

Community-based language learning – an opportunity to increase the motivation for language learning

Birute Klaas-Lang^{1a}

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

Summary

The population of adult learners of Estonian in Estonia is extremely numerous and heterogeneous. There are nearly 200,000 residents who need to learn the official language (Centar, 2018), i.e. approximately 15% of Estonia's population, while only 30,000 of them can be considered new residents (Estonian Ministry of Culture, 2019). The size of the group and the number of permanent residents among them is noteworthy in the European context and in light of Estonia's small size. Regrettably, the majority of persons who have acquired a Russian-language or even Russian-Estonian bilingual education move on directly to lifelong learning since they do not achieve the necessary level of Estonian proficiency by the end of their studies (Integration monitoring, 2020). Studies and reports show that approximately "half of the adults whose native language is other than Estonian do not have an active level of Estonian language proficiency" (Kallaste et al., 2018). Therefore, the need to teach Estonian to adults will not disappear in the near future.

Previous studies have indicated that the motivation for learning Estonian is primarily pragmatic. However, there is also evidence of integrative motivation to communicate with Estonians and participate in society and culture. The higher the learner's current level of language proficiency, the greater the role of integrative needs. Everyone's reasons for not learning Estonian are unique, but in general, obstacles include attitudes and a lack of interest in increasing one's level of Estonian proficiency. A lack of interest is related to the fact that it is difficult to see the usefulness of learning Estonian when there is no opportunity to use it, meaning that there is no one with whom to speak it (see also Centar, 2018, p. 81–88; Klaas-Lang & Reile, 2019).

The paper proposes a concept, activities and possibilities novel in Estonia of how to improve the effectiveness of adult L2 learners of Estonian with various supportive activities in a community-based manner and by increasing the

¹ Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, Tartu, 50090 Estonia; birute.klaas-lang@ut.ee.

language awareness of native speakers of Estonian. First, we will analyse the differences in the population of adult L2 learners of Estonian compared to the common European practices and summarise the results of previous studies on the effectiveness of language learning, including the importance of language environment in the learning process. We will then introduce the theoretical framework and practice of community-based language learning and the international (but also Estonian) practices in designing the activities of language coaches. We will also analyse a native speaker's attitude in supporting a new speaker.

We will use and further develop the learning path model REDEL (RITA_REDEL, 2020) of adult new immigrants originally developed by the author and Kristiina Praakli in the course of the RITA_RÄNNE project and the opinions and attitudes of adult L2 learners of Estonian collected from focus group interviews during the project as well as data from interviews with international students and staff conducted in the course of graduate projects supervised by the author (Reile, 2018, Savisto, 2021). In this context, language learning and language acquisition is viewed as a unified process where learning in a classroom, in an e-environment, or any other formal or independent learning should be supported by language learning in an authentic language environment, i.e. in practice, by using the language and becoming increasingly more proficient.

In the RITA_RÄNNE project, we introduced the concepts of community-based language learning and the language coach. While collecting feedback for the learning path model and policy recommendations from working teachers, it became clear that these terms and concepts require a more thorough explanation, a theoretical framework and connection with practices in the Estonian context. We will investigate how language learners perceive this process and if and how teachers manage to connect or continue learning in the classroom with such community-based learning.

Community-based learning is characterised as the acquisition of language by using the target language outside the classroom in different contexts and real-life situations and via social practice (Clifford & Reisinger, 2019). "Teaching second languages behind closed classroom doors means to ignore one of the most powerful resources available: language use in everyday social contacts in the surrounding society. Making this resource available for language teaching has the potential to enhance language teaching and learning greatly." (Clark et al., 2018, p. 2–3)

To some extent, community-based language learning can be associated with usage-based language learning (Tomasello, 2003; Eskildsen, 2009; Atkinson, 2011), but community-based learning, according to studies, is more than that. The renewal of terminology can probably be explained by the general

tendency to view language learning as an interactive and co-effective process where learning is connected to networking, forging and strengthening contacts. In addition to networking and integration, community-based learning views the learner as a subject, not an object, emphasising the learner's activity in the process on the one hand and the supportive role of the environment, the community's language awareness, ability and desire to help the non-native speakers adapt to the new (in the case of immigrants) or newly discovered (in the case of long-term inhabitants) linguistic and cultural environment on the other.

Community-based language learning can also be viewed as a process where members of the multilingual and multicultural community are teachers and introducers of their native language(s) and culture(s) to the main population (Borthwick, 2018). The policy recommendations of the REDEL project also included the necessity to increase the awareness and positive attitudes of Estonian residents towards multilingual and multicultural societies (RITA_REDEL, 2020, p. 22).

The role of the native speaker in community-based language learning is firstly to forge connections between the new speaker and the community (RITA_REDEL, 2020) and secondly to support the new speaker's linguistic development by speaking with him/her in Estonian and not in a foreign language. The interviews clearly show that native speakers are not prepared to act as "voluntary language teachers" for new speakers and prefer to choose English or Russian as the language of communication (Reile, 2018; Savisto, 2021; RITA_REDEL, 2020). The primary reason for this is the Estonians' wish to practice their English. Additionally, respondents found that perhaps it is difficult for the locals to watch a foreigner struggle with Estonian. Hence, they switch to English out of politeness and a desire to help.

Community-based language learning should also be recommended by the teacher in language courses and included in the learning process. Encouraging the learner to change from a passive recipient to an active language acquirer, from an object of language learning to a subject of language learning taking responsibility for his/her studies also makes it necessary for the teacher, in addition to the usual language instruction, to explain the whole learning process to the learner (in the classroom as well as outside it), to fill it with purpose and activities. The learner could and should also have help on this path – coaches, volunteers, mentors, and language buddies who provide a connection to the community and the society, help the learner to navigate the Estonian language environment and also the digital environment, give advice on language learning, help to find social and cultural activities, etc. For the more widespread implementation of community-based learning, it is naturally necessary to improve overall language awareness and promote the attitude that every native speaker

is a language teacher for a new speaker. This attitude is accompanied by the willingness to speak more slowly and use simpler expressions when speaking with a new speaker with poorer language skills, listen patiently and not switch to some major language.

The renewed concept of inclusive language learning that includes the community in the process is closely related to the increasingly widespread “communalisation” in society, to networking. Involving communities in language learning will certainly require very close cooperation with all the above-mentioned parties, but first and foremost, it requires a change in paradigms to accept that many other people besides the learner and the teacher can contribute to the effectiveness of the non-native speakers’ learning process.

Keywords: Estonian as a second language, community-based language learning, motivation and language learning, adult learner, language coach