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Language Attitudes of Parents with Russian L1 in Tartu: Transition to Estonian-Medium Education

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Abstract

In 2023, the authors conducted a qualitative study in five bilingual educational institutions (two general education schools and three kindergartens) in Tartu, Estonia, undergoing a transition to Estonian-medium education. The empirical material for this qualitative research was collected during ten discussion evenings with Russian L1 parents, with around 300 attendees. Given the emotional and political sensitivity of the topic, the discussions were documented through researchers' handwritten field notes and subsequently reconstructed from these notes for thematic analysis following the principles of qualitative content analysis. This study aimed to map the concerns and fears of Russian L1 parents and to collaboratively explore possible solutions. The broader objective was to understand and interpret Russian-speaking parents' attitudes toward the shift to Estonian-medium instruction. A further aim was to raise language awareness among parents and to help lay a more positive foundation for the transition process. The theoretical framework draws on the notion that parents' language attitudes significantly influence their children's perceptions of the value of the language being learned. Our results show that many Russian L1 parents in Tartu consider it important for both Estonian- and Russian-speaking children to study in a shared, Estonian-medium learning environment. At the same time, parents identified several key challenges, including concerns about a decline in education quality, increased academic pressure and stress for children learning in a non-native language, a lack of suitable learning materials, and parents' limited ability to assist with homework due to their own insufficient proficiency in Estonian.

Keywords: transition to Estonian-medium education; general education; parents; second language; Estonian

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1. Introduction

Estonia is a multilingual country: according to the most recent population census, 243 different mother tongues were registered (REL, 2021). The most spoken are Estonian (67%) and Russian (29%), while English is the most widely spoken foreign language (REL, 2021). The Russian-speaking minority primarily formed during the Soviet occupation (1944–1991), when extensive immigration to Estonia occurred from other parts of the former Soviet Union (Tammaru & Kulu, 2003). Since regaining independence, the proportion of Russian speakers has declined but still accounts for approximately one-third of the population. The Russian-speaking population is mainly concentrated in Tallinn and its surrounding areas, as well as in cities in Ida-Viru County e.g., Narva and Kohtla-Järve (Ehala, 2015).

One of the central challenges in Estonia's education system lies in the parallel school structure inherited from the Soviet era, where general education schools operate separately in Estonian and Russian under the same curriculum (Knapp et al., 2023; Erss, 2023). This system emerged after World War II, alongside extensive Russian-speaking immigration, and led to school choices being largely shaped by students' home language and the linguistic composition of their region.

Although several educational reforms have been introduced since 1991, the parallel system has persisted for decades, primarily due to political considerations. The education reform launched in 2022 aims to transition fully to Estonian-medium instruction in general education by 2030.

The main concerns associated with the current system include linguistic and cultural segregation, insufficient Estonian proficiency for accessing higher education and the labor market, and unequal quality of education. Results from the national Estonian-as-a-second-language exam (e.g., HARNO, 2023, 2024) indicate that Russian-medium schools often fail to provide sufficient proficiency by the end of basic school: only about half of students reach the B2 level (with an average score of 57.3 points in 2024). Studies such as PISA (2015, 2018), along with national research (Põder et al., 2017), demonstrate a persistent achievement gap between students in Russian-medium and Estonian-medium schools. Furthermore, students in Estonian-medium schools report higher levels of satisfaction (PISA, 2022).

A major legislative step was taken on 2 December 2022, when the Estonian Parliament adopted amendments to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (PGS, 2022), initiating a phased transition to Estonian-medium instruction in state and municipal kindergartens, general education schools, and vocational institutions that currently provide instruction in Russian or in a bilingual format. The transition began in September 2024, with preschool education and instruction in grades 1 and 4 delivered in Estonian nationwide. Full implementation is expected by the 2030/2031 academic year.

Efforts to establish a unified Estonian-medium education system have been ongoing since the restoration of independence, yet political delays have repeatedly impeded progress. The Ministry of Education and Research defines the objectives of the reform as fostering social cohesion, ensuring equal quality of education, and promoting equal opportunities for further study and employment, regardless of the mother tongue, objectives that presuppose a high level of Estonian proficiency among non-native speakers. While the transition presents significant challenges, it is regarded as a necessary step toward reducing inequality and enhancing integration.

Previous studies (e.g., Memberg, 2022; Vender et al., 2023) indicate that although Russian-dominant parents generally consider proficiency in Estonian important, many still prefer that their children receive instruction in Russian. According to the 2020 Integration Monitoring survey, only 17% of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds support their children studying exclusively in Estonian-medium schools (Integration Monitoring, 2020). A survey conducted among Russian-dominant parents in Tartu in December 2022 by the Baltic Research Institute (BUI), to which we also contributed, revealed widespread negative attitudes toward Estonian-medium instruction: 17% of respondents were rather dissatisfied and 21% were completely dissatisfied (BUI, 2023). These findings suggest that the transition is accompanied by considerable parental resistance and generates significant uncertainty among Russian-speaking families.

