

AN ESTONIAN (L2) ONLINE COURSE FOR UNIVERSITY APPLICANTS: RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The rationale for establishing the course for university applicants in Estonian as a second language lies in the Estonia's ethnolinguistic composition and the particularities of its education system. Around 10% of new entrants to the University of Tartu come from upper secondary schools with Estonian-Russian bilingual instruction, having studied Estonian as a second language. This background does not always provide sufficient proficiency to manage university studies, where the curricula are delivered in Estonian. Successful participation in academic communication requires exposure to input across a range of registers. The e-course is designed to help secondary school graduates strengthen their Estonian language competence for academic purposes. The C1-level course is organised around the University of Tartu's four disciplinary domains (Social Sciences; Arts and Humanities; Medicine; Science and Technology). The modules are discipline-specific, with thematic content supported by authentic materials. Instruction takes place via Moodle. The course has been offered in 2024 and 2025 (3 ECTS; with 205 and 165 participants, respectively). The paper aims to outline the rationale and methodological principles of course design, as well as to evaluate initial experiences and identify areas for further development, drawing on feedback from both students and teachers. The course serves as an applied model for facilitating the transition from secondary to higher education for students whose mother tongue differs from the university's language of instruction. The model is also adaptable in other countries where a gap exists between the language of instruction and students' first language.

Keywords: *e-learning, CALL, course design, Estonian as a second language.*

1. Introduction

The need to develop a specialised Estonian language course for prospective students entering the University of Tartu arises from Estonia's national demographic composition and the specific features of its education system. According to the 2021 population census, of Estonia's slightly more than 1.3 million inhabitants, 67% were native speakers of Estonian, while 33% had a different first language, the majority being Russian speakers (Statistics Estonia). In general education schools, Estonian is taught both as a first and as a second language. At the time of writing this article, the expected proficiency level in Estonian as a second language for upper secondary school graduates, according to the national curriculum, is B2 (satisfactory level B2.1, good level B2.2, very good level B2.2–C1) (Riigi Teataja), and the national examination in Estonian as a second language taken at the end of upper secondary education is aligned with the B2 level (Haridus- ja Noorteamet). Admission to Estonian-medium degree programmes at the University of Tartu likewise requires at least B2-level proficiency in Estonian (Tartu Ülikool). According to the Common European Framework (2020), a B2-level learner is able, for example, to follow lectures, write summaries, and mediate information; however, more demanding academic language practices typically require C1-level proficiency.

In 2022, approximately one tenth of the University of Tartu's students had studied Estonian as a second language at upper secondary level, which does not always ensure sufficient language proficiency and register awareness for studying in Estonian-medium programmes (Klaas-Lang et al., 2025). Effective (academic) communication requires learners to possess both knowledge of standard language (lexis and structure) and exposure to varied input across different registers (Schleppegrell, 2024). Previous research has shown that both autonomous and controlled motivation tend to be lower among students studying in a language other than their first language compared to those studying in their mother tongue (Meristo & Jõgi, 2023).

Against this background, we identified a need for an online Estonian language course that would support upper secondary graduates in acquiring the forms of language use required in academic contexts, thereby increasing their linguistic confidence and helping to sustain their motivation as university students. The e-course discussed in this article constitutes a language programme for specific purposes (see Hyland, 2009; Basturkmen, 2025), focusing on the linguistic needs of a particular target group and enabling learners to acquire, already prior to entering university, knowledge of the specialised register required in academic settings. The course thus serves as a bridge between B2-level Estonian acquired at school and the academic Estonian required at university. The course carries 3 ECTS credits and has been delivered twice (in 2024 and 2025), with 205 and 165 participants, respectively.

2. Objectives

The aim of the article is to present the background, structure, and methodological principles underlying the development of the e-course, as well as to analyse the experiences gained to date and identify areas for further development. Special emphasis is placed on the course's contribution to the development of learners' academic Estonian proficiency, along with its practical implications for the design of comparable preparatory courses in other contexts.

