

# RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN BILINGUALISM RESEARCH AND ITS PRACTICAL MEANING FOR ESTONIAN SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

*The article deals with the researches done in the field of Russian-Estonian bilingualism for the modern period of Estonian life, comparing to the results drawn from the times when Estonia formed a part of the Soviet Union. The authors present the situation of bilingual students distribution in the Estonian-medium schools. The problem proved to be topical - the number of bilingual students in Estonian-medium schools has been growing. It means that methods of teaching Russian language for this people have to be modified. Within the research the data on amount of bilingual students in Estonian schools gotten from the Ministry of Education and Science has been specified. The questionnaire was sent to all Estonian schools, and the received data were processed and systematized according to the regions and levels of study, which enabled to present the distribution of Russian-Estonian bilingualism in Estonian-medium (with Estonian as a language of instruction) schools. The data on using Russian in the families of the students were also received.*

**Key words:** *bilingualism, Russian-Estonian bilingualism, mother tongue.*

## Introduction

Being a member of European Union, Estonia had to enact some measures in order to protect linguistic and ethnic minorities in Estonia. Therefore, two bilingual regimes are provided. The first one is the bilingual territorial regime; the second bilingual regime assures cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities (Constitution of Estonian Republic, §§ 50, 51). However, a lot of people from so-called Russian-speaking families (forming more than 30% of Estonia's population) send their children to schools with Estonian as a language of instructions. A fundamental research has not been conducted yet; however it is becoming obvious that the level of both Estonian and Russian languages achieved by the Russian-speaking children is far from perfect (e.g., see Ahmet 2003, Rannut 2005, Loopman 2004). Nevertheless, it is the mother tongue that mostly defines a person's self-identification.

The problem of bilingualism in general and of Russian-Estonian bilingualism particularly is really topical; it has been proved by numerous research devoted to bilingualism and bilingual education (see Baker 2000; Baker, 1996; Baker, Prys. Jones 1998; Coelho 1998; Sears 1998; Montanari 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Рюнкянен 2006, 2007; Hannikainen 2002; Протасова, Родина,

2005 etc.), as well as by interest shown in mass media (e.g., GOOGLE and YANDEX.RU offer about 103 thousand and 2 million publications respectively on key words *Russian child (children) in Estonian school* in the beginning of 2009).

In Estonia preferably national-Russian bilingualism was examined in 1970-s, determined by social-political conditions: there used to be a unique multinational state with one interlanguage (Селицкая 1976, Рейцак 1976; Моисеенко 1978).

Recently bilingualism have been studied actively in the Estonian Republic from the other sight angle: both theoretical aspect of bilingualism and Russian-Estonian bilingualism are in the limelight (Замковая, Моисеенко 2008; Hint, 2002; Раннут 2004; Rannut, 2003; Синдецкая, Чуйкина 2006; Ауг 2007; Мальцева-Замковая, Моисеенко, Чуйкина 2008; Русскоязычная семья и эстонская школа 2008, Постникова 2008).

## Problem for the Research

As for the Russian language, based on the observation the largest part of such pupils after leaving an Estonian medium school are not fluent in writing and reading Russian, including orthography, punctuation and grammar. Their speech does not differentiate in the spheres of communicating (e.g., informal and formal style). Sometimes they speak Russian with an Estonian accent, though with the parents they use only Russian. The results of the first observations can be found in articles by N.Tshuikina and N.Sindetskaia (Чуйкина, Синдецкая 2005, 2006). Similar and thorougher study on the question was conducted in the Soviet times (see, e.g., Моисеенко 1979, Хинт 1989, Селицкая 1976, Рейцак 1976), however, the situation has changed and needs some new approaches (Моисеенко, Замковая 2002; Мальцева-Замковая, Моисеенко, Чуйкина 2009). However, such matters are not enough, the problem need to be thoroughly studied, especially in Estonia, as the list of researches is limited to the above mentioned publications.

## Methodology of the Research

In order to define the target group questionnaires were worked out. The questionnaires were designed for the schools' administration and sent to all regions of the Estonian Republic (Harjumaa, Hiiumaa, Ida-Virumaa, Järvamaa, Jõgevamaa, Läänemaa, Lääne-Virumaa, Põlvamaa, Pärnumaa, Raplamaa, Saaremaa, Tartumaa, Valgamaa, Viljandimaa, Võrumaa). The aim of the questioning was to receive the following data:

- 1) total amount of bilingual students in every single school;
- 2) bilingual students' distribution on different teaching stages (1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10–12);
- 3) home language/s of the bilingual students.

On the next step, the received data was compared to the numbers provided by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science.

The change (dynamics) in the amount of students for the last 7 years was to be highlighted. The data of academic years 2001/2002 and 2008/2009 were compared.

