



Methodological Excellence in Data-Driven
Approaches to Linguistics

Mother tongue teaching in a changing society

Funded by EC Horizon Europe, project no. [101079429](#)

Contact: medal@ut.ee

Project website: medal.ut.ee

The Methodological Excellence in Data-Driven Approaches to Linguistics (MEDAL) consortium is financed by the EU Horizon Europe programme (101079429) and UK Research and Innovation (101079429).

Abstract

In Estonia's ongoing transition to Estonian-language education, the teaching of Estonian as a mother tongue faces growing challenges that demand urgent attention. On 11 November in Tallinn, the Estonian Language Council and the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics at the University of Tartu convened a high-level seminar titled "Mother Tongue Teaching in a Changing Society." The event brought together educators, policymakers, and researchers to examine the current state of Estonian mother tongue teaching instructions and propose actionable development strategies. This white paper outlines the key insights and recommendations from the seminar, emphasising the need for curriculum reform, investment in teacher training, and the development of modern, accessible learning resources. It calls for a coordinated national strategy to ensure that Estonian mother-tongue education remains robust, inclusive, and sustainable.

Mother tongue teaching in a changing society

On 11 November in Tallinn, the Estonian Language Council and the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics at the University of Tartu hosted the seminar "Mother Tongue Teaching in a Changing Society" ("*Emakeeleõpetus muutuvast ühiskonnast*"), addressing key challenges in teaching Estonian as a first language. The discussion was moderated by Helen Hint (University of Tartu) and featured contributions from Prof Birute Klaas-Lang (University of Tartu, Estonian Language Council), Helin Kask (Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia), Maija Yli-Jokipii (Tallinn University, Tampere University), Kaja Sarapuu (Eesti Emakeeleõpetajate Selts), Katarin Leppik (Tallinn University), Kati Käpp (University of Tartu, Vanalinna Hariduskolleeegium), and Ilona Tragel (University of Tartu). The hybrid event drew over a hundred participants, both on-site and online.

The transition to Estonian-centred education motivated MEDAL to organise a seminar, focused primarily on teaching Estonian as a second language. However, these changes also affect Estonian-medium schools where Estonian is taught as a mother tongue. Increasing linguistic diversity, outdated materials, and limited lesson hours pose serious challenges to the quality of education. Currently, the number of Estonian language lessons, especially in upper secondary school, is insufficient to meet curriculum goals. Many textbooks are over a decade old, forcing teachers to create their own materials, which increases their workload and the risk of burnout. The teaching staff faces serious challenges: nearly half of Estonian language teachers are over 50 years old, and about 1/5 lack the required qualifications, directly affecting students' learning outcomes. Writing tasks often lack clear objectives and fail to reflect students' real-life language use or synergise with other study materials. International experience, such as Finland's, demonstrates that separate curricula for first and second language learners can be effective but require robust systems for assessing language proficiency and clear guidelines for placement. Estonia can avoid similar problems by establishing early assessment mechanisms for students' language proficiency and effectively organising E1 and E2 instruction in mixed-language classrooms.

The discussion emphasised the need for text-based and process-oriented writing instruction, fostering linguistic creativity and argumentation skills, and adapting to societal and technological changes. Strengthening Estonian mother tongue education requires systemic reform, updated learning materials, and sustained investment in teacher training and curriculum development. Policymakers, educators, and researchers must work together to ensure that language education meets the needs of a diverse and dynamic society.

Discussion recommendations for developing mother tongue education

- Increase Estonian language lesson hours in basic and upper secondary schools
- Develop a national strategy for teaching Estonian as both a first and second language in mixed classrooms
- Align exams with curriculum goals and emphasise argumentation and practical language skills
- Develop expert-reviewed, curriculum-aligned textbooks and create a centralised, reliable online platform for sharing updated learning materials
- Integrate language learning with other subjects and promote meaningful writing tasks
- Support teacher training and recruitment through updated curricula and micro-credentials
- Fund research on mother tongue education alongside second language studies