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## **The 20 Years of a Systematic Approach to State Language Learning in Estonia: The Journey of the Language Immersion Program**

### **Abstract**

The state language of the Republic of Estonia is the Estonian language, with all the official procedures, documentation and paperwork conducted in the state language. At the state level there are requirements to the state language proficiency for employment: for instance the education sector requires the state language proficiency at the level from B2 to C1. At the same time the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia comprises about 30% of the population. In Estonia there are Estonian-medium and Russian-medium kindergartens and basic schools, education at the upper-secondary school level is Estonian-medium either fully or partially (taking up 60% of the instructional time).

Due to the complicated situation with the Estonian language proficiency of alumni of the Russian-medium schools at the end of the 1990s, the Ministry of Education and Research made a decision to launch the language immersion program in November 1998. That decision was the beginning of the wholesale and systematic approach to Estonian language teaching and learning, which was, and still is, based on the needs of society. The first forms of the total early language immersion were opened in 2000, followed by late language immersion classrooms. The Language Immersion Centre that deals with coordination and methodological development of the program was opened also in 2000. The first kindergarten groups of total early language immersion were opened in 2003. The success of the total early language immersion model lay in a number of factors: it was a state program from the very beginning, it was thoroughly planned and prepared and it had a clear social message of integration.

The program developed and underwent changes responding to updates in the needs of society: to address parents' concerns for the development of the children's mother tongue and to cope with the lack of teaching, the partial language immersion model was launched in kindergartens in 2008; the two-way language immersion model was introduced at the preschool level in 2015 to offer all children, both Estonian and Russian speakers, equal access to possibilities for early multilingualism and to respond to the recent changes in the labour market that indicated the growing need for Russian language proficiency. There is also a growing interest towards language immersion from the side of the Estonian-medium school, which recognizes the immersion experience as valuable in the situation of working with children from families of refugees and asylum seekers. Thus the future seems to be the multilingual school using the best of immersion and CLIL methodology and experience.

**Key words:** *Systematic Approach to State Language Learning in Estonia: Language Immersion Program, CLIL methodology and experience.*

### **Introduction**

This paper provides an overview of the history of the language immersion program in Estonia, explaining the reasons behind the emergence of each of the models and specifying peculiarities of each of the model described. The article also provides the social background and describes the general situation on the educational

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landscape of Estonia to the extent it is necessary to support the main topic. The research method used in the present paper is by analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Main body**

According to Statistics of Estonia, the population of the Republic of Estonia was estimated at 1,318,700 people as of 1 January 2018 (Statistics of Estonia, 2018). The results of the Population and Housing Census of 2011, the largest national minorities in Estonia are Russians (25.2% of the total population), Ukrainians (1.8%), Belarussians (1%), and Finns (0.6%) (Rahvused Eestis: Statistikaablogi). Representatives of the first three minorities together make up almost 30% of the Russian-speaking part of population in Estonia. The most Russian-speaking areas of Estonia are North-East, especially Narva on the border with Russia, and Tallinn.

Estonia has one state language, which is the Estonian language. As the Language Act states, the Estonian language is “the main language for communication in all spheres of public life” (Language Act of Estonia). A certain level of Estonian language proficiency, more specifically regulated by particular professional standards, is required to find permanent employment in Estonia. There are Estonian proficiency examinations, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which are used to assess people’s Estonian language skills. The examinations are conducted by the examination centers of the Foundation Inneve. The Estonian language proficiency required for employment ranges from A2 to C1 level. In the teaching profession any teacher, whether at the preschool or school level, teaching Estonian as a subject or teaching through the medium of Estonian has to demonstrate Estonian language proficiency at C1 level (Teacher’s Professional Standard). The minimum requirement of the Estonian language proficiency of teachers working in Russian-medium kindergartens and schools is B2. In case a person is a native speaker of the Estonian language or has graduated from an Estonian-medium educational institution (which means that at least 60% of the study process was conducted in the Estonian language), he/she does not need to confirm his/her Estonian language proficiency (Language Act of Estonia).