The received records were systemized in order to elicit regions with highest distribution of bilingual students, so that to be thoroughly studied.

## Results of the Research

The aim for the first stage of the research was to define the target group and to describe the group (regions, statistics, dynamics).

In order to elicit the target group we have collected information about the number of bilingual students in secondary and high schools of Estonia with Estonian as a language of instruction. The

data have been organized taking into account the regions and teaching stages – they are drawn to the following table (Table 1):

**Table 1. Quantitative data on bilingual students in Estonian-medium schools.**

STAGE / REGION	1–3	4–6	7–9	10–12	TOTAL
Harjumaa	372	380	381	307	1 440
Hiiumaa		1			1
Ida-Virumaa	149	165	179	82	575
Jarvamaa	7	9	21	6	43
Jõgevamaa	44	32	29	17	122
Läänemaa	11	12	27	35	85
Lääne-Virumaa	48	48	40	30	166
Põlvamaa	6	6	5	7	24
Pärnumaa	63	73	56	23	215
Raplamaa	33	35	21	9	98
Saaremaa	5	4	8	2	19
Tartumaa	85	94	82	60	321
Valgamaa	47	40	38	21	146
Viljandimaa	26	26	32	16	100
Võrumaa	9	11	11	6	37
<b>Total:</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>936</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>3 392</b>

As the table (Table 1) shows, 3 392 students of Estonian-medium schools are bilingual, which makes 3.1% of total amount of students in Estonian-medium schools. The highest number of bilingual pupils are in Harjumaa (42.4% out of selection in all regions), Ida-Virumaa (16.95%), Tartumaa (9.5%), Pärnumaa (6.3%), Lääne-Virumaa (4.9%). The least number of such students island regions present: Hiiumaa (0.02%), Saaremaa (0.6%). Therefore, the target group for further research is presented by bilingual students from 5 regions of greater representation.

Research data on different schools mostly confirm the evidence that greater number of bilingual students study in Estonian schools of larger towns with a liberal share of Russian-speaking population. E.g., there are a little less than 10% (64 students out of 740) in Tallinn French Lyceum, more than 10% (86 out of 710) in Tallinn Gymnasia ARTE, more than 8% (60 out of 839) in Tallinn German Gymnasia, more than 30% in Tallinn Laagna Gymnasia (239 out of 710), more than a half (176 out of 235) in Narva Estonian Gymnasia.

However, there are schools with great amount of bilingual students in smaller towns and rural settlements. E.g., there are about 30% bilingual students in Kunda General Gymnasia (152 out of 419), more than 20% in Kiviõli Secondary School (67 out of 317), almost 10% in Kohila Gymnasia (72 out of 751), more than 10% in Aegviidu Gymnasia (7 out of 56), about 20% in Mustvee Gymnasia (30 out of 158). This obviously can be explained by the fact that there is a lack of Russian-medium schools in most of the mentioned communities, while the number of Russian-speaking population is considerably large.

One can find the following distribution of bilingual students within the teaching stages: there are 3.4% of bilingual students in the first teaching stage in 2008/2009 (905 out of 26779), 3.4% in the second stage (936 out of 27583), 2.9% in the third stage (930 out of 32098), 2.6% in high school (621 out of 23882). The figures prove that the distribution according to the teaching stages does not fluctuate considerably.

The dynamics of „diffusion“ process among bilingual students one can observe in the following table (Table 2):

**Table 2. Number of bilingual students of Estonian-medium schools in 2001/2002 and 2008/2009.**

ACADEMIC YEAR / REGION	2001/2002	2008/2009	Increase in the number of bilingual students	Decrease in the number of bilingual students
Harjumaa	690	1440	+750	
Hiiumaa	2	1		-1
Ida-Virumaa	436	575	+139	
Jarvamaa	64	43		-21
Jõgevamaa	106	122	+16	
Läänemaa	64	85	+21	
Lääne-Virumaa	236	166		-70
Põlvamaa	49	24		-25
Pärnumaa	57	215	+158	
Raplamaa	95	98	+3	
Saaremaa	0	19	+19	
Tartumaa	136	321	+185	
Valgamaa	61	146	+85	
Viljandimaa	40	100	+60	
Võrumaa	15	37	+22	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>2051</b>	<b>3392</b>	<b>+1315</b>	<b>-117</b>

Comparing the quantitative data of bilingual students studying in Estonian-medium schools in 2001-2001 (Русскоязычная семья и эстонская школа 2008) and 2008/2009 (see Table 3) it becomes obvious that the number of such students have grown by 1315 people, which is especially exhibitory at the time when the total amount of students in schools of Estonia has fallen.

