Compiling a collection of reading texts for Estonian A2-level adults. Finding a balance between authenticity, interest and affordability

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Summary

In order to develop second language skills, it is important to obtain a large amount of authentic input that presents natural language constructions (Ellis, 2013; Eskildsen, 2008; Martin, Mustonen, Reiman, & Seilonen, 2010; Mustonen, 2015). Additional reading outside of language lessons is a good way to increase input. While a learner with a higher level of language proficiency can easily find reading texts suitable for input in a language environment, this is a major challenge for A2-level learners. Good reading texts must be authentic or similar to authentic (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1994), interesting and affordable to the target group (Brophy, 2016; Tomlinson, 2010; Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara, & Rubdy, 2001). Additional easy reading text collections for beginner learners have been created in many languages, but they have not been available for A2 learners of Estonian as a second language so far. The article examines how the two authors compiled, as a Master's thesis, a collection of additional reading texts "Meie elu" ("Our Life") (Palts & Urb, 2020a) for adult A2-language learners, which sought to strike a balance between authenticity, affordability and interest.

In the first stage of the work, initial versions of the texts were created on the basis of real-life events, focusing mainly on authenticity and interest. The texts were written in a blog style and were based on A2-level general topics. Four different types of adults were identified as writers for the blog posts: mother, father, foreign student and single working woman.

The texts were written as authentic as possible. For the content, ideas were obtained from events that happened to the authors or their acquaintances. The texts were made more interesting by containing something unexpected or contradictory. A total of 32 initial versions of the text were completed, all written in authentic colloquial language.

In the second stage of the work, threefold feedback was collected on the initial versions of the texts: from the target group on interest and affordability, from the supervisor on authenticity, interest and affordability, and by analysers

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(Sõnaveeb) from the Institute of Estonian Language on affordability. First, the members of the target group (n = 71, with 25 different mother tongues) provided feedback on the texts, filling in an anonymous electronic questionnaire in English or Russian. The questionnaire included mandatory Likert-type 5-point scales (highest 5) and optional open-ended questions. The Likert scales assessed each text's comprehensibility of the vocabulary and the sentence, its interest and its personal value. Examples of words and sentences that seemed complicated and comments were given as free answers. A total of 360 questionnaires were received. On average, 11 readers read one text.

The average score for general comprehension of the text was 4.3 points, and the score for interest and usefulness was 4.2 points. The average score for comprehensibility of the sentence was 3.9 points and for vocabulary 3.6 points. Thus, complete texts appeared to be understood better than words or sentences alone. Feedback on vocabulary was also given as free answers in 350 questionnaires. The students had difficulties with specific words and word combinations of Estonian culture, multi-word compounds, some ambiguous words and more complex word forms, words belonging to a higher level of language proficiency, as well as some A-level words. The free answers provided feedback on the sentence in 128 questionnaires, but most of them focused on vocabulary instead of the sentence. The most complex aspects of the sentence were mainly word order. The supervisor's feedback suggested replacing words that were too complex at A2 with simpler ones, shortening long sentences, simplifying the structure of complex sentences and avoiding more complex grammatical forms (e.g. conditional speech, participle phrases), shortening longer texts, removing irrelevant descriptions, replacing the present tense. The level of relevance of each word was also determined by the text evaluation analyser from the Institute of the Estonian Language (Sõnaveeb).

In the third stage of the work, the feedback was analysed, and changes to the texts were edited accordingly. The feedback received on each text was first examined, and then a decision was taken during the joint discussion on the need to edit. When editing the vocabulary, the text evaluation analyser's assessment, the target group's average assessment of the text's vocabulary and general comprehensibility of the text, the complex words presented by the target group and the supervisor's feedback on the same aspects were first examined. The words for which some feedback indicated a problem were not immediately changed but discussed. Complex words were replaced by simpler ones or abandoned without being replaced, and some of them disappeared as the text was shortened. More complex words were left in the texts when the general understanding of the text was assessed as very good, the content was understood by the context, the word was understandable because of the international stem, or it was decided to support the meaning of the word by illustration.

The distributions of words and word forms by language proficiency level in each text are presented in tables 1 and 2.

The target group provided little feedback on the sentence in the free answers, so the sentence was mainly edited by the supervisor's recommendations. During editing, long sentences were shortened, and the structure of more complex sentences was simplified. All the texts used simple past forms because it is natural for blog posts. At times, more complex forms (e.g. present perfect and past perfect) were retained, especially when they were very characteristic of the authentic language and did not cause significant problems in understanding. In order to ensure authenticity, interjections were also left in the texts. The average length of the sentences in the final text was 7.8 words.

If the target group or the supervisor had highlighted the complexity of tracking the content of the text, the general comprehensibility of the text was also edited. The number of activities in texts with more complex events was reduced, some activities were changed, and many texts were shortened. At the supervisor's suggestion, long descriptions irrelevant to the content were removed. The average length of the final reading text was 209 words. Names were added to the authors of the blog posts, and the texts were arranged according to the logic of action. After editing, the collection was illustrated with pictures, which both added interest to the texts and supported the understanding of the texts, i.e. made the texts more affordable.

In conclusion, it can be said that the collection of additional reading texts has filled an important gap in the teaching materials of Estonian as a second language. The texts have managed to strike a balance between authenticity, interest and affordability. Reading texts provides learners with input that incorporates natural language constructions in a natural context and thus effectively contributes to the acquisition of natural language use. The collection of additional reading texts "Meie elu" has also been published and has been well received by users. A reprint has already been published.

The creation of a collection of texts in collaboration with the two authors and in the course of the Master's thesis showed the usefulness of the collaboration. It proved that it is possible to compile actually used works as student work. In the future, creating more similar collections for both A2 and B1 levels would be necessary. The Master's thesis is also valuable for teachers and authors of study materials. Also, it would be interesting to study the impact of the collection on the development of students' Estonian language skills and language learning motivation.

Keywords: Estonian as a second language, A2-level, creating reading texts, authenticity, interest, affordability