

The effectiveness of content and language integrated learning at Russian speaking schools: school leaders' views and strategies

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Summary

The majority of pupils belonging to national minorities in Estonia speak Russian as their first language and study at schools where Russian is taught. Following Estonian independence in 1991 significant improvements to the official language teaching system have been made. The quality of study materials, teacher training, and the language proficiency level of secondary school graduates have also improved. Despite all this the results of the state language exams are below the levels required to ensure that Russian schools' graduates have equal opportunities in higher education and in society in general. In order to improve the situation, the national educational reform was carried out during the period from 2007 to 2012. Starting from 2011 all pupils entering the 10th form at Russian speaking schools have to learn 60 per cent of the upper secondary school curriculum in the Estonian language.

According to the national curriculum the recommended methodology for the subjects that are taught in Estonian as a second language is content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Considerable efforts have been made at state, municipal and schools level to implement this methodology and the schools have indeed started using Estonian as their language of choice. Many schools already have long-term experiences of teaching several subjects in Estonian. However, the process has not been easy for pupils or schools. In accordance with the national curriculum Estonian has become the obligatory language of instruction only in upper secondary schools. The Estonian bilingual education model is rare in the world context. Models where pupils start studying in a language other than their mother tongue, either in kindergarten or primary school, are more wide-spread. This article highlights the understanding of topical issues such as late starting models based on the Estonian model.

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In this article we give an overview of school leaders' experience and views on the above-mentioned reforms and introduce some of the results of the study *Bilingual study in Russian-medium schools* (Metslang et al., 2013). We conducted 12 interviews with headmasters and head teachers at 6 schools. On the basis of these interviews we describe the school leaders' main concerns and strategies implementing this new language programme. We focused on the aspects that are directly related to the lesson situations – to studying and teaching in language lessons and content subjects taught in Estonian. In order to provide context and to help the reader understand the school managers' position we compared the results of the interviews with other research results obtained during the study (77 lesson observations in forms 9 to 12, content subject, teacher, pupil, language teacher questionnaires and focus group interviews with the same groups). The main sample included 8 schools, the number and location of which reflected the national distribution of the schools where Russian was the main language.

All the interviewed school leaders had generally a positive attitude towards using Estonian as the first language and they supported its potential in preparing the pupils to succeed in life. This result is important because educational reform depends largely on the attitude of school leaders. However, school leaders are critical about the details on how the new programme has been implemented – for example, about the proportion of Estonian used in teaching. They are aware that there are several problems that hinder pupils' academic success within the framework of the new programme i.e. insufficient Estonian and study skills of the pupils entering upper secondary school, their low motivation to learn Estonian, the lack of teachers and study materials suitable for CLIL.

When discussing how they lead and support the new programme the school leaders reported that they react on day to day basis to the emerging needs and learn rather through practical application. However, they did not report systematic use of leadership or management tools as a daily way to influence the success of the programme, for instance using the school's strategic development or work plans for enhancing CLIL. The school heads did not have a good understanding of the CLIL methodology and the activities needed for its implementation. They did not have a CLIL teacher training strategy in place and (as lesson observations revealed) there is no evidence that the CLIL methodology taught at in-service training courses is put into practice in everyday teaching – there is a lack of monitoring and support in this area. Currently there is scope for development in organising effective co-operation between teachers and other stakeholders.

It appeared during interviews that the school leaders did not have a good understanding of the reasons that influenced the effectiveness of Estonian as a second language, its teaching and the pupils' motivation to study Estonian. As pupils' Estonian skills are key to the programme's success, school leaders need to be aware of how to manage these factors, how to ensure that good quality methodology is being used and that language lessons support the study of other subjects in Estonian (the latter depends also on national requirements, and currently the national curriculum does not include the teaching of academic Estonian).

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