**Table 3. Total amount of students in schools of Estonia.**

TEACHING STAGE/ ACADEMIC YEAR	1-3	4-6	7-9	10-12
1992/1993	61 619	60 477	60 955	27 140
2001/2002	46 565	62 058	64 437	34 552
2008/2009	36 866	36 689	42 699	31 266

We can trace the tendency on increasing number of bilingual students in the regions with larger towns, such as Tallinn, Pärnu, Tartu. Such an external factor that some Russian-medium schools in the regions (e.g., Pärnu and Tartu) get closed also influences the growth of bilingual students. As the table shows, the number of bilingual students in rural areas and on the islands have been stable or decreased in some cases (see Põlvamaa, Raplamaa, Hiiumaa, Jarvamaa). That may be caused by the fact that some people have moved to larger towns for work.

Quantitative changes in the researched group according to teaching stages for the last 7 years are presented in the following table (Table 4):

**Table 4. Quantitative changes of bilingual students according to teaching stages from 2001/2002 to 2008/2009.**

NUMBER OF BILINGUAL STUDENTS (AND %) / TEACHING STAGE	2001/2002	2008/2009
1-3	483 (1)	905 (2,45)
4-6	597 (0,9)	936 (2,56)
7-9	578 (1, 35)	930 (2,18)
10-12	393 (1,25)	621 (2, 29)

Data comparison from the table brings to conclusion that there has been proportional increase in the number of bilingual students of all teaching stages. Analysis of the last two tables gives an opportunity to trace the dynamics of size of the target group in details. E.g., in the first teaching stage in 2001/2002 bilingual students formed only 1% of the total amount of pupils in Estonia, in the second stage – less than 1%, in the third – 1.35%, in high school – 1.25%.

Comparing the data of 2001/2002 (Русскоязычная семья и эстонская школа 2008) and 2008/2009 we can notice remarkable growth in number of bilingual students, especially in the two first stages. This again proves a distinct tendency of „enlargement“ in the group of bilingual students of Estonian-medium schools.

Getting education in the Estonian language by a large amount of bilingual students exercise a significant affect on the “condition” of the mother tongue, in many cases it causes the decrease in the level of competence in the native language (Baker, 2005: 27). In this context another research has become extremely topical, the research of how the mother tongue is supported in the students’ homes. In order to light out some of the facts there is a table demonstrating the “home” languages in use by the bilingual students (Table 5).

**Table 5. Home language / languages of students.**

HOME LANGUAGE/REGIONS	One language	Two and more languages
Harjumaa	328 (Russian)	294
Hiiumaa		
Ida-Virumaa	275 (Russian) 3 (Estonian)	31
Jarvamaa		9
Jõgevamaa	53	15
Läänemaa	48	31
Lääne-Virumaa	41	60
Põlvamaa	3 (Russian) 1 (Estonian)	13
Pärnumaa	132	41
Raplamaa	48	28
Saaremaa		19
Tartumaa	61	89
Valgamaa	43	30
Viljandimaa	6	36
Võrumaa	22	9
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1071</b>	<b>705</b>

The figures in the Table 5 (although the data are not final) indicate that the larger part of bilingual students speak Russian at home, however those who speak both (Russian and Estonian) languages form a considerable share (almost 40%). Data from some school authorities show that some families purposefully refuse to speak native Russian language and even escape from communicating in the two languages with the children in preference to the Estonian language. At the same time there are families (and it is symptomatic) where parents speaking to each other the two languages or only Russian in communication with children choose only Estonian. There are also occasions when parents with poor skills of Estonian do prefer to converse to the children in this language.

The table shows that in so-called Russian regions families do speak preferably Russian, while in the regions with limited spread of the Russian language parents generally converse with the children in both languages. Impossibility or limitations in using the language outside family can naturally lead to a significant decrease in the level of the language competence.

Language choice in a family is often random. Few parents use purposefully in their communication one or two languages. However, there are three language strategies in upbringing a bilingual

child to consider: 1. one person – one language; 2. both parents speak both languages to the child; 3. parents speak to the child a native language, the other language is spoken outside the family. The last strategy often takes place in the context of national minority. That is the situation that is developed in most families raising a bilingual child (Baker, 2000). It is also true for Estonia.

A mother tongue support is definitely necessary, as its “miss” often causes loss of ethnical identity and breaks connections with the family (from presentation by Fred Genesse „Insight from immersion Research” on conference «Lõimitud aine- ja keeleõppe levik. Mitmekeelsus kui toime- tuleku võti paljukultuurilises maailmas». Tallinn, 24–25 October 2008), which negatively affects full-bodied personality formation able to self-realization in the context of multicultural society.

## Discussion

The early and the late immersion (Estonian) programmes for children from Russian-speaking families were also introduced in 2000 and 2004 respectively. However, it is early to discuss the level of the native language command, as even the first groups of these children have not finished the school. Nevertheless, isolated observations are presented in some works (Новиков 2005; Игнатова 2005). *The project is oriented to the Russian-speaking 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> year students, not participating in immersion programmes.* The data will be displayed within periods of studies (in the end of 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> year).

