Upper secondary school students' perceptions of the interest, appropriate challenges, and developmental value of Estonian as a second language learning materials: A study of the communicative learning package Sõnajalaõis B2.1

Mare Kitsnik[a1], **Jelizaveta Novak**[b]

[a] *Narva College, University of Tartu*
[b] *Narva City Centre School*

Summary

Estonia's historically dual-track education system is currently transitioning to a fully Estonian-language instruction, aiming to ensure that all students, including those with a different home language, achieve sufficient proficiency in Estonian. The transition has also brought increased attention to students' proficiency in general Estonian and its teaching methods in upper secondary education. Previous research (Bernhardt, 2025; Kitsnik & Sooalu, 2020; Metslang *et al.*, 2013) has shown that Estonian as a second language instruction often lacks systematic, communicative, and learner-centred approaches, and that learning materials are frequently perceived as outdated and demotivating. These challenges highlight the need to develop new types of learning materials and to examine how learners experience them in authentic classroom contexts.

This study explores which characteristics upper secondary students associate with interesting, appropriate levels of challenge and developmentally supportive communicative learning materials for Estonian as a second language. The study was based on the learning package *Sõnajalaõis B2.1* (Kitsnik, 2019a, 2019b), which was designed for learners progressing towards the B2.1 proficiency level. The package integrates authentic language input, active language output, and the development of language constructions in communicative contexts.

In addition, it aims to promote learner interest, provide an appropriate level of challenge, and support students' perception of the learning process as developmentally beneficial. The package makes extensive use of audiovisual input. The television series Nullpunkt[1] serves as a central learning resource, featuring a wide range of communicative tasks, game-based activities, and the

[1] Narva College, University of Tartu, Raekoja plats 2, Narva 20307, Estonia; mare.kitsnik@ut.ee.

integration of grammar and vocabulary learning into interactive speaking and writing tasks. Rather than presenting grammar mainly through abstract rules and isolated written exercises, the materials attempt to support the development of language constructions through repeated contextualised use.

Three research questions guided the study:

- How do students evaluate the interest, appropriate level of challenge, and developmental value of the communicative learning package *Sõnajalaõis B2.1*?
- What positive and negative features do students identify in relation to the interest, appropriate level of challenge, and developmental value of the learning package?
- What suggestions do students have for improving the learning package?

The study was conducted between autumn 2019 and spring 2020 with 41 students from three upper secondary school groups in Tallinn and Narva. The participants had heterogeneous proficiency levels, with most learners being approximately at the B1 level, while some were at the A2 level and others close to the B2 level at the beginning of the study. *The Sõnajalaõis B2.1* was used as the main learning material over one academic year. Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analysed using both deductive and inductive content analysis (Schreier, 2012).

The results showed that upper secondary students value authentic and communicative learning materials. Students associated interest primarily with contemporary and personally relevant topics, audiovisual input, active communication, and game-based tasks. An appropriate level of challenge was associated with the clear structure of the learning package, comprehensible learning activities, an appropriate workload, and repeated practice. Developmental value was associated with authentic language use, practical vocabulary, abundant opportunities for communication, and tasks that encouraged critical thinking. The feedback from the students included a greater variety in the learning texts, better differentiation of the difficulty level of learning activities, and increased emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and writing instruction. The findings suggest that, from the students' perspective, interest, appropriate levels of challenge, and developmental value do not arise from individual learning activities, but from the interaction of multiple features of learning materials.

The results also indicate that students are willing to embrace learning approaches that differ from those they are accustomed to, provided they are

interesting, comprehensible, meaningful, and supportive of learning. Also, students differed in their expectations regarding the amount and complexity of tasks as well as approaches to grammar instruction. This points to the need for a greater differentiation in the development of higher-level language-learning materials in order to support those with varying language proficiency and learning preferences.

A particular feature of the study is that the first author was also the author of the learning package; to reduce potential bias, student feedback was collected anonymously, and the qualitative data were analysed separately by both authors, with discrepancies resolved through discussion.

The findings should be interpreted in the context of the relatively small sample taken. In addition, the results may have been influenced by teachers' implementation of the learning activities, which was not examined in this study. External factors, particularly the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, also affected the implementation of the learning package, as some planned activities involving communicative and gamified tasks could not be carried out as intended. This may have influenced students' experiences and their evaluations of the learning materials.

The study contributes to our understanding of students' attitudes towards communicative language learning and the importance they attach to interest, appropriate levels of challenge, and developmental value in learning materials. It also provides a more detailed description of the material characteristics that upper secondary students associate with these qualities. Despite the participants' heterogeneity, several common patterns emerged. The findings further highlight the importance of interest in Estonian as a second language instruction, a topic that has received relatively little attention to date.

The results demonstrate the value of examining language-learning materials from the students' perspectives. They may inform both materials developers and teachers seeking to create engaging, appropriately challenging, and developmentally supportive learning environments.

The study does not provide conclusions about the actual impact of the learning materials on language development. However, it does reflect on students' experiences and perceptions, which may influence learning outcomes. Future research could investigate the long-term effects of the learning package on language development and examine more closely how specific design features of learning materials, such as the sequencing and integration of activities and their classroom implementation, shape students' experiences and learning.

Keywords: Estonian as a second language, language teaching materials, materials evaluation, learner perceptions, upper secondary education