



Methodological Excellence in Data-Driven
Approaches to Linguistics

Supporting Home Language

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Abstract

Estonia advances toward a fully Estonian-language education system, but the question remains how to support the home languages of multilingual children. On 4 April 2025, the Centre for Multilingualism at the University of Tartu, in collaboration with the Bilingualism Matters network and the MEDAL consortium, hosted a public roundtable titled “Supporting the Home Language.” The hybrid-format event brought together over a hundred participants to explore how home language acquisition and instruction can be supported within the framework of the new educational landscape. This white paper presents the key insights and recommendations from the discussion, emphasising the importance of valuing linguistic diversity, supporting home language education, and fostering inclusive identities in a multilingual society.

Supporting Home Language

On 4 April 2025, a public roundtable “Supporting Home Language” was organised by the Centre for Multilingualism at the University of Tartu’s Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, in cooperation with the Bilingualism Matters network and the MEDAL consortium. The discussion focused on how to maintain and develop multilingual children’s home languages during Estonia’s transition to Estonian-medium education. The hybrid event drew over a hundred participants, both on-site and online.

Moderated by Prof Birute Klaas-Lang, the panel included Helina Aasmaa (Tartu Hansa School), Kätlin Kõverik (Ministry of Education and Research), Prof Virve Vihman (University of Tartu), Ave Härsing (Integration Foundation), and Diana Vender (University of Tartu and multilingual parent).

Key topics included legal provisions for home language instruction, practical challenges, and regional differences. Participants emphasised the cognitive and social benefits of

multilingualism, the importance of clear communication, and the role of culture. Recommendations focused on stronger cooperation among stakeholders, providing better information for parents, teacher training, allocating more resources to preschools, and ensuring schools do not restrict home language use during breaks. The discussion also noted that most attention and funding have been directed towards Estonian as a second language. The Multilingualism Centre was created to raise awareness, share research, provide resources, and organise workshops for schools and parents to dispel myths about multilingualism. It also serves as a collaborative hub for researchers.

Key Proposals compiled by the Centre for Multilingualism

- Close cooperation between all parties, including parents, schools, local governments, ministries, and cultural societies, is crucial. The parties' roles in supporting the home language need to be clarified
- Dissemination of information to parents and educators about the benefits of multilingualism and home language development is crucial. Children can learn a second language in parallel with their home language, already in pre-school
- Educators should be prepared to encourage parents to support skills in the home language and understand why this is important
- Pre-schools/kindergartens need more resources to support home language development
- Extracurricular schools run by cultural societies can be a valuable resource for language learning and disseminating information about language rights and opportunities
- The language used by children during recess and peer interactions is not regulated. Schools must not prohibit speaking the home language during recess.
- More attention and resources should be devoted to supporting children's language skills in South Estonian and Estonian dialects