This article examines the attitudes of Russian-speaking parents prior to the transition to Estonian-medium education in the city of Tartu. It addresses the following two research questions:

1. What are the main positive aspects, fears and concerns of Russian-speaking parents regarding the transition to Estonian-medium education in Tartu's educational institutions?
2. To what extent are the goals set by the Ministry of Education and Research achievable from the parents' perspective, and what do parents see as the main obstacles to achieving these national goals?

These research questions were selected to gain a comprehensive understanding of Russian-speaking parents' attitudes toward the transition. Parental attitudes have been considered (Pasquale, 2011; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012; Getie, 2020) a crucial focus because they significantly influence the development of their children's own attitudes and, consequently, the success of the transition. Moreover, the change in the language of instruction often generates considerable uncertainty and numerous unanswered questions among parents, who may also lack adequate information regarding the shift to Estonian-medium education. This context further justified the use of a qualitative methodology, which enables an in-depth exploration of parents' concerns, perceived obstacles, and proposed solutions.

To address these questions, we draw on qualitative data collected through a long-term collaboration with five bilingual educational institutions in Tartu. Between autumn 2022 and spring 2024, we engaged primarily with Russian-speaking parents through various formats. This article focuses specifically on field notes from ten parent discussion evenings held in 2023. These meetings—conducted in Russian—enabled us to explore parents' concerns, perceived obstacles, and suggested solutions regarding the transition to Estonian-medium education. The field notes, documented independently by two researchers, form the basis of our analysis and provide insight into parents' thinking in a natural conversational setting. While the method has its limitations, it proved effective for examining this relatively under-researched topic.

2. Data and Method

Language environments in Estonia, a country with a population of 1.3 million, have been defined according to the proportion of Estonian- and Russian-speaking populations in a given region. Rannut (2005) distinguishes four types of language environments: Tallinn, characterized by extensive multilingualism; the cities of Ida-Viru County, dominated by the Russian language; cities with a small Russian-speaking minority (15–30%); and cities and rural areas with a predominantly Estonian-speaking population. Later, Ehala (2015), see also (Ehala & Koreinik, 2016), argued that Tallinn and its surrounding municipalities (Harku, Kiili, Rae, Saue, Viimsi, and Maardu) constitute a distinct linguistic environment—the so-called Greater Tallinn—that differs from other contexts due to its internal heterogeneity and patterns of ethnolinguistic segregation.

Tartu, the main urban center of South Estonia and an increasingly international university city, has a population of approximately 98,247 and an overwhelmingly Estonian-speaking demographic compared to Greater Tallinn and Ida-Viru County: Estonians constitute 78% of its inhabitants, Russian speakers 11%, and Ukrainian speakers 5% (Tartu, 2024). Tartu is classified as an Estonian-dominant urban environment, where Estonian serves as the primary language of communication in both the private sphere and institutional domains. As a historical legacy of the Soviet occupation, the city still retains two bilingual general education schools and three bilingual kindergartens alongside predominantly Estonian-medium educational institutions. Tartu has been chosen as the focus of this study because it initiated the transition to Estonian-medium education earlier than other regions of Estonia. At the same time, Tartu's Estonian-speaking environment offers a unique context for examining how language policy decisions and the linguistic homogeneity of the urban setting shape the transition process and its outcomes.

Since autumn 2022, the authors have collaborated with the Tartu City Government to support selected educational institutions in preparing for the transition to Estonian-medium instruction. In 2022–2024, we investigated the awareness, attitudes, readiness, and concerns of primarily Russian-speaking parents whose children attend Tartu's bilingual schools. As part of this process, we engaged with both school administrators and parents, conducted a qualitative study, and provided policy recommendations to the city (see Klaas-Lang et al., 2023).

We employed various discussion formats to engage participants and gather data (see Klaas-Lang et al., 2023), including meetings with school leadership (n = 5), observations of whole-school parent meetings (n = 5), thematic discussion evenings (n = 10), and individual interviews (n = 25). Additionally, the Baltic Research Institute (BUI) conducted surveys in 2022 and 2024 to assess parental readiness for the reform, drawing on input gathered through the abovementioned engagements.

The empirical data analyzed in this article are based on researchers' field notes documenting thematic discussion evenings (n = 10) in winter and autumn 2023. The discussion evenings were held twice in each general school (n = 2) and kindergarten (n = 3). Although approximately 300 parents attended the discussion evenings over the one-year period, only about 100 actively expressed their views. Therefore, the analysis presented in this article focuses on the perspectives of these roughly 100 parents. The main objective of the first meetings was to identify parents' readiness, expectations, and concerns regarding the transition to Estonian-medium education, and to collect input for subsequent individual interviews. During the follow-up meetings, the same topics were revisited to assess any shifts in parents' attitudes and to examine whether their views on the transition to Estonian-medium education had evolved throughout this period.

