



Teaching and Learning Russian as a Foreign Language at the Estonian Military Academy Nowadays.

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Abstract

The issue of learning the Russian language in Estonia has been acute for decades. In the light of today's geopolitical situation, when Estonia's Eastern neighbor unleashed a bloody war in Ukraine, the issue of learning or not-learning the Russian language is ethically and socially more important than ever. Nevertheless, this paper doesn't aim to present a full analytical review on the geopolitical, sociological nor ethical inquiries of Russian learning and teaching in Estonia. It is about the Russian language learning and teaching particularly at the Military Academy of Estonia today at its specific development and conditional point within the local society. The author of this paper tries to analyse the reasons of learning Russian, general motivational aspects of the students, give a brief overview on a short but intensive teaching period and to formulate possible ways of teaching and learners' motivating development and improvement.

Keywords: *The Estonian Military Academy, students' motivation, Russian language learning.*

1. Introduction. Background and context.

Estonia, as a multilingual society during its whole history¹ [14], has become an Independent State since 1991 with Estonian as the state language. Before that, during the Soviet occupation period², Russian in Estonia was a dominant language and was taught in all the schools as an compulsory subject.

For the last 30 years the situation has been changing³ and the role of Russian in society nowadays in general is decreasing⁴. Nevertheless the "language question"⁵ is a stumbling block at many different levels of the society, especially educational — secondary education in Russian, Russian language learning and teaching as a foreign language in Estonian-medium schools etc.

As Martin Ehala puts it in the article "Ethnolinguistic Vitality and Acculturation Orientations of Russian Speakers in Estonia" even during the USSR period the Russian language skills varied according to different needs of people. For instance, "despite the fact that Russian was a compulsory subject in all Estonian-medium schools, proficiency in Russian among Estonian speakers varied according to personal needs occupation, work requirements and region of residence" [2]. Years have passed and since 1991⁶, when the Republic of Estonia was restored *de facto* and the Estonian language has become the *sole official language*, the imposing of studying Russian has been eliminated, we continuously evidence the fact, that Russian skills are needed accordingly. The reasons are mostly the same: regional, individual (incl. working, official duties, social network), generational [2].

The spread of Russian among the Estonian-speaking population is less intense in comparison with Soviet times. Estonian proficiency among Russian-speaking citizens is noticeably increasing. On the other hand, the use of Russian by the Russian-speaking part of the population is still very high and a

¹ "According to Hennoste (1997: 48) nine sociolinguistic periods with different characteristics for Estonian can be distinguished" Cited by [14].

² See [12].

³ "<...> in the last 30 years, geopolitical changes such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia's EU membership, migration process, and language policies, contributed to the increased share of speakers of Estonian as L2" [8].

⁴ See [15].

⁵ See [11].

⁶ See also [17] about the Russian emigrants of the 4th wave.



complete transition to the Estonian language in our small society is much more difficult than in a country with a population of many millions. The latest Estonian census was carried out in 2021, and its latest data has been published just recently. The general trend has remained unchanged over the years: the share of people who consider themselves to be ethnic Russians remains close to a quarter of the entire Estonian population (23,7%). The share of the Estonian-mother tongue population has not increased (69,1%), but there has been a significant rise in the number of languages spoken as the mother tongue (6,8%) [13].

2. Language studies at The Estonian Military Academy

The Estonian Military Academy (EMA) trains and educates senior non-commissioned officers, as well as junior and senior officers for the Estonian Defence Forces, National Defence League, and other military institutions [4]. Along with the subjects of the professional content the curricula of applied higher education in military leadership and the curricula of advanced officers' course (a MA level programme) provides the cadets and the officers with a possibility to study foreign languages. As the general level of knowing English is on a par with upper-intermediate or advanced level, the cadets and the MA officers have to choose to learn French or Russian language. 16/20 (80%) of the officers and 40/60 (67%) of the cadets⁷ are learning Russian this academic year.

The working hypotheses before the research:

- the role of socio-cultural and geopolitical features of Estonia should be high in reasoning and motivational aspects of the students;
- assumption that the cadets and students study Russian largely in the current academic year due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, as a result, want to know better the language of the "enemy"⁸;
- the assumption, based on four-month observation of the educational process: the cadets, as a younger generation, should see less value and be less motivated in learning Russian nowadays.

3. The results of the research

There was used a short questionnaire to confirm our working hypotheses. The letter was filled by the cadets and officers studying Russian this year⁹. 80% of the officers and 82% of the cadets have taken part in this survey. At the time of answering the questions, the cadets had been studying the language for 2.5 months, and the officers had completed their 78-hour course, which lasted 3.5 months. Separate interviews with language learners were not conducted, however, the author of this paper, being also a teacher of 75% of the target-group, observed and talked with students throughout this time and can share some of her personal observations.

