

Language learning beliefs and motivation of Estonian and non-Estonian students at Estonian-language universities

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Summary

Inclusive education is a crucial part of Estonian education, including the higher education system. At university, there are students whose first language (L1) is not Estonian but who follow the Estonian-medium curricula. Engaging such students and supporting their motivation and self-directed learning is essential for students' welfare. Foreign language acquisition has been studied a lot, but less attention has been paid to investigating learning through the medium of a second language and how to involve and support those students effectively.

Students whose L1 and university's medium of instruction do not overlap have been studied from different perspectives: their social adaptation (e.g. Lee & Rice, 2007; Sherry et al., 2010) and their perception of language learning difficulties (e.g. Lou & Noels, 2020a, 2020b; Sawir, 2005). Previous studies indicate that their motivation and learning outcomes are lower than those whose medium of instruction is L1 (Sert, 2008; Tsui & Ngo, 2017). In the case of students with special educational needs, the teacher's awareness of these needs and the ability to differentiate learning are important. Hence, in the case of non-native-speaking students, a similar approach emerges. Academic staff should be aware and be able to consider better the needs arising from learning in another language than L1, including the students' different social and cultural backgrounds, so that the students would perceive equal inclusion in the learning process (Myles & Cheng, 2003).

Ignoring the peculiarities arising from cultural and linguistic differences may reduce students' well-being, which may cause frustration and lead to physical or emotional detachment (Robertson et al., 2000; Sümer et al., 2008). For example, students with a different L1 than the medium of instruction

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perceive unequal treatment during the feedback of writing tasks and find remarks about their language skills (e.g. using the wrong language register) and pronunciation errors in oral assessment irrelevant (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Myles & Cheng, 2003). Yet controversially, academic staff are expected to correct all the mistakes (Kartchava, 2016; Meristo, 2022).

In addition, teachers tend to show little empathy towards students with a different L1 (Robertson et al., 2000; Tavares, 2021). When experiencing similar problems, students with a different L1 begin to communicate more with each other because the difficulties experienced are easier to relate to. This, in turn, creates a vicious circle where there is less and less attempt to integrate into the university environment (Kim, 1994; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Students with similar social and cultural backgrounds also tend to stick together in their dormitories, which reduces interaction with local students. Offering each other primarily emotional support may not always be the best solution to students' academic concerns and might lead to the escalation of problems (Myles & Cheng, 2003).

The inclusion of native and non-native students is important from the point of view of the latter's academic adaptation (Kim, 1994; Walsworth et al., 2021). Attitudes, communication styles, and expectations towards courses may differ between the students of different L1 (Jenkins, 2000; Tavares, 2021). Without the university's guidance, students with a different L1 than the medium of instruction involvement may remain superficial or insufficient (Ammigan, 2019; Fu, 2021).

The coping and well-being of students with a different L1 have also been studied in Estonian universities (Klaas, 2006; Meristo, 2019). So far, no attention has been paid to their beliefs and motivation. However, it is known that beliefs can inhibit language learning and affect motivation (Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Yashima et al., 2017). In order to efficiently support and include all students, it is important to know what their learning beliefs and motivation are. Thus, this study aims to compare the language learning beliefs and motivation of two groups of students – those whose L1 is Estonian and those whose first language is other than Estonian but whose medium of instruction is Estonian. For this purpose, the following research questions have been formulated: 1. Whether and how do the beliefs of the students of the two groups differ? 2. Whether and how does the motivation of the students of the two groups differ?

The sample of this study consisted of 191 students (161 women and 30 men). The average age of the participants was 23.61 years ($SD = 6.67$). Estonian was L1 for 140 students, and 51 students indicated another L1 (Russian, Ukrainian, Finnish, Swedish, Arabic) as their mother tongue.

BALLI (*Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory*, Horwitz 1988) was used to assess language learning beliefs. Respondents rated the extent to which they agree with the statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = “do not agree at all” and 6 = “agree completely”). The BALLI statements are divided between five subscales: *The Difficulty of Language Learning*, *Foreign Language Aptitude*, *The Nature of Language Learning*, *Learning and Communication Strategies*, and *Motivation and Expectations*. The last subscale was excluded from the present study. For all the subscales, individual statements were used in the data analysis.

The self-regulation questionnaire (*Learning Self-Regulation Questionnaire*, Black & Deci, 2000) was used to assess autonomous and controlled motivation. Autonomous (e.g. I listen to my teacher because his explanations help me understand the language better) and controlled motivation (e.g. I listen to my teacher because it is more likely that I get a better grade) were assessed with four statements each (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$ for autonomous and $\alpha = .74$ controlled motivation subscale).

The statistical package jamovi (The jamovi project, 2022) and its factor analysis extension (R Core Team, 2021; Rosseel, 2012) were used to analyse the data. Differences in beliefs and motivation between two groups of students were analysed using an independent samples t-test. Levene's test was used to check the homogeneity of the variances of the two groups, and if necessary, the t-statistic is reported, which considers the unequal variances.

The results show that among students with a different L1 than the medium of instruction, there are more fixed beliefs that may hinder successful university studies. They are also less motivated, both in terms of autonomous and controlled motivation. The results allow universities to be more aware of students' learning-related beliefs and motivation to organise inclusion better and support them individually. Examples of beliefs related to language learning can be interpreted in a wider context and transferred to other learning situations. The academic staff needs to recognise the role of students' beliefs and motivation in their studies.

Keywords: Students with a different L1 than Estonian, language learning beliefs, autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, inclusive education