



Knowledge of Russian and Estonian – an aisle of Finnish–Russian–Estonian relations

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Abstract

This article seeks to identify the educational tendencies in the case of Russian and Estonian second language instruction in Finland observing the shift from language erosion to maintenance. We examine the reasons why the promotion of Russian and Estonian in Finland is opportune and how acquainted immigrant children's parents are with their rights to Russian or Estonian language instruction. The aim of this study is to examine the level of ethnic and linguistic intolerance sensed by the Russian and Estonian immigrants and the degree of integration into the Finnish culture and society. The study addresses the following research questions: How does Finland try to attenuate the social exclusion of the Russian and Estonian immigrants? Do immigrant students receive enough support to achieve bilingual proficiency? In what cases does the child not agree to speak Russian or Estonian at all? Is knowledge of the two analyzed languages a prerequisite for economic and cultural perspectives in Finland? The topic will be focused from sociolinguistic, linguistic, cognitive, cultural perspectives and the article will adopt a comparative approach.

Rezumat

Acest articol urmărește să identifice tendințele educaționale în cazul predării limbilor ruse și estone ca limbi secundare în Finlanda, observând trecerea de la eroziune lingvistică la menținerea limbii. Examinăm motivele pentru care promovarea limbilor ruse și estone în Finlanda este oportună și cât de familiarizați sunt părinții copiilor imigranți cu drepturile lor la instruirea în limbile rusă sau estonă. Scopul acestui studiu este de a analiza nivelul de intoleranță etnică și lingvistică resimțită de imigranții ruși și estonieni și gradul de integrare în cultura și societatea finlandeză.

Studiul abordează următoarele întrebări: Cum încearcă Finlanda să atenueze excluderea socială a imigranților ruși și estonieni? Studenții imigranți primesc suficient sprijin pentru a atinge competența bilingvă? În ce fel de cazuri copilul nu este de acord să vorbească deloc limba rusă sau cea estonă? Cunoașterea celor două limbi analizate este o condiție prealabilă pentru perspectivele economice și culturale din Finlanda?

Subiectul va fi abordat din perspective sociolingvistice, lingvistice, cognitive, culturale, iar articolul va adopta o abordare comparativă.

Keywords: Russian, Estonian, second languages, Finland, social and cultural perspectives

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Definitions and study of border languages

The language skills of the population in the neighboring countries around the Gulf of Finland, the similarities of the adjacent languages and the cultural aspects have been researched and compared since the beginning of the 19th century. During the 20th century the study of the neighbors' languages has been articulated even more until it became a compulsory subject both in Finland and Estonia. Kaivapalu (2019)¹ observes that language courses and the media in the border language constitute a "window to the outside world", nevertheless the speakers' proficiency in the adjacent language varies depending on the age group and other factors.

When analyzing the languages taught in the Scandinavian countries, there has been made a division of the languages according to which Russian is defined as a *small language*. The term is used to name such languages which are taught in the form of short courses or lessons at a beginner level.² However, some educational institutions may experience the decline in the number of students, so that even the main European languages could be considered as small, while in other years many students inquire about these languages, so that they are not regarded as small ones anymore. While the Russian language can be considered a marginal case, Estonian is defined as a small language since many schools cannot even bear the costs of a teaching position.

In Finland instead, Russian-speaking young people are the largest group with an immigrant background and as Iskanius (2004)³ notes not much is known about their primary educational needs. In line with the research data, it appears that these young people embrace the Russian ethnic and linguistic identity, as long as they show a more volatile, weaker and inconstant position towards the majority language. This does not mean that they reject the Finnish language studies or ignore to interact with Finnish

¹ Annekatrin Kaivapalu, "Eesti ja soome keele sarnasusest ja omandamisest ning nende mõjust eesti-soome suhtlusele", in *Eesti-Soomesuhted 100. Viro-Suomi suhteet 100.*, ed. A. Rolle, K. Kumer-Haukanõmm (Migration Institute of Finland, 2019), 1.

² Högskoleverket. Att vara eller inte vara? Frågan om småspråkens framtid i den svenska högskolan – ett regeringsuppdrag. Stockholm: Högskoleverket, 2002, 19.