Given the emotional and political sensitivity of the topic (see Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Silverio et al., 2022), and the fact that parents did not consent to being recorded, the discussions were documented in the form of researchers' field notes, as previously agreed upon with the participants, with the assurance that their anonymity would be fully protected. To ensure reliability and minimize interpretation bias, two researchers independently documented the meetings. The resulting field notes provided rich, contextual insights into parental attitudes and reasoning within a natural conversational setting. While this method has certain limitations, such as the potential for researcher bias, unequal participation, and the complexity of analyzing qualitative notes, it proved effective for examining a relatively under-researched issue. The discussions also served as input for interview planning and informed subsequent interviews, although interview data are not included in this article.

The parents who attended the meetings may be seen as active members of Tartu's Russian-speaking community, representing a range of "voices" and perspectives on the transition to Estonian-medium education. As the participants were aware that they were taking part in a study organized by the Tartu City Government, it is reasonable to consider whether this awareness could have influenced the overall findings. While the possibility of participants manipulating their responses can never be entirely excluded in qualitative research, the researchers believe that, given the high personal relevance of the discussion topic, the parents were motivated to express their genuine views during the discussions.

All discussions were conducted in Russian, reflecting the parents' choice of language for communication during the meetings. Parents were given the opportunity to choose the language of the meetings, and they opted for Russian as the primary medium of communication. All field notes were originally written in Russian and subsequently translated into Estonian for analysis and further translated into English for this article.

The field notes were analyzed through content analysis, which involved coding the data and identifying broader themes relevant to the research questions. The analysis was carried out following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes (assigning tags to meaningful units in the notes that characterized parents' concerns, fears, or expectations), grouping the codes into broader themes (e.g., fears related to children's language learning, the readiness of educational institutions, and issues of identity and belonging), refining and consolidating the themes, defining and naming each theme, and finally presenting the results with illustrative examples (quotations) from the data. All quotations presented in the article have been reconstructed on the basis of the researchers' field notes.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Tartu.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Parents' Beliefs About Learning in a Second Language (L2)

Parents hold beliefs about many aspects of a child's development, including second language (L2) acquisition and learning through a L2 (Gardner, 1985; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). According to Gardner (1985), parental attitudes toward language learning, shaped by cultural background, education, personal experience, norms, and social status, can influence children's L2 development (Roosa et al., 2002; Rodríguez et al., 2009).

Studying these attitudes is essential, as they strongly shape children's own views. Mihaljević Djigunović (2012) notes that children adopt the attitudes of significant adults. Negative home attitudes toward a language or its speakers can reduce motivation, while positive attitudes and strong motivation can enhance language learning (Jiang et al., 2009; Forey et al., 2015; Adwani & Shrivastava, 2017; Troesch et al., 2020; Hallap & Padrik, 2024). Families' identification with the host country's culture and language, and the value they place on learning it, also influence their language use and children's attitudes (Hammer et al., 2007; Ronderos et al., 2022).

Some parents see bilingual or multilingual education as a valuable option that can improve their child's cognitive ability, future educational and career prospects, and coping. They may see it as an investment in the child's future. If parents believe that learning an L2 at an early age is important and beneficial for their children, then children also have a positive attitude toward learning L2, which in turn increases their motivation to learn the language (Bartram, 2006; Bialystok, 2011).

Some parents are concerned about their child's academic success and emotional well-being. These concerns are partly rooted in the link between language proficiency and academic achievement, particularly at the initial stages of schooling in an L2 (Genesee et al., 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2012). Concerns about the negative impact of learning in a non-native language on cognitive and intellectual development remain widespread, yet these fears often overlook evidence showing that in well-designed bilingual and immersion programs, students tend to achieve outcomes equal to or even surpassing those of monolingual peers in the long term (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2012). A common fear is that using L2 may hinder understanding of complex subjects, especially early in language learning or that children may lose L1 skills and cultural identity (Baker, 2005; Griva & Chouvarda, 2012; Klaas-Lang et al., 2024).

Although many parents in Estonia fear that studying in a non-native language (e.g., Russian-speaking children learning in Estonian) hinders comprehension of complex subjects, international data contradicts this. PISA results show (see Table 1) that schools with Russian as the language of instruction score lower, especially in mathematics and science (equivalent to nearly a one-year knowledge gap, as a 39-point difference reflects one academic year) (PISA, 2022; Klaas-Lang et al., 2024, 2025). At the same time, it is important to

emphasize that these differences are not solely attributable to the language of instruction; socio-economic background, school resources, teacher training and differences in pedagogy also play crucial roles (Genesee et al., 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2012).