The problem can be viewed as important from two standpoints. The first one relates to the idea that any language should be taught additively, not subtractively. It means that another language should be added to your mother tongue, not to replace it. The statement may refer to the Constitution of Estonia, guarantying bilingual regimes. However, some researchers (e.g., works by T. Skutnabb-Kangas, one of the prominent specialists in the field of multilingualism) emphasize the importance of such an idea only in relation to endangered languages, explaining the role of so called languages-killers. At the same time she draws examples of linguistic genocide in Sweden against Finnish minority language or American English against Hispanic minorities’ languages. She also states that it has nothing in common with the language policy against Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. We can understand that assimilating 500 000 Russians in Estonia will not harm the Russian language itself (as well as Finnish in Sweden and Hispanic languages in America respectively). That is why the second standpoint might be more rational for the issue (actually, also supported by T. Skutnabb-Kangas (2004)).

Alan N. Crawford, working for the project of bilingual education in Latvia, declares the role of studying in a native language for the general mental development, development of logic. In his article he draws examples from researches conducted in America (Crawford 2002). As it is said before, bilingual education in Estonia has also taken its place. However, a Russian child in Estonian school is a fact, which cannot be violated. That is why one of the approaches to solving the problem is to find a way to support the knowledge of the mother tongue and culture in this group of children. We suppose that one of the appropriate measures for that could be a special programme of language studies which finds its place in special text-books, accompanying by teacher’s manual as well as a special in-training course for the teachers of Russian as a foreign language.

The future research implies several steps considering general and specific studies. First, it is important to define the types of bilingualism in general, as well as the type of bilingualism to be studied (assuming that it could be more subtractive than additive).

Second, the research implies studying the level of language skills in different aspects: a) phonetics, b) vocabulary, c) grammar and syntax, d) authentic texts perception by the studied group.

Third, it is essential to estimate the extent of influence from media, TV, other relatives, after-school activities on the target group’s language skills.

Cross-cultural communication can be applied here as some study of literature used in teaching Russian as a foreign language in the aspect of cultural information supporting the general knowledge of Russian culture, history and so on (which has been partly done by T.Jegoshina (Егошина 2007)) and way of implementing the other relevant cultural information both about Russian and Estonian culture (which can be considered especially important in the light of recent events in Tallinn, two national groups of people living in Estonia do not understand each other due to different cultural background) on the basis of Russian authentic texts, specially processed to fit the need. The requirement: relevant cultural information, language difficulties appropriate for the level of students, possibility to use as model for vocabulary and grammar exercises. The data for developing such exercises is going to be drawn from the research project: it will describe the level of Russian language skills, general linguistic, cultural and psychological problems of the studied group, methods used to teach Russian as well as proposals for improving the above mentioned.

The research deals with traditionally used methods of Russian as a foreign language teaching and their acceptability in the mentioned process; methods of teaching Russian as mother tongue in relation to the issue. It is obvious that neither methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language, nor methods of teaching Russian as a mother tongue could be applied separately.

In result, the objective of the project is to work out an optimal model for teaching Russian-speaking children in the context of Estonian-medium school.

## Conclusion

The data presents the situation of bilingual (Russian-Estonian) students distribution in the Estonian-medium schools. The problem is extremely topical – it has been discussed not only in scientific research, but also in different mass media sources. This research has been done within two projects and its aim is to define the target group as well as to describe it (area distribution, statistics, dynamics).

First, the data about the number of such students (3 392) was collected and systematized according to the regions and levels of study. There also was noticed that the largest number of bilingual students is presented in Harjumaa (42.4%), Ida-Virumaa (16.95%), Tartumaa (9.5%), Pärnumaa (6.3%) and Lääne-Virumaa (4.9%) – in the larger towns with a big number of Russian-speaking population. Therefore, these five regions are meant to be the target group of the further research. The students are almost evenly distributed on different levels of study, except gymnasia.

The received data was compared with the numbers of 2001/2002 and 2004/2005 school years, which showed that the amount of bilingual students has risen while the total number of secondary schools has dropped.

Education in Estonian for the mentioned group has deeply influenced their mother tongue knowledge. Most of them speak Russian at home, while quite a high percent (40%) of them use both Russian and Estonian at home. In whole, most Russian-speaking parents tend to pursue their children to gain the Estonian language knowledge in order to achieve in social life – which in most occasions does not support the mother tongue skills. It leads to subtractive bilingualism. It becomes obvious that teaching Russian in Estonian-medium schools for student from Russian-speaking families should get systematic and solid support from families, schools and the state. Only in this situation efficient bilingualism is possible, which maintains ethnical identity of a person supporting his or her self-fulfillment in a multicultural society.

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