³ Sanna Iskanius, "Venäjänkieliset toisen asteen opiskelijat Suomessa. Pohdintoja identiteetistä ja kielestä", in *Äidinkieli ja toiset kielet: Pohjoismaiden kaksikielisyytyöpaja Tampereella 18.-20.10.2002*, ed. S. Latomaa (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2004), 28–42.

speakers. Still, there exist certain groups of young people who do not establish contacts with any Finns at all and feel proud to be born in Russia and are not keen on being granted the Finnish citizenship.

Study has also been undertaken on distinctive Estonian and Russian communities living in Finland, who generally showed diverseness and dissimilarities in descent, heritage, prestige and level of integration into the Finnish society. Tiido (2019)⁴ identifies two types of Russian and Estonian newcomers in Finland and the Baltic nations: those speakers who are offspring of the population residing in the lately founded republics after the downfall of the Soviet Russia, and the other vaster group consisting of more recent immigrants.

By cause of the Finnish history and the war memories with Russia, Finland does not bring the Russian minority to the public attention and it even adopts a circumspect manner in relation to Russia, even though during the recent years of peaceful cohabitation they have built valuable connections.

Is the future of the Estonian language in Finland uncontrollable?

Since Estonians study Finnish because it seems an easy language to them, in Finland the interest in the language of the neighboring country could be increased as well. Finnish speakers consider Estonian an enjoyable and easy language, though it must also be useful in order to learn it. Estonians benefit from knowing the Finnish language: one of the reasons is the EU-membership and the opportunity to apply for jobs in Finland, other reasons are studying, training, becoming an exchange student, shopping at the weekends or even visiting friends.

Finns could perhaps be attracted to exchange study or training places in Estonia. Lipasti (2007)⁵ argues that Estonian could be offered as an optional subject in Finnish high schools, but also in vocational schools. Several organizations and other entities organize exhibitions, lecture series,

⁴ Anna Tiido, 'Russians in Europe: Nobody's tool. The examples of Finland, Germany and Estonia', *Estonian Foreign Policy Institute* (2019): 10.

⁵ Järvi Lipasti, 'Virossa opiskellaan suomea', *Kielikello* 3/2007, 14.

language courses or cultural trips. Consequently, it is beneficial to know the language of the neighboring country. Nonetheless, even if the children were born in Estonia, very often their parents declare Finnish as the children's mother tongue. Praakli (2004)⁶ considers that this is due to the fact that Estonian speakers work in a Finnish environment, albeit they have lots of opportunities to maintain their mother tongue with the help of language clubs, festivals and associations focusing on education and language teaching. In practice, indeed, Estonian children benefit just from two hours of mother tongue instruction a week and otherwise the language of instruction and communication at schools is Finnish.

The future of the Estonian language in Finland seems to be unsure but not beyond control. It turns out that Estonian children living in Finland do not learn much Estonian as a mother tongue. Finland has to be able to teach immigrants' children the Estonian language not only because they have to be able to return to Estonia without a language problem but also because the number of Estonian speakers worldwide should not decrease. There are few Estonian language teachers in Finland who teach in several schools. Estonian is taught to adults as a second language and in the case of young people the groups are formed of children from several schools. These children have often different Estonian language skills, which causes difficulties to the teachers. Children born in Finland may learn Estonian as a foreign language, while others learn it as a mother tongue or a second language.

For these situations the necessary teaching skills are acquired by collaboration and exchanging experiences with colleagues. Lipasti and Pajusalu (2013)⁷ note that teachers in neighboring cities work together and participate in trainings where they get acquainted with active learning methods.

⁶ Kristiina Praakli, "Koodinvaihdosta Tampereen virolaisten kielenkäytössä", in *Äidinkieli ja toiset kielet: Pohjoismainen kaksikielisyystyöpaja Tampereella 18.-20.10.2002*, ed. S. Latomaa (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2004), 106–116.

⁷ Järvi Lipasti, Renate Pajusalu, *Emakeel on oma keel. Kuidas hoida emakeelt vöõrsil* (Helsinki: Tuglase Selts, 2013), 3-13.