Table 1. Average results of the PISA 2022 test (According to PISA, 2022).

	OECD Average Score	Average Result in Estonia	Average Result of a School with Estonian as the Language of Instruction	Average Result of a School with Russian as the Language of Instruction	Backwardness of Schools with Russian as the Language of Instruction Compared to Schools with Estonian as the Language of Instruction (in Points)
Mathematics	472 p	510 p	517 p	485 p	32 p
Natural Sciences	485 p	526 p	534 p	498 p	36 p
Functional Reading	476 p	511 p	516 p	493 p	23 p

In Estonia, the impact of studying in Estonian as L2 has been researched for two decades. Asser (2003) found that academic performance does not decline compared to native speakers. The study by Pulver and Toomela (2014) also reveals that multilingual and/or non-Estonian students studying in Estonian-medium schools have better results on the 3rd grade mathematics test than students in language immersion schools, and the test results in the 5th grade do not differ from the results of children studying in Estonian as their mother tongue. In a situation where the test results were low, the reason was not studying in another language, but the student's lower mental capacity (Asser, 2003; Pulver & Toomela, 2014).

3.2. The Role of Parental Support in L2 Learning

Parental support plays an important role in children's academic achievement (see Otani, 2020; Balala et al., 2021). Studies (e.g., Castro et al., 2015; Tan et al., 2020) have shown a strong correlation between parental involvement and student success: children whose parents set higher expectations tend to achieve better results. Parental involvement largely means supporting and guiding children, maintaining communication, and participating in school life (Castro et al., 2015; Hill, 2022).

In language learning, parents play a key role by offering support and serving as role models. They help foster positive attitudes toward the language and encourage active use in everyday contexts. By creating opportunities for practice and modeling language use, parents significantly influence their children's motivation and engagement in learning the language (Xu, 1999; Pasquale, 2011; Punar & Karatepe, 2019; Getie, 2020). Their main task is to value the target language and motivate their children to use it, even if they do not speak it well (Baker, 2005; Park, 2013; Punar & Karatepe, 2019; Ronderos et al., 2022; Klaas-Lang et al., 2023). Parents should act as "encouragers" rather than "correctors" when listening to their child use the language. Even without understanding the content, their interest and encouragement support language development (Baker, 2005; Punar & Karatepe, 2019).

Parental support is also influenced by the social status or prestige of the language, and by the extent to which parents associate that language with their child's future. According to Ema Ushioda, a key motivator in language learning is the learner's future vision—how strongly they link language knowledge to future opportunities (Ushioda, 2011, 2017; see "possible self" and "future self" in English). Parents whose children do not see their

future in Estonia often do not support education in Estonian, i.e., in a non-native language (Klaas-Lang et al., 2024, 2025).

How parents support L2 learning may also depend on the cultural context. People from different cultural backgrounds may have different views on learning L2 (Forey et al., 2015). Some parents believe that schools and teachers are solely responsible for their child's language learning outcomes, while others take greater personal responsibility for their children's success (Chi & Rao, 2003; Gao, 2006). In Estonia, Russian-speaking parents often support learning at home by reviewing material, helping with homework, and preparing for tests, while Estonian-speaking parents tend to rely more on schools and teachers (Klaas-Lang et al., 2025).

4. Results

Below, we present the issues raised by parents during meetings with Tartu parents. In terms of results, we present examples within the text, which are generalizations and paraphrases of the positions expressed at the meetings. As quotations, we have pointed out the positions documented in the diary entries. These reflect both positive attitudes toward the change in the language of instruction as well as the challenges and stress the transition entails for parents. We have divided the results into two sub-sections. The first provides an overview of the positive aspects of the transition, and the second focuses on concerns and challenges expressed by parents regarding the shift to Estonian-medium education.

4.1. Positive Aspects of the Transition to Estonian-Medium Education

Parents in Tartu recognize some positive aspects in the change of the language of instruction, although the aspects listed below do not represent the views of all parents. Some even questioned why the transition had not happened earlier, asking: "Why wasn't this done 30 years ago?"

4.1.1. Shared Space for Education and Socialization

Non-Estonian-speaking parents in Tartu support learning together in Estonian, regardless of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The only positive outcome many parents see in the transition is that all students will receive their education in a common school space, irrespective of their home language. Until now, Russian-speaking parents have had limited options when choosing kindergartens and schools. In Tartu, there have been three kindergartens and two schools with Russian or immersion language instruction. According to parents, it has not been easy to place their children in Estonian-medium schools, as such schools might not accept children with poor Estonian skills. If all kindergartens and schools adopt Estonian as the language of instruction, parents believe this will foster competition among educational institutions, a development they welcome. Learning together is seen as beneficial for children's socialization and as a way to reduce segregation: "the Russian ghetto will disappear, as will the boundaries between Estonians and Russians."

