

Mutual attitudes of Estonian and Estonian Russian basic school students before and after participating in the gamified cooperation activities

Mare Kitsnik^{a1}, Jekaterina Petuhhova^a

^a *Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu*

Summary

The ability to interact with people from other ethnic backgrounds is an essential aspect of social and civic competence. People often form stereotypes about groups of people (incl. ethnic groups) to whom they have no connection, which impedes interaction. This article examines whether and how the social and civic competences of young Estonians and Estonian Russians could be developed to improve communication between the two groups. In order to answer these questions, the article looks at the attitudes of young Estonians (as the ethnic majority) and Estonian Russians (as the biggest ethnic minority) regarding the characteristics of the other group and how they feel about interacting with them, as well as how these attitudes change after participating in gamified cooperation activities. This article starts with an overview of how Estonians and Estonian Russians are currently integrated, describing ethnic attitudes and discussing how gamification as an innovative method can influence attitudes. The second half of the article describes the materials, methods and results of the research and includes a discussion on what the results could mean.

Estonia has been actively working to integrate the ethnic majority and minorities of the country for more than 20 years. However, society is still not particularly well integrated. According to analyses, the main issue is the segregation of different ethnic groups (Leetmaa, 2016/2017; Tammaru & Eamets, 2015; Päärt, 2019, Realo, 2016/2017; Vihalemm, 2016/2017). It is highly problematic that young Estonian Russians born in Estonia after the country regained its independence live separately from young Estonians. In fact, integration is only achievable if the two groups grow up together. This would be possible with integrated Estonian schools, a model that was developed as part of the research and implementation project 'Rita-Ränne', which defines an

¹ Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, Tartu, 50090 Estonia; mare.kitsnik@ut.ee

integrated Estonian school as follows: “An integrated Estonian school is one at which students with different home languages and cultural backgrounds study together and where learning is carried out mostly in Estonian and following the principles of contemporary approaches to learning, facilitating the development of Estonian civic identity and the self-realisation of students in society, while also valuing their cultural identity.” (Pedaste, Kirss & Kitsnik, et al., 2019) The integration process in the school works both ways, as the Estonians participating in the process learn to interact with other cultures as well. (Tamm et al., 2018)

An integrated school should have specific activities designed to integrate young people from different ethnic backgrounds. The development of social and civic competences is highly influenced by a person’s attitudes towards people different from themselves. Attitude is a psychological tendency which evaluates a particular entity (e.g. people, events, or phenomena) with some degree of favour or disfavour. (Albarraccín et al., 2005) Attitudes are not innate but develop based on a person’s previously formed opinions and how they interpret their experiences. Attitudes are inherently inert but may change when a person experiences something new that contradicts their previous attitudes, making them unstable. (Albarraccín et al., 2005.) The ability to interact with people of different ethnicities is a social and civic competence which should be developed in schools.

The research described in the article was based on the projects of a company called Game Club, which organises informal gamified learning for both adults and students. The gamification method entails “the use of game elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011). This means that the activity takes place in a fictional world, and the rules of the game must be followed. Participants are emotionally and cognitively engaged in the activity, which is exciting, challenging, and unpredictable. Participation is voluntary. (Männamaa, 2019; Sillaots, 2016; Kapp, 2012) Gamification creates a bond between the participants. Many gamified activities require people to cooperate and allow them to experience strong emotions together, which makes them feel connected. However, gamification does not work spontaneously: it requires thorough planning and expert guidance.

The four integration projects requested by the Integration Foundation, which were researched included Estonians and Estonian Russians (n=80) who were students in Grades 8 or 9 and who lived in Tallinn or Harju County. Each of the projects lasted for four days. The project activities were carefully devised and sequenced. The following principles were used as a basis for the activities: treating the two groups as equals; reducing anxiety caused by interacting with strangers; avoiding competition; frequently swapping group members; making

activities exciting and engaging; cooperating and supporting one another; and experiencing strong emotions together (Petuhhova, 2019). The participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire (with Likert-scale questions and open-ended question) before and after the project. This was used to evaluate their attitudes regarding the interaction with the other group. The answers were analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

This revealed that the attitudes towards the other group were more positive after the project than they had been beforehand, but to a different extent and in different respects among the two groups. When it comes to attitudes regarding interacting with the other group, the results of the projects revealed that the Estonian Russians were more interested in interacting with the Estonians than vice-versa. Even before the projects, the Estonian Russians were already looking to speak better Estonian, interact more with Estonians, make Estonian friends and go to the same schools as them. Estonian youths had a positive attitude only towards proficiency in the Russian language. Before the project, the attitudes of Estonians towards communicating more with the Russians, making friends among the Russians and going to the same schools with the Russians were neutral. Attitudes towards knowing each other's culture and partying together were neutral in both ethnic groups before the project, and attitudes towards a girlfriend or boyfriend of the other nationality were rather negative.

After the projects, the desire to interact with members of the other ethnic group, the desire to become friends and the desire to go to parties with members of the other ethnic group has grown among both groups, and attitudes towards a girlfriend or boyfriend of the other nationality has grown among Estonian Russians. The desire to attend the same school with members of the other ethnic group did not grow quite as much. Before the projects, members of both ethnic groups already had a strong interest in learning the language of the other group and an above-average interest in getting to know their culture and this interest continues after the project.

Both the Estonians and the Estonian Russians learned something unexpected about the other group while interacting with them during the project. The Estonians were pleasantly surprised by the good Estonian language skills, friendliness, kindness, good behaviour and cooperation skills of the Estonian Russians who had taken part in the project. They also learned that not all young Estonian Russians are the same, nor very loud, but that they are actually very similar to Estonians in many ways. The Estonian Russians were also surprised that the Estonians were kind, friendly and sociable, but mostly that they were interested in interacting with them. They also mentioned that it was a positive surprise to find that the Estonians were active, energetic, smart and

good at teamwork. Neither the Estonians nor the Estonian Russians expected to learn how similar the two groups were.

The limitation of this study is the lack of a control group. Therefore, it cannot be stated with certainty that the changes that took place during the project were due to the use of the gamification methods and that the youth cooperation project using other methods would have produced a different result. Therefore, in the future, similar studies should be repeated with the control group. Research into ethnic attitudes is also very important and should be continued. For example, whether and for how long changes in attitudes that form over the course of a short project last could be further studied. Attitudes towards other ethnic groups could also be studied among other age groups and people from other parts of Estonia. Improving the stereotypical attitudes of different nationalities is the basis of developing social and civic competences, as it makes young people more open to interacting with others. There is potential for the gamification method to be used in other projects and in general education schools, both in class and as part of extracurricular activities. To use the method successfully, teachers and all those who work with youngsters will need to undertake professional training to gain the skills and knowledge needed to work with multi-ethnic groups and make it engaging, supportive and age-appropriate.

Keywords: ethnic attitudes, gamification, cooperation activities, young Estonian and Estonian Russians, integration, general competences, social and civic competence