

Why could the first foreign language in Estonia be Finnish and Estonian in Finland?

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Summary

From the perspective of early language learning, the article discusses why the first foreign language taught in Estonia and Finland could be the closely related language spoken in the neighbouring country. Traditionally, Estonia and Finland's first foreign language education started in the third grade. Still, since 2020, the beginning of foreign language studies in Finland has been moved earlier: the mandatory first foreign language education must begin no later than the spring of the first academic year. In Estonia, the proportion of children starting foreign language education in the first and second grades has also increased over the past decade. Estonia and Finland's most commonly learned first foreign language is English. Other foreign languages are chosen as the first foreign language significantly less often, and as a result, there has been growing concern in society over the narrowing of language choices in the past decade.

Finnish began to be extensively taught in Estonian general education and vocational schools after Estonia regained independence. Interest in learning Finnish as a second foreign language increased after the full-scale war in Ukraine began. In the 2024–2025 academic year, nearly 3,000 students in Estonian general education schools were learning Finnish. Estonian is taught extensively as a foreign language in Finland at Helsinki's Sibelius High School. Education is conducted both in-person and through online courses. Students from other Helsinki schools can also participate in the latter. In other Finnish schools, Estonian language education has been more sporadic, primarily dependent on the availability of teachers with Estonian language skills.

The discussion is based on a comprehensive study conducted in the 2024–2025 academic year in Estonian and Finnish general education and universities, examining the state of Finnish language education in Estonia and Estonian language education in Finland, focusing on the language learning experiences of Estonian primary and secondary school students learning Finnish and Finnish high school students learning Estonian. The article seeks to answer the following questions:

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1. What was the students' first encounter with the neighbouring country's language?
2. What are the reasons for learning Finnish or Estonian, the language learning experience, and how has motivation changed during studies?
3. Has learning a closely related language contributed to the development of language awareness?
4. How do students plan to develop further and use the acquired language skills and cultural knowledge, and how does this affect relations between the countries?

The study data were collected from December 2024 to February 2025 using a structured online survey, utilizing the University of Helsinki's electronic survey environment E-lomake (<https://elomake.helsinki.fi>). A total of 15 high school students from Finland, 28 high school students, and 48 primary school students from Estonia responded to the survey. Descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis were used to analyse the responses.

Based on the analysis of the language learning experiences of Estonian and Finnish students, it can be concluded that several factors favour earlier and more extensive teaching of the closely related language spoken in the neighbouring country. Due to the close geographical proximity and the intertwining of societal, cultural, and economic life between the two neighbouring countries, many students encounter Finnish or Estonian through travel, family ties, friends, or hobbies. This creates a positive attitude towards the language being learned, even before studies begin, and is one of the main reasons for choosing Finnish or Estonian as the language to learn. The experience and knowledge of the possibilities of using learned language maintain motivation. However, quite many Estonian students, especially in primary school, have their first encounter with Finnish only when it is necessary to choose a second foreign language to learn.

The reasons for choosing Finnish or Estonian as the language to learn include integrative and instrumental reasons, which are generally very closely intertwined. Among Estonian students' responses, instrumental reasons dominated – the need to choose a second foreign language, the simplicity of Finnish, learning and work opportunities – were associated with a positive attitude towards the neighbouring country's language and interest in its culture. Finnish students began learning Estonian mainly due to family relationships, Estonian roots, and interest in the language and culture.

The experience of learning Finnish or Estonian is very positive for most students, further enhancing or maintaining the initial positive motivation.

Teaching a closely related language is considered easier than other languages, primarily due to the similarity between the first and target languages. Learning a similar language progresses faster, especially initially, compared to more distant languages, allowing more students to experience success. The perception of oneself as a successful language learner creates a good foundation for learning all subsequent foreign languages. However, some students found learning Finnish more challenging than learning English, as English surrounds them everywhere and learning it as the first language begins earlier, whereas Finnish cannot be practiced daily. For this reason, it is worth considering whether English as the first foreign language is sufficiently justified or whether another foreign language, including Finnish in Estonia and Estonian in Finland, could be the first foreign language.

Among the components of language awareness, the ability to compare the first language and the target language was central and most developed when learning Finnish or Estonian, which is the basis for learning any new language. Additionally, students gained a lot of new knowledge about vocabulary and expressions, grammar, and the neighbouring country's culture. Most students plan to continue learning Finnish or Estonian in the future, preferably at their current or future educational institution, but also through other courses and independently. They intend to use the acquired language and cultural knowledge in their work life, in communicating with Finns and Estonians and participating in their culture, in professional activities and hobbies, and while living and studying in the neighbouring country.

Therefore, there are several prerequisites for earlier and more extensive Finnish and Estonian language education: students' previous encounters with the language being learned, a positive attitude towards the language, and the desire to study it long-term, a successful language learning experience, and the societal need for speakers of the neighbouring country's language. The obstacle may be the lack of resources, especially teachers. However, this should be overcome through the joint efforts of universities preparing teachers, schools, professional associations, and other relevant institutions.

Keywords: foreign language learning, motivation of language learning, language awareness, Finnish, Estonian