Lipasti (2007)⁸ states that many Estonian children refuse to learn Estonian as a mother tongue or a second language since those lessons of two hours a week often take place after the teaching hours and perhaps in a different building, so they need additional travelling to the sight. Though learning Estonian is made easier since schools have managed to order the necessary textbooks.

Knowing Estonian will probably determine future career choices and will enhance relations with Estonia. If children do not want to learn Estonian as a mother tongue and attend a bilingual class, they can learn it as a second or foreign language. English also infiltrates schools and students use it in breaks but they do not have difficulties in switching from Finnish or English to Estonian. According to Lipasti and Pajusalu (2013) these children make language mistakes and the Finnish language influences their sentence structure. The Estonian teachers' language skills do not disappear since they follow both Finnish and Estonian news through the media. Lipasti and Pajusalu (2013)⁹ admit that children who learn their mother tongue besides Finnish make grammar mistakes and are influenced by the structure of the majority language, but the specialists also consider that grammar mistakes should not be noticed, and yet adults should use the language correctly.

With regard to the educational level of the Estonian speakers living in Finland, Praakli (2017)¹⁰ states that they are less knowledgeable than the Russians with a migrant background. While half of the Russians are in possession of a university degree, only one fifth of the Estonians own such a degree, while others have only a basic, vocational education.

Enterprise development through Russian second language learning

In Finland Russian is the most common unofficial language, since it is the third most widely spoken language after Finnish and Swedish. Today more than 77.000 people in Finland consider Russian to be their mother

⁸ Lipasti 2007.

⁹ Lipasti 2013.

¹⁰ Kristiina Praakli, 'Viron kieli Suomessa. ELDIA-projektin tuloksia: lyhennelmä tutkimusraportista', *Studies in European Language Diversity* 29.2 (2017): 13–15.

tongue and more than 100.000 people, including immigrants from Russia, speak Russian at some level. Russian is also the most common foreign language in most parts of Eastern, Northern and Central Finland. Today, it is possible to study Russian at different stages of education, starting from early childhood education. There are a few schools in Finland that teach both Finnish and Russian. In an ordinary primary school, Russian can be taught both as a mother tongue and as a second language. It is also possible to study Russian at Finnish universities within the framework of the higher education program.

As Finland can successfully solve the modernization and migration problems and has the potential for economic growth and competitiveness, Balchyunene (2014)¹¹ finds that Finland is a country of interest for Russian and Estonian speakers. Therefore Finland has proposed to attract qualified immigrants who could contribute to the enterprise development and labor productivity. The economic relations and tourism between Finland and Russia are constantly developing and new forms of cooperation are also built particularly between Karelia and border Finland.

As stated by Balchyunene (2014)¹², one of the identified paths is the promotion of the Russian language in Finland, considering that the number of Russian-speaking inhabitants has reached over 77.000 in Finland.

Research conducted by the Confederation of Finnish Industries finds that the Russian language plays a significant role in the Finnish business life and there is a growing need for its knowledge. Being ranked third among the most demanded languages in Finland, almost one third of the employers claim proficiency in Russian. Thus every seventh child in Eastern Finland is interested in learning Russian. Moreover, trade and economic relations prove that fluency in English is not enough nowadays.

Though Vanhalakka (2012)¹³ acknowledges that not everything has been done in the municipalities of Eastern Finland to raise the level of

¹¹ Наталья Ильинична Бальчюнене, 'Русский язык в Финляндии: проблемы и перспективы' [Russian language in Finland: problems and perspectives], *Инженерный вестник Дона* 28/1 (2014): 17.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Суви Ванхалакка, *языковая политика Финляндии в области образования с точки зрения русского и шведского языков. «Case-study» в городе Коувола* [Finnish language education policy

Russian language teaching. Nowadays Eastern Finland needs more Russian speakers to the extent that Finland even considers some reforms in its language policy by replacing Swedish and starting teaching Russian at schools as a second or foreign language.

In Renvik's (2018)¹⁴ view Russian immigrants are remarkably skilled but due to governmental reasons they are socially underprivileged and their recruitment for the labor market is less favorable than in the case of Estonian speakers. Further inquiry pursued indicates that the more disfavored Estonian or Russian immigrants are, the less the assimilation level in the Finnish community is.

