In the content subject lessons that take place in Estonian, activities that require pupils' communication are rare. Instead, lessons usually involve traditional activities that are rather subject focused than learner focused. In harder subjects (see below) the dominating learning activity is taking notes as pupils' ability to participate in discussions is hindered by their low language skills.

Studying in a second language requires learning new vocabulary. Language teachers and content subjects' teachers lack time to practice subject-specific language during classes. Well planned homework would be good way to improve the pupils' autonomous study skills and in such a way also their ability to cope in studying in Estonian. The pupils were asked about the homework given to them in Estonian-medium content subjects and Estonian lessons. The selection of homework tasks that the respondents said they usually get largely corresponds to the tasks they regarded as less appealing (e.g. reading the study book, text-based exercises and learning something by heart).

Practical subjects (physical education, music and fine arts) and social studies were considered easier

subjects. Estonian literature, citizenship, maths and handicraft occurred as medium difficulty subjects. Other subjects were regarded as more difficult. The respondents found that social studies and history are most useful in developing their Estonian skills.

### *Difficulties*

Pupils have many difficulties in all areas they were asked about. Coping with new words is especially hard. Reading book texts and other new material as well as writing and grammar are also very difficult for them. Many difficulties in understanding are caused by teachers' too quick or complex speech. For many it is hard to participate in discussions and conversations were reported to be rare. Even understanding instructions for tasks and homework caused problems.

### *Support*

Most of the pupils reported that content subjects' teachers create an easy and friendly atmosphere in the lessons, encourage, help and support them if they do not understand something. The results indicate that pupils do not get much support elsewhere (from parents or friends). Another factor that helps pupils to cope is when the teacher uses special teaching methods created for studies in a second language. Pupils reported that getting support in coping with studies in their second language helps them considerably.

## Conclusions

Pupils' attitudes towards studying in Estonian in upper secondary schools has become more favourable. However, many pupils still have doubts whether the present approach is the best method for learning Estonian. They consider it has a negative effect on their knowledge of content subjects. At the same time, they notice that it has brought about an improvement in their Estonian skills, although, not exactly to the desired degree. The pupils report that their teachers are supportive and ensure a positive learning atmosphere. However, many problems are caused by insufficient implementation of CLIL methodology in the content subjects' lessons. There is a special need for increasing the availability of language support in content subjects' lessons. The effects of the language reform to the knowledge and skills in Russian were not studied.

*The author is a teacher of Estonian as a Second Language. This paper is based on her MA thesis that was part of a larger project "Bilingual learning in Russian-medium schools" (Metslang et al. 2013).*

## References

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