3. Methodology

The article first outlines the principles guiding the course design, including the selected e-learning environment, the thematic organisation of the modules, and the types of tasks employed. It then analyses feedback from course participants as well as reflections by the course designers and instructors. The empirical material is based on learner feedback questionnaires and the introspective observations of the course designers/instructors. The study follows the principles of qualitative research.

4. Findings

Course design principles.

As a classical university, the University of Tartu comprises four broad fields, which were used as the basis for structuring the course: humanities and the arts, social sciences, medical sciences, and natural and exact sciences.

The course was delivered in the Moodle environment. The modules were field-specific and included authentic materials, such as videos introducing disciplines and institutes, texts addressing field-specific vocabulary, and related language exercises. Academic language use was developed across all language skills: instructors conducted dedicated sessions to foster speaking proficiency and provided feedback on learners' written assignments. This structure enabled the integration of language learning with an academic context and supported learners' preparation for further studies at university.

The materials were designed to combine different modes of learning: automatically graded exercises enabled independent practice, writing tasks received individual teacher feedback, and speaking skills were developed in small groups via Zoom. Task design was informed by the format of national examinations in Estonian as a second language, based on an analysis of examination papers from the previous five years. This ensured alignment with language requirements and helped prepare learners for exam-type tasks.

Analysis of the instructional process and findings from learner feedback.

At the outset of the course, learners' main expectations were related to improving their grammatical knowledge, often alongside developing vocabulary and writing skills. The need to develop speaking skills was highlighted almost equally. Many learners considered speaking the most difficult skill, yet essential for everyday communication, and it was often linked to listening skills. Writing was primarily associated with final examination tasks and essay writing. Reading was mentioned less frequently. Nevertheless, many learners emphasised the importance of developing all language skills holistically.

Upon completing the course modules, learners emphasised the value of authentic materials and the field-based approach. They noted that these elements contributed to vocabulary expansion and reinforced the connection between language use and real-life contexts. The course was also regarded as instrumental in creating a (simulated) language environment that supports language development in contexts where everyday exposure to the target language is limited.

Learner feedback provided support for the course designers' methodological approach, including the focus on developing all language skills and the scaffolded progression from comprehension tasks (e.g. multiple-choice items) through gap-fill exercises to free writing and speaking tasks. The type of task

influenced learners' experiences, with similar task types receiving similar feedback. Learners tended to prefer tasks with lower cognitive load, such as multiple-choice gap-fill exercises, while also recognising the importance of more complex productive tasks for language development. At the same time, open-ended tasks generated greater insecurity regarding linguistic accuracy. Areas for further development include the need for more detailed grammatical explanations, more opportunities to discuss language-related questions (e.g. via discussion forums), and the systematic presentation of typical errors.

Analysis of the learner cohort revealed considerable variation in prior experience with e-learning. A substantial proportion of learners had not previously taken online courses, while others had mainly used Moodle. This affected their ability to cope with the technical and organisational aspects of the course.

Feedback indicates a need to provide learners with clearer instructions and materials that support their adaptation to using the course. A similar experience was reported by the instructors: following the first implementation, the wording of several task instructions was refined and additional explanations were provided, and further revisions are planned.

It also emerged that learners' disciplinary interests were unevenly distributed. Approximately 40% preferred the medical field, while interest in other fields was more evenly spread, and some learners had not yet decided on their future field of study. This suggests that, although a field-based structure is justified, further development could include additional options, such as field-specific supplementary materials or differentiated tasks tailored to learners' interests.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the results indicate that the course design is effective and supports learners' linguistic and academic development. At the same time, challenges related to learner heterogeneity, differences in e-learning experience, and linguistic self-confidence point to clear directions for further development.

The course model may also be applied in other countries to support the transition from upper secondary education to higher education for learners with different first languages, particularly where there is a gap between the language of instruction at university and learners' mother tongue. This requires maintaining the core components of the model (field-based structure, authenticity and scaffolded progression) while adapting it to the local linguistic, learner, and institutional context.

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