

Film-based communicative teaching of Estonian as a second language: supporting the interest, active participation, and development of basic school students

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Summary

The level of Estonian as a second language proficiency at the end of basic school leaves much to be desired. Many students currently do not reach the required B1 level by the end of basic school (Eksamite Infosüsteem, 2025). Students' learning motivation is not always high either. To teach Estonian more effectively, the teaching methodology of Estonian as a second language needs development: more diverse communicative learning, active methods, and interesting topics should be used in studies.

This article discusses an intervention study determining whether and how film-based communicative learning can support students' interest, active participation, and language development in a B1-level Estonian as a second language class. The study was conducted in a ninth-grade study group at a general education school in Tallinn, using a specially designed set of communicative learning activities based on the youth series "Miks mitte?!"² ("Why Not?!").

The research questions were:

1. How much interest in learning do films and film-based communicative learning activities arouse in students, according to their own and the teacher's assessment?
2. According to teachers and students, how do film and film-based communicative learning activities promote active learning?
3. How affordable are films and film-based communicative learning activities for students, in their own and the teacher's opinion?
4. How useful do teachers and students find film and film-based communicative learning activities in language learning and exam preparation?

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² <https://jupiter.err.ee/1136218/miks-mitte>

There were 13 students in the study group with whom the research was conducted. According to the teacher, the groups' average Estonian language proficiency was relatively weak, and most students were not accustomed to using Estonian continuously during class. The teacher noted that, until now, students in Estonian as a second language class have mainly been used to reading textbook texts, answering questions, and completing written grammar exercises.

The film was a ten-part fast-paced series featuring a hardworking and somewhat shy high school girl named Anna, who dreams of becoming a rapper. The learning material prepared for the intervention consisted of 10 parts. Each part of the set included a warm-up task, a prediction task, a viewing task for one episode of the series, speaking tasks, grammar and vocabulary tasks, and, in some parts, also writing and, in some, reading tasks. Completing one part usually took two 45-minute lessons. The tasks were prepared considering the B1 level requirements (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2007, 2023).

The warm-ups involved movement and improvisation, and these activities aimed to energize the students and create a positive mood. The prediction activity aimed to generate interest in watching the film and to facilitate the understanding of the film's plot. This activity included answering questions, evaluating the truthfulness of statements, and similar tasks. One episode's viewing and listening task involved watching the film during the class.

The grammar and vocabulary activities aimed to spark interest and engagement while making learning more affordable. These tasks were done orally and involved communication among students.

In the simpler speaking activities, students moved around the classroom and talked with different classmates or conversed in small groups using given questions or screenshots from the film. The more complex speaking activities involved answering questions in various ways, role-plays, improvisation, story creation, shorter discussions, and more.

The intervention lasted from the beginning of October 2022 to the end of January 2023. Classes took place twice a week, each lasting 45 minutes. One weekly Estonian language e-lesson with another teacher was also conducted during the intervention. The content of the e-lessons with the other teacher is unknown, but it can be assumed that they included at least some exam-type tasks. After the intervention, students studied for four months until the end of the school year through in-person lessons using the ninth-grade textbook and prepared for the basic school final exam.

During the testing, feedback from the teacher and students was collected. The teacher was asked to provide written feedback on each learning activity. Two online interviews were conducted with the teacher, focusing on the interest

generated by the series and learning activities, the promotion of active learning, the appropriateness of the materials, and their usefulness in learning Estonian and preparing for the basic school final exam. After the basic school exam took place in May 2023, a short follow-up interview was conducted with the teacher by phone. Student feedback was collected at the end of the intervention through an anonymous online survey, in which students rated the film and learning activities in terms of interest, difficulty, and usefulness using Likert scales, and also provided comments in open-ended responses.

The students' scale responses were analysed quantitatively. The teacher's written feedback and interviews and the students' open-ended responses were analysed using deductive and inductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The deductive categories were based on three theory-driven aspects: 1) generating interest, 2) achieving affordability, and 3) promoting active learning. During the analysis, a fourth category – usefulness – was also added. For each category, subcategories were created inductively from all types of responses that appeared.

In response to the first research question, the study revealed that students found the dynamic nature of the series and meaningful situations interesting, as these create cognitive tension in viewers (Schiefele, 2009). Students were also attracted to good acting, humour, the musical background, and empathy for the characters, which evokes positive emotional tension (Sanjaya et al., 2022; Schiefele, 2009). The simpler speaking activities were mainly engaging for students due to their variety and interaction with peers. According to the teacher, more complex activities that required deeper thinking and with which students struggled were uninteresting to students and decreased their learning motivation.

The findings for the second research question showed that watching the film activated the students: they followed the plot and engaged emotionally with it. The abundance and variety of film-based communicative learning activities were novel to the students. In activities that were at least partially familiar, students were rated by the teacher as putting in more energy and effort and working more independently, which are indicators of engagement (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

In response to the third research question, it was found that according to the teacher, the series was cognitively at an appropriate level of difficulty for the students. Still, linguistically it was pretty challenging for most, who were progressing towards the B1 level. Nevertheless, three-quarters of the students said they understood the series fairly well. Their comprehension was supported by the visual action in the series, prediction activities, and the teacher's supportive strategies.

Students generally rated the activities as affordable, while the teacher considered them challenging. Speaking activities caused the most difficulties – although the simpler ones gradually became more affordable over time, the more complex activities that required greater independent thinking and shorter discussions remained difficult until the end.

In response to the fourth research question, it was found that both the students and the teacher rated watching the series and completing activities as moderately helpful in learning Estonian. Neither the students nor the teacher saw significant benefits from the series of learning activities for exam preparation, because the exact exam tasks were not practiced. This is in line with previous studies that highlight the one-sided nature of learning activities in Estonian language lessons and the impact of exam tasks on language learning activities (Hausenberg, 2006; Kitsnik, 2018; Metslang et al., 2013; Kitsnik & Sooalu, 2020). The students' good exam results, particularly in speaking, surprised the teacher, who admitted that such a level had not been predicted.

In conclusion, the research results suggest that film-based communicative learning activities can, according to the teacher and students' assessment, effectively support B1-level Estonian as a second language learning in upper basic school grades, provided they are used purposefully and consciously. Further research on the impact of film-based communicative teaching needs to be continued with a larger sample and more objective measurement tools.

Keywords: Estonian as a second language, youth TV series, communicative language teaching, intervention study