At the moment the Russian-speaking minority has access to preschool and basic school education in the mother tongue, with the following statistical data: the total number of general education schools in Estonia is 530, out of which 84 are Russian-medium, and the total number of preschool institutions is 628, including 106 with Russian as the medium of instruction (Haridussilm).

A few years ago after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it became obvious that the traditional teaching of the Estonian language as a subject with just a few lessons a week and use of traditional Soviet pedagogy was not enough to prepare Russian-speaking students to compete with their Estonian-speaking peers for places in higher education and in the labour market. It was obvious that drastic measures were necessary. Thus, in November of 1998 the Ministry of Education and Research made a decision to launch the language immersion program, taking the Canadian language immersion model as an example. At the moment the decision was made, many representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research in Estonia were somewhat doubtful about the new educational initiative, being “more curious about the idea than a convinced supporter of immersion” and feeling “sceptical and cautious, as a cursory description of immersion programs and their results did not seem possible or credible” (Mehisto & Genesee, 2015).

After 1.5 years of teacher training and teaching and study materials development, to a large extent supported by the Canadian Embassy, in the year 2000 the first forms of total early language immersion were opened in four out of 102 Russian-medium schools of Estonia. In this language immersion model, pupils study through the medium of the Estonian language 100% during the first grade, then in the second grade they start learning Russian as the mother tongue, and in third grade they start learning English as a foreign language. Starting from the fourth grade, Russian-medium subjects are introduced and their amount increases gradually every year, reaching about 40% of the total instruction time by the end of the compulsory education, i.e. the

ninth grade. At the upper-secondary school level the teaching is either conducted only through the medium of the Estonian language (except for foreign languages) in the Estonian-medium school or in the Estonian and Russian languages in the ratio of 60/40 in the Russian-medium school (also except for foreign languages). But, not only pupils who started their school education in 2000 needed urgent measures to provide them with sufficient proficiency of the Estonian language also pupils who were already at school stages II and III also required a different approach to their learning of the state language. Thus, in 2003 another model of immersion practiced in the basic school – late language immersion – was launched. Implementation of this model starts in the sixth grade, when the amount of the Estonian-medium subjects rises to 70% in grades 6, 7, and 8, and then returns to 60% in the ninth grade in order to ensure that the pupils who want to take the final examination in the Russian language have the corresponding language proficiency. In case of the both total early and partial language immersion models at school, the choice of the subjects taught from the medium of one or the other language is the responsibility of the school. This provides schools and parents with the two-fold security: the school is confident in its personnel-related capacity, and parents are confident in the subject knowledge their children obtain, as quite often schools choose to teach such content-rich subjects as Mathematics and Physics in students' mother tongue.

According to the Estonian National Curriculum for Preschool Educational Institution, “the child whose home language is not Estonian is provided with Estonian language learning. [...] In the Russian-medium preschool institution Estonian is taught to children beginning from the age of three in the following forms: through separate language learning activities, through integration of language learning activities with other educational activities, as well as in groups of partial language immersion”. To say it in other words, all Russian-speaking children in Russian-medium kindergartens are given a possibility to study Estonian as a second language at the preschool age.

Language immersion reached preschool education in 2003 when the first kindergarten groups of total early immersion were opened. This immersion model is implemented in groups with Russian-speaking children at the age of 5 and is planned for 2 years until children go to school. There are two teachers and one assistant teacher working with the children, both the teachers speak to the children only in the Estonian language. The group environment – so-called “talking walls”, encouraging atmosphere – along with routines and a lot of repetition help children feel safe and acquire the target language through play and natural everyday communication. In 2008 due to the lack of teachers who are either native speakers of the Estonian language or who demonstrate the C1 language proficiency and the growing concern of Russian-speaking parents about the development of their children's mother tongue skills, kindergartens started implementing the partial language immersion model for Russian-speaking children. Children come to partial language immersion group at the age of 3. In the case of this model, there are two teachers and an assistant teacher working with the children, where one of the teachers only communicates in the Estonian, and the other – in the Russian language. The teachers can work either half a day or the whole day interchangeably, they do not translate each other, but each of them consolidates the knowledge children have received in the other language. The music and P.E. activities that are conducted by corresponding teachers are either only in the Estonian language, or in the Estonian and Russian languages interchangeably, depending on the language of the group during this half of the day.

