

Estonian Language at Estonian Schools

The use of the Estonian language in European-style education dates back to about 500 years. However, it gained momentum thanks to the Reformation. Churches began to set up Estonian language schools. The first known Estonian-language primer was published in 1575; unfortunately none of its copies has survived. The earliest Estonian-language primers that have survived date from the end of the 17th century. At first the purpose of Estonian-language schooling was limited to the teaching of reading skills and Christian values. Unfortunately, the early Estonian-language schooling suffered badly because of inadequate norms of Standard Estonian and correct usage because German spelling, which was unsuitable for Estonian, made the reading and understanding of texts too complicated. At that time Germans generally thought that Estonians could not acquire the reading skills because of their low level of intelligence.

A breakthrough in Estonian-medium education took place in the mid-17th century when Estonia became part of Sweden. Bengt Gottfried Forselius became a reformer of Standard Estonian and a founder of the Estonian-language educational system. In all likelihood Bengt Gottfried Forselius was born ca. 1660. He was of Swedish descent but learned Estonian already in his childhood by interacting with Estonians. After studying at the University of Wittenberg the promotion of Estonian peasant education became his life's work. When teaching reading in his home locality, he realized that the current spelling was unsuitable, and he started to work out a new and more suitable spelling. The new spelling enabled schoolchildren to learn to read in a few months instead of the previously needed six months. With the support of the king's power he founded Estonia's first seminary for the training of schoolteachers not far from Tartu. Although the seminary worked only for four years, it provided education to 160 boys who later became schoolmasters in their home localities. Unfortunately, Forselius was unable to see the fruits of his labour. He perished at the age of 28 on the stormy sea when returning from Stockholm, and there is even no picture of him.

During almost four hundred years Estonian remained a language of the peasantry that was not used in official situations and for governance. At first the development of Standard Estonian and educational literature was mostly carried out as part of missionary work. Because it was thought that clergymen should know the Estonian language and people, a lectureship was set up at the theological faculty of Tartu University in 1803. It meant that the Estonian language became officially part of university education. By that time many grammars of Estonian had been published which facilitated teaching. The primary purpose was to teach how to write Estonian-language sermons for students of theology. The efficiency of teaching Estonian was not that limited. Interest in the study and learning of Estonian increased at the end of the 18th century under the impact of Herder's ideas, whereby during the first half of the 19th century the lectureship became an important training ground of Estophiles and the budding Estonian intelligentsia. In fact, their activities laid the groundwork for the development of Estonian as a language of culture which finally led to the extension of Estonian-medium education to secondary schools.

Unfortunately, it took place only 100 years after the foundation of the lectureship of Estonian at the University. Up to the beginning of the 20th century Estonian-medium instruction was available only during the first three years of school. At the same time during the second half of the 19th century the Estonian intelligentsia had become so strong that there was a desperate need to extend Estonian-medium education. In 1862 an idea was conceived to organize an all-Estonian fund-raising campaign for the establishment of an Estonian-medium secondary school, which was named *Aleksanderkool* 'Alexander's school' in honour of the emperor. However, the foundation of the Estonian-medium school met with strong political resistance; for this reason it was possible to open the school as late as in 1888, only as a Russian-medium school. The Estonian language could be studied only as a school subject. The tsarist government permitted the establishment of Estonian-medium private schools only after the 1905 revolution. In fact, the first Estonian-medium secondary school was founded in 1906, followed by several other schools at short intervals. Thus, Estonian-medium secondary education has a history of slightly over one hundred years.

Regrettably, at first Estonian-medium secondary education was highly limited; it was available only at private schools. General Estonian-medium secondary education began in 1918 after Estonia gained independence. It was a pivotal event that permitted to develop the Estonian-medium educational system up to the highest level. The groundwork was laid on 1 December 1919 – 287 years after its foundation the University of Tartu (1632) began work as an Estonian-medium national university. At first there was a severe shortage of teaching staff who were invited from abroad; also the scientific terminology in Estonian had to be developed. Motivated work during two decades resulted in the Estonian-medium university education and the foundation of an academy of sciences. Since then Estonian has endured as a language of university education and science. Similarly to other national universities, globalization poses a challenge to Estonian-medium higher education. In order to neutralize possible threats, a national strategy for the development of the Estonian language has been worked out.

Up to the end of the 20th century Estonian-medium education was mostly intended for Estonians themselves. Over centuries relatively few people have learned Estonian as a foreign language – foreign pastors needed it, and there has been a small number of Estophiles. However, the situation changed dramatically after Estonia regained its independence in 1992. Command of Estonian as a state language became a requirement to the Russian-speaking community in Estonia, which makes up about one third of the population of Estonia. For this reason, the past decades have witnessed a rapid development in the methods of teaching Estonian as a second language; language immersion has become hugely popular. At the same time the Estonian state has extended opportunities to study the Estonian language abroad – at present lecturers of Estonian work at 23 foreign universities.

Additional reading

Lembit Andresen, *Eesti kooli ajalugu: algusest kuni 1940. aastani*. Tallinn 2003.
'History of Estonian schools: from the beginning to 1940'

The poster was prepared by the Mother Tongue Society, Estonian Literary Museum, Ministry of Education and Research.
Text by Martin Ehala. Designed by Margus Nõmm; Multimedia Centre of the University of Tartu 2008.



Aleksanderkool
'Alexander's school'
at Põltsamaa



Title page of the
Estonian-language primer
by B. G. Forselius, 1694



1914 Class of the
Girls' Gymnasium
of the Estonian Youth
Education Society



Fr. R. Faehlmann,
an influential
lecturer in Estonian



Estonian girls among
the graduates of Tartu
Pushkin Gymnasium,
the first class of graduates



A class of Swedish
at Vormsi School.
P. Voolaid 2007