3.1 Knowing Russian

The first and very important remark that deserves attention is: despite the cadets' young age and the lack of rich life and worldly experience, nevertheless, most of the respondents believe that knowledge and study of Russian in Estonia is necessary today. This surprises us a lot, especially in the light of what is happening in the world (so-called "Russian culture cancelling", which Russian propaganda is desperately talking about) as well as active conversations within Estonian society (including at the level of the Ministry of Education¹⁰ and the most influential media channels¹¹) about a possible abolition of Russian as a foreign language in schools. The answers given by the officers are identical – 75% have voted pro and 25% contra.

⁷ 2021/2022: 11/30 (37%) — officers, 4/55 (7,3%) — cadets; 2020/2021: 16/27 (63%)— officers, 11/41 (27%) — cadets.

⁸ In this context, Dörnyei's words seem more relevant than ever "<...> since people are unlikely to be successful in learning a language whose speakers they despise" [1].

⁹ The author thanks her students, who kindly participated in this survey and answered all the questions in the most detailed way possible.

¹⁰ The minister of Education stated in August 2022, that "The dominance of Russian as a B language in Estonia is not normal" [10].

¹¹ E.g. Priit Hõbeägi, an experienced journalist, in the article "Let's stop Russian language teaching" declares that "There is no reason or need to learn Russian in Estonian schools" [7].

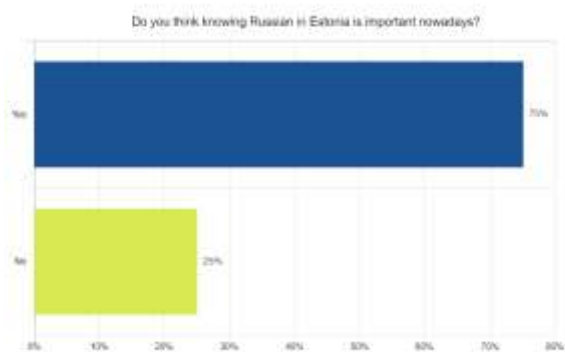


Fig 1. Answers given by the cadets and the officers (identical percentage)

The explanations given by the cadets and the officers¹² regarding the knowledge and study of the Russian language are varied, but they can be divided into 4 groups:

- a) Communication with Russian speakers;
- b) Knowledge of any language is enriching;
- c) Russian helps to perform official duties;
- d) Russian is not needed.

3.2 Learning Russian

There is no big difference between the answers to the question about the need to learn/teach Russian in Estonia among the cadets – 78% pro and 22% contra, while among the officers this percentage is higher: 83,3% pro and 16,7% contra. It is clearly seen that the officers are more tolerant towards the Russian language usage and learning the language. One of the officers explains: “language barriers must be broken from both sides as much as possible”, besides that, other add “speaking Russian varies according to the working needs” and “in Estonia one should speak Estonian on a daily basis”. Despite the clearly formulated message of some students¹³ that only Estonian should be in use in the country¹⁴, most of them are ready to work hard and learn Russian. With different explanation and reasoning¹⁵ the output that the cadets and the officers come to can be formulated as: There are different mother tongue speaking people in Estonia, both sides should work to understand each other and in order to be understood.

3.3 Reasons to learn Russian

The Master students find the official duties to be the most important reason of their Russian learning. Some of them mention, that knowing Russian even on a basic level is helping them to achieve a better communication scale with the subordinates.

It is interesting to evidence, that the second most relevant reason the officers point out is the curiosity that leads them to the decisions to learn Russian. As Hugh Wagner puts it: “Curiosity might be based

¹² Separately, should be emphasised that some officers in their answers do not distinguish between Russians and Estonians, but speak about Estonians, whose first language is Russian. It is an important remark (and a big step forward) for the general rhetoric of our country.

¹³ From the students’ answers: “I understand that it will be useful, but we still live in Estonia, and it should rather be the responsibility of Russian speakers to learn Estonian”; “I remain convinced that the schools of Ida-Virumaa must be forcibly Estonianized, so that people do not even have the opportunity to study in Russian”; “Better to know than mandatory. I consider it right that we still have 1 national language”. (A.H.)

¹⁴ From the students’ answers: “I have always believed you don’t need to know Russian when you live in Estonia. For too long, the life of Russian-speaking citizens has been made too easy with Russian-language signs and service”.