In the early 2010s, labour market researches have shown that a Russian-medium school alumni speaking three languages (Estonian, Russian, and English) had better chances of finding employment than their peers from the Estonian-medium school who spoke Estonian and English, but could not speak Russian. Besides that, the Ministry of Education and Research recognized the importance of providing all children in Estonia with access to possibilities for early multilingualism, which so far had been given only to children in Russian-medium kindergartens by providing them with lessons of Estonian as a second language from the age of 3. Considering all of the above-mentioned aspects, in April of 2013 the Ministry of Education and Research via the Foundation Innove announced the preparatory period for the launch of the two-way immersion model, and the first two-way language immersion groups were opened in September 2015. In the case of this model, the

group consists of children of Estonian and Russian as mother tongues and of children from bilingual families (not more than 1/3 of the group). There are two teachers and an assistant teacher working with the children, where one of the teachers only communicates in the Estonian, and the other – in the Russian language. Thus, each of the teachers is simultaneously the teacher of his/her language as the mother tongue and as a second language. The teachers can work either half a day or the whole day interchangeably, they do not translate each other, but each of them consolidates the knowledge children have received in the other language. Both languages have the same status. The group environment demonstrates the clear visual distinction between the languages.

Perhaps due to the fact that the language immersion program was launched with the clear goal of social and linguistic integration it has been considered the topic of Russian-medium educational institutions, and the majority of kindergartens and schools with immersion groups and classrooms are, indeed, the ones with Russian as the language of instruction. However, recently the program has been expanding to Estonian-medium educational institutions as well. The reason for that is the growing number of children from families of war refugees and asylum seekers not only from Somalia and Syria, but also from Ukraine. As a rule, parents of these children choose Estonian-medium schools, even if they come from a Russian-speaking background (Ukraine). As soon as the child from the family of new immigrants gets to school, he or she is immediately integrated into the mainstream classroom. Estonia's system of education does not use the welcome classroom, as, for instance, does Catalonia, or any other kinds of preparatory programs. The number of children from families of war refugees and asylum seekers in Estonian-medium schools is now around 800 (Language Immersion Program Database, 2018). Initially finding the right teaching methods for these children was quite a challenge for the Estonian-medium educational institution that has been predominantly monolingual for the last 25 years. Facing this challenge, the Estonian-speaking school and kindergarten turned to the language immersion program for help regarding implementation of the methodology, in-service training of teachers, and also regarding the program's study materials and their use. Supporting language learning and integration of children from new immigrant families has now become a new task of the language immersion program.

At the moment 37 schools and 63 kindergartens have joined the language immersion program, which means that about 10,000 children in Estonia are educated in different language immersion models and through CLIL via the medium of the Estonian language in subject content teaching at the stage of basic and upper-secondary Russian-medium schools as well as in vocational education.

The systematic approach and the success of the language immersion program in Estonia is explained by several reasons: first of all, the program has always been national, planned, supported and financed by the Ministry of Education and Research in all of the program's aspects, including in-service teacher training and study materials; secondly, the sustainability of the program is ensured by long-term planning – the strategy of the language immersion program is revised every five years after collecting feedback from target groups and considering any changes in the educational policy; thirdly, the program has always had clear social and educational values expressed in the Program Vision 2020+, “with the implementation of content and language integrated learning in the Estonian education system, language immersion has fostered the idea that on finishing basic school, pupils - being multilingual independent learners - have wide possibilities for further studies and in the labour market as well as they value their ethnic identity and mother tongue” (Strategy of the Language Immersion Program).

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All materials regarding the language immersion program are taken from the program's homepage at <http://kke.innove.ee>