Tiido (2019)¹⁵ finds that although Russian speakers want to integrate into the Finnish culture, they are occasionally disfavored in the work environment. They accept that Finnish language proficiency is essential to be able to mingle with the majority population. Experience also shows that Finns who have Russian colleagues or acquaintances are more unprejudiced than others.

Admitting that the Estonian and Russian mother tongue or second language instruction is not available everywhere, reality shows that not all parents are informed about their rights to such education. The main goal for their children is to be well integrated into the dominant community and to master Finnish well enough along with English. They usually choose a Finnish school for their children where they can also learn Russian or Estonian, while others opt for a bilingual school. Nevertheless, few of the parents consider that school assistance in their children's mother tongue is not necessary.

Conclusions

As stated by population migration experts, in 30 years the Russian minority may become the largest immigrant group in the country and their language could become the third official language in Finland.

from the point of view of the Russian and Swedish languages. A case-study in the city of Kouvola] (University of Jyväskylä, 2012).

¹⁴ TA. Renvik, et al, 'Perceived status and national belonging: The case of Russian speakers in Finland and Estonia', *International Review of Social Psychology* 31(1) (2018): 1–10.

¹⁵ Tiido 2019

It is certain, that integration into the Finnish society can only be achieved if Russian and Estonian speakers adapt themselves to the new culture and learn the Finnish language with the condition to preserve their own language and culture. Iskanius (2004)¹⁶ reveals that Estonian and Russian immigrant children are afraid of losing their identity and forgetting their mother tongue under the pressure of acquiring Finnish mainly due to its social significance.

The existing educational circumstances may boost bilingual children's language skills and self-respect, and if Estonian and Russian children also master the state language, then integration into the society will be a favorable outcome. Just as Protassova (2008)¹⁷ demonstrates, parents are frequently the ones that do not embrace the benefits offered by the various educational institutions existing in Finland.

The Finnish administration reinforces the rights of the Russian and Estonian speakers to their integrity but simultaneously it calls for integration into the Finnish society. Yet, it is undeniable that these communities do not fully accommodate with their new social environment, they feel more exposed and are more active in business life than politically. Some of these minority groups have articulated voices of nonfulfillment, resentment or unconcern about integration.

Praakli (2017)¹⁸ makes a few recommendations which could be implemented in the case of both studied minority languages in Finland. Language policymakers should pay attention to the constant development of the Russian and Estonian mother tongue and second language education in Finland, since language maintenance depends on the attitudes of the young generations towards these languages. Informing the children's parents about their rights to language teaching is also essential. A notable resemblance between the two discussed minorities is that Russians and Estonians living in Finland do not form close communities but smaller groups which are spread all over the country. Thus, they lack clear goals and a firm identity. Therefore, researchers and experts taking part in the project

¹⁶ Iskanius 2004.

¹⁷ Ekaterina Protassova, 'Teaching Russian as a heritage language in Finland', *Heritage Language Journal* 6(1) (2008): 127-152.

¹⁸ Praakli 2017

called *European Language Diversity for All* point out that language teaching and cultural activities need careful planning, and Russian and Estonian speakers have to be more involved in the Finnish social life. Parents are advised not to make language choices for their children, even if the Finnish language is considered to have a higher market value and hence the significance of Russian or Estonian is questioned.

Seeing that English language skills are not enough for the working life, Lempinen and Ågren (2017)¹⁹ emphasize that Estonian or Russian language skills improve the speakers' employability. In vocational training, for instance, a language-oriented individual study path is recommended where learning is integrated into the employees' professional degrees and students benefit from updated language teaching methods, practical language learning, hands-on studies and communication technologies.

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¹⁹ Petri Lempinen, Satu Ågren, "Kielitaito on ammattitaitoa: Katsaus kielten opetukseen ja vieraskielisiin opiskelijoihin ammatillisessa koulutuksessa", Ammattiosaamisen kehittämissyhdystys AMKE ry. 2017, https://www.amke.fi/media/julkaisuja/kielitaito_on_ammattitaitoa_2017.pdf, accessed at 14.06.2021.

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