¹⁵ From the students’ answers: “Because the Russian-speaking community is quite large in Estonia”; “There are people who speak only Russian, both in civilian and in the service”; “Learning Russian doesn’t mean we speak less Estonian. It helps us understand Russian-speakers living in Estonia. And that way we can help them to learn Estonian”. (A.H.)



on a need to be aware of the environment so as to be able to respond efficiently, for example to threat". [16].

Surprisingly, "The war in Ukraine (e.g. reading news, watching videos etc.)" did not come out to be the main reason for learning Russian among the EMA students. It gained only 15,4% of popularity among the cadets and 13% among the officers.

3.4 Learning motives

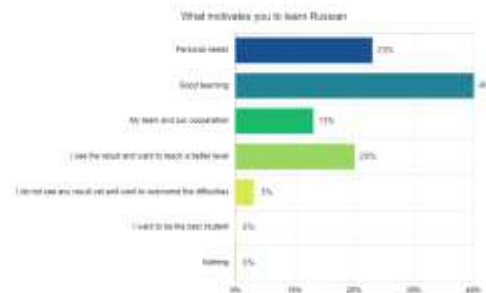


Fig 2. The officers.

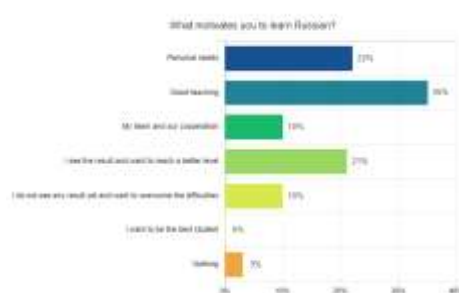


Fig 3. The cadets

The social facilitation and a motive of cooperation are other highly significant factors that should be considered in the context of other cognitive and social motives. The officers have pointed out that "our team and cooperation" and the reason of seeing the result and therefore willing to reach a better level are important to them. Cadets see this aspect as less motivational, maybe due to a less quality-time spent together as a team. It is interesting to notice that one of the main motivational reasons¹⁶ for learning a language for students is an achievement motivation. As Wagner explains the hope of success balanced against a fear of failure¹⁷ [16]. Following the Wagner's theory of the psychobiology of human motivation, we note that social motivation and cooperation, as the main components of cognitive and social motives, are fully represented both among cadets and among officers. However, their significance does not allow interpreting it as the main component of EMA students' motivation. Personal needs, as the second most common motivational explanation, correlates with what Wagner calls "self-presentation". It can also relate to impression management in some extent and is considered one of the most fundamental human motives in life [16]. Yet most important for both target-groups in the field of Russian learning motivation is a "good teaching" aspect¹⁸. This may not be the most important factor for language schools or universities with a wider range of language classes, however, for our specifically directed area, these students' statement should be considered more than significantly. The students from both target groups emphasise that the "free atmosphere", "a lot of speaking exercises", "good and relaxed learning environment", "various methods", "no pressure", "personal approach", "a good teacher, "teacher's personality and the attitude" are the factors that make Russian learning acceptable and even enjoyable ("It's not as formal as I would've imagined and that is why learning Russian is so enjoyable"). There should be more physical time spent by teachers for preparation and it requires a better emotional involvement into the teaching process in order to achieve this beneficial type of teaching/learning. However, it is what motivates the students mostly and helps to achieve better results and maybe helps to smooth out the rough edges of the "language question" in society, at least at the level of a small group.

Conclusion

The presented short information about the state of Russian in Estonia eloquently makes it clear that the issue of learning or not learning the language is acute in society. The number of Russian-speaking

¹⁶ "We have no ready panacea for solving the problems of student motivation, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the learning contest and specifically the provision of high-quality feedback and the adoption of appropriate assessment systems are at least part of the answer" [6]; see also [9].

¹⁷ <...> A person's tendency to take on the challenge (approach) is determined by the combination of the person's need for achievement, the perceived probability of success and the intensive value (reward)" [16].

¹⁸ "Sometimes a small personal word of encouragement is sufficient" [1].



people in the country implies the need for knowledge of the Russian language at the level of understanding.

The assumptions made that the EMA cadets, to a lesser extent than the MA level officers, consider the study of the Russian language to be unnecessary, did not find confirmation.

The expectation that language learners are motivated to learn the language solely because of the military situation in Ukraine has also not materialized.

Both cadets and officers made it very clear that their motivation lies in the quality of teaching and the attitude of the teacher towards them, as well as towards the subject. This in turn allows to outline the next vector for studying the issue, namely, to study in detail the methods and the direct learning process.

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