At the start of the transition, some schools have been explicitly labeled as "transition schools", i.e., former Russian-medium schools. This has led some parents to consider placing their children in "real Estonian-medium schools", which they believe would offer their children better integration into Estonian-speaking peer networks.

Parents of preschool children tend to have a more positive view of the transition than parents of schoolchildren, because "young children don't think about how they communicate or cope linguistically." Parents want their children to have good Estonian skills before entering first grade, which implies an expectation of strong Estonian-medium instruction and socialization in preschool. If the preschool successfully prepares non-Estonian-speaking children for Estonian-medium learning, parental fears are eased.

4.1.2. Estonian Language Proficiency Among Children

There is broad agreement among parents in Tartu on the necessity and value of mastering Estonian very well (1). They hope the transition will improve their children's Estonian skills, thus expanding opportunities for further education and careers, as "all doors will be open" and "they will be able to communicate and participate in society." Proficiency in the national language is seen as essential for living in Estonia.

(1) "You can't manage without Estonian; it's needed everywhere."

Parents have personally experienced or observed among their acquaintances that limited Estonian proficiency restricts opportunities for education and employment. They want their children to be more proficient in Estonian than they are themselves.

4.2. Problems and Challenges Related to the Transition to Estonian-Medium Education

At the beginning of 2023, there was widespread skepticism and distrust among Tartu parents toward the transition to Estonian-medium education (BUI, 2023). The Ministry of Education and Research has defined the goals of the transition: societal cohesion, harmonization of general education quality, and equal opportunities for further studies and labor market participation, regardless of the mother tongue. The last goal requires a very high level of Estonian proficiency among speakers of other languages. Parents are skeptical about the achievability of all three goals, as shown in the following examples:

(2) "The transition to Estonian-medium education is tragic—it changes nothing in education. It just makes life harder because language learning is difficult for many, as languages don't stick."

(3) "It feels like we're starting the transition from the wrong end. First comes Estonian instruction, and only afterward do we think about where to find teachers, funding, and learning materials. There is no state support, but 'we believe we'll get through the transition.'"

Often, the reform's purpose remains unclear to parents (2). They also express concern about the unrealistic timeline for implementation and the potential decline in general education quality. Many feel the transition is being forced, and they believe their children feel the same. They also consider state support to be insufficient (3).

4.2.1. Segregation or Assimilation, Identity

Parents would like to see a shared educational space that is not determined by the home language, but they are skeptical about whether this can be realized, as Estonian- and non-Estonian-speaking children still operate in different educational environments and social networks. In Russian-medium schools, the language shift is perceived as the creation of an artificial language environment (4):

(4) "We are now creating one Estonian-medium school for Estonians and another separate Estonian-medium school for Russians. That doesn't solve the problem, as Russian children cannot learn the language in an artificially created environment. Why don't we move toward a shared school where Estonian and Russian children learn together?"

While a common Estonian-speaking environment in schools is seen as important, instruction in Estonian alone is not sufficient if children continue to socialize in separate networks. Even in Tartu, where Estonians make up 78% of the population, Estonian- and Russian-speaking children have little contact with each other and few opportunities to socialize. Much of this segregation is attributed to inaction by the state (5–7):

(5) "Children either don't have or have very few Estonian friends. Joint projects with Estonian-medium schools are sporadic. There should be continuous activities."

(6) "Segregation is the reality in Estonia. The situation is still okay in Tartu, but it's much worse elsewhere."

(7) "This is a political problem. The state has supported segregation for 30 years."

While a unified Estonian education system could reduce segregation, parents worry that the transition could lead to assimilation for the next generation, something they do not want for their children. Many parents consider it important to preserve their (Russian) mother tongue and identity. They are pleased that kindergartens still read Russian fairy tales and include Russian songs and dances in performances. However, they fear that in Estonian-medium schools, children will become Estonian-minded and lose their Russian identity and language skills, drifting away from their roots. Nearly half of the surveyed parents also expressed this concern (BUI, 2023). The Russian-speaking community in Tartu wants reassurance that their children's linguistic and cultural development will also be supported. A dominant concern is what will happen to students' Russian language skills when all subjects are taught in Estonian. Parents fear that Estonian instruction may hinder the development of both their children's Russian and Estonian skills (8):

(8) "Learning the mother tongue is extremely important. Otherwise, children end up 'half-lingual' and won't be able to express themselves well in either Estonian or Russian."

