

The role of the language of instruction in the formation of the ethno-cultural identity of Estonian Russian-speaking students

Maie Soll^a, Sander Salvet^a, Anu Masso^{a1}

^a *University of Tartu, Institute of Social Sciences*

Summary

Problems related to language are very real in Estonian society. Knowledge of the Estonian language is highly important both for national identity and participation in the public discourse (Masso et al., 2013; Vihalemm, 2011). Proficiency in Estonian has been a major supportive element and the insufficiency in Estonian language skill is an obstructive factor in various spheres of life in Estonia. Previous research (Vihalemm et al., 2011) has shown that Estonian proficiency within the Russian-speaking population is linked to their subjective quality of life or their opinions on managing with life and satisfaction with life; while, in other Baltic states, the differences can be rather attributed to ethnic boundaries, instead of language. As language is an important feature of the Estonian identity – the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ –, it may also actualize the significance of language for other nationalities, and the activities which aim to support proficiency in Estonian may be interpreted as pressure, an attempt at assimilation, and a threat to native tongue and ethnic identity.

In this study, we focus on the role of instructional language in the formation of ethno-cultural identity in Russian-language upper-secondary schools undergoing the transition to the Estonian-instruction language. Studies carried out in Estonia have, so far, analyzed the appreciation for Russian as a mother tongue (Pavelson & Jedomskihh, 1998), the fears of losing Russian proficiency given the change of instructional language (Vihalemm, 2002); and, in general, the self-definitions of the Russian-speaking population (Masso & Vihalemm, 2003; Masso & Tender, 2007; Vihalemm & Masso, 2007). The role of the language of instruction in the development of ethnic identity has been examined only in a few studies (Soll, 2006, 2012), which have concluded that the language of instruction does not have a direct impact on the formation of ethno-cultural identity.

¹ Institute of Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences and Education, University of Tartu
Lossi 36, 51003 Tartu; anu.mass@ut.ee

Until now, there have not been any studies in Estonia which analyze how the socializing environments created by instruction languages help to generate the development of ethno-cultural identity. The possible link between ethnic identity and instructional language has not been examined in other countries, in part, because ethnic minorities usually do not have the possibility to study in their native language.

Our goal is to analyze the self-definitions of Estonian Russian-speaking school-leavers in the context of different instructional languages. We understand ethno-cultural identity as a complex sociopsychological (Verkuyten, 2005) and communicative phenomenon (Luhmann, 2002). We use written online interviews (Salmons, 2010) via Skype and Windows Live Messenger as the empirical basis; we combine manual analysis with software-based method and thematic analysis (Dey, 2005) with grounded theory analysis techniques, e.g. constant comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The sample consists of upper-secondary school students ($n = 14$) with various languages of instruction (e.g. Estonian, Russian, language immersion) and from different regions of Estonia (e.g. Tallinn, Tartu, Ida-Viru County). We are searching answers to the following research questions: (1) How do the students ethno-culturally define themselves? (2) What kind of a role has instructional language played in the formation of ethno-cultural self-definition?

It appeared from the interviews that although the students used a different basis of self-definition depending on the specific situation (e.g. identifying oneself as a human or a student), ethno-cultural identity was the primary source of 'we-ness' for the majority of answerers. We discerned two dimensions in the interviewees' ethno-cultural self-definitions: ethno-cultural practices and emotional-perceptive certainty. By ethno-cultural practices, we mean a discussion about ethnic belonging and cultural activities related to this: on one hand, the students identified themselves as members of one or more ethnic groups (i.e., simply Russians, or both Estonians and Russians); on the other hand, some of them also gave an emotional meaning to the belonging. We use the term 'emotional-perceptive certainty' to indicate whether the students expressed certainty or uncertainty while they were discussing their ethno-cultural identity. (Un)certainity was reflected both in linguistic structures (e.g. punctuation, mode) and the content of the students' arguments (e.g. if an interviewee said that it was hard for him/her to identify himself/herself as a member of an ethnic group).

Based on the dimensions, we divided interviewees into three groups: (1) certain identity with a Russian ethno-cultural focus; (2) uncertain identity with a Russian-Estonian ethno-cultural focus; and (3) alternative,

ambivalent identities. The first group of students defined themselves as Russians and were certain of their ethnic belonging; the second group identified themselves both as Russians and Estonians, but were uncertain in their identity, because they believed to have fulfilled only a part of the criteria to belong to each ethnic group (e.g. because of Russian surname, bilingualism); the third group of interviewees did not identify themselves ethno-culturally, but used alternative, ambivalent self-definitions (e.g. based on the country of birth, language, social roles, being a European or a human).

The Estonian-Russian self-definition can be interpreted as a hybrid identity (Verkuyten, 2005); however, as the interviewees' explanations of their self-definitions implied that the necessary criteria were not fulfilled to belong to either ethnic group; it can be rather described as an unfulfilled wish to acquire hybrid identity on the basis of ethnicity. The uncertainty of some students' identity can possibly mean, in Phinney's and Marcia's terms (Luyckx et al., 2011), that they are in the phase of ethnic identity search, and those answerers who did not consider ethno-cultural identity important are in the identity diffusion status.

The analysis showed similar to earlier research (Soll, 2006, 2012) that the language of instruction does not have a direct impact on self-definition. The interviewees who had a certain ethno-cultural identity with a Russian focus studied in Estonian-language, Russian-language and language immersion classes; the students who had the uncertain ethno-cultural identity with a Estonian-Russian focus studied in Estonian-language or Russian-language classes; and the others who used alternative self-identification strategies studied in Russian-language or language immersion classes. The students were aware of differences between schools/classes with various instruction languages, but from the viewpoint the feasibility of study and the motivation to study, not in relation to social identity.

Based on both personal and mediated experiences, the answerers attached positive instrumental qualities to the Estonian instructional language (e.g. the possibility to acquire Estonian and other foreign languages on a good level); the only negative aspect mentioned was that it limits the possibilities to study the mother tongue. There were two types of opinions on language immersion: some saw it similarly to the Estonian instructional language as a good means to acquire Estonian and foreign languages, the others believed that language immersion causes insufficient language skills or so-called 'semi-lingualism'. The main shortcomings of the Russian instruction language were, in the interviewees' view, more humble options to study Estonian and, therefore, narrower possibilities also in the future.

At the same time, the results support previous studies (Masso et al., 2013), according to which students value the emotional aspect of ethnic identity – studying among other members of the same ethnic group is considered emotionally supportive (both in the case of the Russian instruction language and language immersion).

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