Parents emphasize the importance of incorporating subjects that support the child's home language and culture into school curricula. Those who believe that a child can have only one dominant language and identity worry that children may drift away from their roots, cultural space, and family: "Estonian-medium schools will turn children into Estonians." They are concerned that Estonian-medium instruction will not support the development of Russian skills, leading to a loss of the child's connection to the Russian language and culture. Some parents would be satisfied if their child could simply read and write in Russian, while others think deeper study should be optional (9–11):

(9) "Russian should be taught like English—so that children can read, write, and speak."

(10) "The course on Russian language structure is too difficult and interferes with learning Estonian. More time should be allocated to Estonian language and literature."

(11) "It should be like with math: those who want can take advanced Russian language and literature; others can take a basic course."

Others expect solid instruction in Russian language structure and believe that children should read Russian classics. In addition to developing their mother tongue, parents see it as extremely important for children to learn about Russian culture through "cultural education: major traditions and customs of Russian culture." However, contrasting views were also expressed (12), suggesting that there is no need for in-depth cultural instruction for Russians who have lived in Estonia for multiple generations:

(12) "I was born in Estonia, and so were my children. Why am I being pushed toward the Russian cultural space?"

Based on the examples, it can therefore be concluded that opinions on the scope of Russian language education vary.

4.2.2. Motivation to Learn Estonian

Many discussions revolved around the motivation to learn Estonian. Although parents express the opinion that knowledge of the Estonian language is necessary in principle in Estonia (1), their own experience has shown that in Estonia, at least so far, it has been possible to manage without good Estonian language skills. Existing practice has convinced middle-aged and older generations of non-native speakers that it is possible to manage in Estonia using only Russian (13). Therefore, many people with another home language feel there is no real need to learn Estonian, as their experience shows that even with minimal knowledge of the national language, it is still possible to access further education and employment. Motivation to learn, or the lack thereof, is also explained through migration history. When comparing the language learning behavior of long-time Russian-speaking residents and newer immigrants, the view is expressed that if long-term residence in Estonia has not created a personal need to learn the national language, people will continue to get by without it (13).

> (13) "People who move to Estonia are motivated to learn the language. Those who have lived here for a long time are not. They've managed without Estonian so far."

Furthermore, according to parents, their children may not tie their future to Estonia, "because it's uncertain whether they'll need Estonian in the future or whether they'll stay in Estonia or not." Such uncertainty about plans further reduces motivation to learn Estonian.

4.2.3. Quality of General Education

Simultaneously acquiring multiple languages in early childhood may not be feasible. Learning in L2 requires age-appropriate proficiency in that language. On the one hand, parents of preschool children expect kindergartens to equip their children with the necessary Estonian skills for school. On the other hand, there is skepticism about whether young children can acquire both an L1 and L2 at the same time (14). Some kindergarten teachers also expressed this concern.

> (14) "Let the child first learn their mother tongue (L1) and then start learning Estonian."

Parents' main concerns are about learning in an L2. Their past experiences have reinforced doubts about whether their children will acquire sufficient Estonian skills for successful learning before starting school. Poor proficiency in the language of instruction is believed to lead to a decline in education quality and learning outcomes. The following statement (15) reflects a frequently expressed view that learning in a non-native language will inevitably result in poorer academic performance. This is a particularly significant concern for parents.

> (15) "If all subjects are taught in Estonian, general knowledge and grades will worsen."

Although students' Estonian skills may improve, parents fear that the quality of subject knowledge will decline due to poor comprehension and grades will fall, limiting further education and career prospects. At the same time, students' academic workload increases, as does the burden on parents, who feel responsible for their child's academic success.

The level of subject comprehension drops. Parents' concerns are largely due to the limited understanding of what it means to study in an L2 (16). Many believe that L2 learning focuses on language acquisition rather than content. New subject-related vocabulary must be memorized mechanically, as parents perceive L2 learning as rote memorization without meaningful connections:

(16) "At home, we study like this: we translate from Estonian into Russian, learn it in Russian, and then translate it back into Estonian and memorize the new words."

Parents are concerned that students will be taught using textbooks written for Estonian-speaking students, which are too difficult both linguistically and in terms of content and do not consider the Estonian proficiency level of non-native speakers. As a result, they believe only academically gifted students with strong language abilities will succeed in Estonian-medium instruction.

4.2.4. Teachers' Competence

There is also concern about the requirement that subject teachers teaching in Estonian must have a C1 level of Estonian proficiency. Many subject teachers in Russian-medium schools do not meet this requirement, which could force experienced and highly knowledgeable teachers to leave the profession (17). A recurring question at the discussion evenings was "Who will replace these experienced teachers?"

(17) "Teachers who've worked for decades and know their subject extremely well will lose their jobs because they can't learn Estonian quickly enough. Schools will hire people off the street—if they speak Estonian."

According to parents, the main criterion for hiring teachers will shift from subject expertise to Estonian language proficiency and communication skills in Estonian, which could result in a decline in the quality of subject instruction. Parents are also skeptical of teachers entering schools through the *Noored kooli* (Teach for Estonia) program, believing that "young teachers can't teach as well as the experienced ones."

4.2.5. Increased Workload for Russian-Speaking Students and Their Parents

Parents perceive L2 learning as working in two languages simultaneously, constantly translating and mediating study materials from Estonian into the child's mother tongue to better understand the content, followed by memorizing the Estonian version. They believe this approach significantly increases the time required to master subjects compared to Estonian-speaking students learning in their native language (18):

(18) "The school's goal should be for the child to speak Estonian by the end of 12th grade. I don't understand why that requires transitioning the entire education system. Right now, we study history with the child every day, learning new expressions and translating chapters to understand what it's about."

Estonian-speaking students, according to Russian-speaking parents, do not have to translate texts, as they understand them as native speakers (19). Thus, they see Estonian- and Russian-speaking children as being in an unequal situation, since the latter require significantly more time for homework (20).

(19) "Estonian-medium education means double the workload for Russian-speaking children, because they constantly need to translate texts."

(20) "Estonian-speaking kids don't have it as hard as Russian-speaking kids, because Estonian-speaking students don't have to learn the same things in Russian or keep translating them."

This also increases the parents' workload in helping with homework, as they feel responsible for their child's academic outcomes. Even in Russian-medium education, studying with a child at home is already a time- and energy-intensive task. Many parents worry in advance about the additional time demands (21, 22):

(21) "How can children be helped with homework at home if no one in the family speaks Estonian?"

(22) "A child in basic school studies for 2–3 h a day at home and often needs help. But what if there are several school-age children in the family?"

The only solution many parents see is hiring a private tutor, which means additional financial burdens.

4.2.6. Russian-Medium Schools Are Not Ready for the Transition

Parents believe Russian-medium schools are unprepared for the transition. There is a shortage of teachers, they doubt teachers can accommodate students' individual needs in the transition, and they are critical of the current support system. Linguistically and academically diverse classrooms, including students with special educational needs, make the transition organizationally complex according to parents.

At the meetings, it was pointed out that there is a shortage of subject teachers and support staff in schools with the necessary educational training and proficiency in Estonian and Russian. Parents are concerned about the poor level of Estonian language skills of non-Estonian speakers (e.g., Estonian spoken with an accent, limited vocabulary, etc.). Estonian spoken with an accent in the teachers' language is seen as a major problem, as it deprives children of the opportunity to hear the "correct" pronunciation of the Estonian language (23, 24):

(23) "Schools should be staffed with native Estonian-speaking teachers, not teachers who are native Russian speakers and have learned Estonian only to a certain level. Right now, they teach in Estonian, but with a Russian accent. Children are not hearing 'proper' Estonian."

(24) "Children are being taught by native Russian-speaking teachers who speak Estonian with a Russian accent."

Parents also fear that educational institutions are not equipped to meet children's individual needs during the transition process. They believe that students will not receive the necessary language support, instruction in small groups, or other essential support services.

During meetings, parents also highlighted problems related to outdated teaching methodologies (25, 26). It became evident that Russian-medium schools still primarily use old-fashioned methods (e.g., the grammar-translation method), and there is little actual implementation of active learning or the integration of content and language learning (CLIL):

(25) "Teachers lack both the skills and experience to use CLIL methods. There should be training sessions for them."

(26) "At school, everything is translated into Russian. The teacher does not master the CLIL methodology."

4.2.7. Estonian-Medium Schools Are Not Ready for the Transition

According to parents, subject teachers in Estonian-medium schools lack methodological training for working in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. They are often unfamiliar with L2 acquisition, intercultural communication, CLIL methodology, and so forth. Drawing on their own and acquaintances' experiences, parents shared multiple examples showing that Estonian-medium schools are not ready to accept students with other home languages. A key issue is the lack of a shared language for communication: students may not speak Estonian well enough, and especially younger teachers may not speak Russian. Based on their experiences, parents stated that Estonian-medium schools and teachers are not equipped to manage linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms (27):

(27) "The Estonian-medium school didn't accept my child because of weak Estonian skills. That's exactly the problem—Russian-speaking children are left with no choice but to go to a Russian-medium school, where teachers speak their mother tongue."

Problems also arise in extracurricular activities, where instructors in Estonian-speaking clubs and hobby groups do not speak Russian and are unwilling to accept children with other home languages due to the lack of a common language.

According to parents, Estonian-medium educational institutions also lack bilingual teachers and support staff, whose presence is seen as essential for creating a safe communication environment. It became evident that both parents, and in their view, children too, do not trust teachers and support staff who do not speak Russian. From the parents' perspective, a safe relationship can only be built through a shared language, Russian (28):

(28) "Communication with the class teacher should be safe and trustworthy. Children do not trust class teachers who don't speak Russian because they often cannot explain their problems."

Parents are also concerned that due to their limited Estonian language skills, as they are unable to communicate adequately with the Estonian-speaking staff at schools and kindergartens and are therefore left out of important information.

5. Discussion and Summary

This study explored the attitudes of Russian-speaking parents in Tartu regarding the transition to Estonian-medium education, aiming to identify perceived benefits, key concerns, and the extent to which the national goals of the reform are viewed as attainable from the parental perspective. Drawing on the theoretical framework emphasizing the influence of parental attitudes on children's second language (L2) learning and motivation (Gardner, 1985; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012; Ronderos et al., 2022), the findings illuminate both the enabling and inhibiting roles that parental beliefs can play in the success of language-in-education policy.

On the one hand, many parents expressed support for the goals of the reform, particularly the promise of increased Estonian proficiency and shared educational spaces that would reduce linguistic and social segregation. Such perspectives align with earlier studies highlighting how positive parental attitudes can enhance children's motivation and performance in L2 contexts (Bartram, 2006; Bialystok, 2011). Parents viewed Estonian-medium instruction as essential for equal opportunities, greater integration into Estonian society, and access to higher education and employment. These aspirations resonate with Ushioda (2011, 2017) concept of the "future self" as a central component of language learning motivation.

However, the study also revealed deep concerns among parents regarding the implementation of the reform. Parents questioned whether the Ministry's goals—social cohesion, harmonization of educational quality, and equal opportunity—were realistically achievable under the current conditions. Many feared that insufficient proficiency in Estonian among students and teachers, a lack of pedagogical support, outdated teaching methodologies, and inadequate learning materials would lead to a decline in education quality. These fears echo findings from other contexts where concerns about learning in a non-native language include cognitive overload, reduced comprehension of subject content, and lower academic achievement (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2005; Klaas-Lang et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the transition was perceived by many as being top-down, rushed, and poorly resourced. Parents emphasized that reforms were being introduced before adequate teacher training, curricular development, and support systems had been put in place.

The perceived lack of preparation among both Russian- and Estonian-medium schools, including limited teacher competence in CLIL methodology and second language pedagogy, was seen as a structural obstacle that undermines the success of the transition.

The preservation of Russian language and identity emerged as another central concern. While parents acknowledged the importance of acquiring Estonian, many feared that full immersion in Estonian-medium education would lead to cultural and linguistic assimilation. This tension between integration and identity maintenance has been documented in prior studies on heritage language learners (Park, 2013; Griva & Chouvarda, 2012). Parents expressed a need for reassurance that their children's Russian language development would be supported alongside Estonian instruction through curriculum choices, optional Russian language courses, and cultural education.

Parental support, identified as crucial in both academic and language development (Castro et al., 2015; Xu, 1999; Otani, 2020), was hindered by parents' limited Estonian skills and unfamiliarity with Estonian-language curricula. Many felt unequipped to assist their children with homework or communicate effectively with Estonian-speaking teachers. This reflects findings from Klaas-Lang et al. (2025), which indicate that Russian-speaking parents in Estonia often assume a high level of responsibility for their children's academic progress but lack institutional tools to do so in an Estonian-language environment.

Taken together, these findings underscore a central paradox: while parents value the objectives of the transition and understand the long-term benefits, they remain skeptical of its practical feasibility given the systemic constraints. Their insights point to a critical gap between policy ambitions and the lived experiences of the families affected by the reform.

This study was limited to the context of Tartu, where the majority population is Estonian-speaking. The findings may not be generalizable to regions such as Ida-Viru County, where Russian speakers are the majority and societal dynamics differ. Furthermore, the primary data consisted of field notes from discussion evenings, which, while rich in qualitative depth, may reflect the more vocal opinions in group settings and are subject to researcher interpretation. Individual interviews conducted during the broader project were not analyzed in this article and could provide additional nuance.

Future studies could expand geographically to include Russian-speaking parents in other parts of Estonia to examine regional variation in attitudes. Longitudinal research would be valuable in assessing how parental attitudes and student outcomes evolve throughout the transition. Including the perspectives of children themselves, as well as educators, would also offer a more comprehensive view of the reform's impact. Finally, research into the effectiveness of teacher training in CLIL and multilingual pedagogy could inform the development of more inclusive educational practices in Estonian schools.

In conclusion, the success of the transition to Estonian-medium education depends not only on the structural readiness of educational institutions but also on building trust and support among families. Addressing parents' concerns, ensuring sustained institutional backing, and supporting both linguistic integration and cultural maintenance are essential for realizing the long-term goals of a cohesive, inclusive, and equitable education system in Estonia.

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