

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ESTONIAN TO ADULTS



KULTUURIMINISTEERIUM



Integratsiooni
Sihtasutus

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MAJA

The courses in Estonian as a second language instituted by the Integration Foundation serve as an example in the field of language studies undertaken by adult learners in the country.

The principles set out in these guidelines are a starting point not only for the Integration Foundation's Estonian Language Centre teachers and those championing integration in its regional centres, but all language school teachers running courses on the basis of procurements organised by the foundation. These principles are likewise recommended to all other agencies and organisations teaching Estonian to adult learners.

We drafted the guidelines based on modern approaches to learning and the best experiences in language-teaching.

WE SUPPORT THE INTERNAL MOTIVATION OF LEARNERS

We are aware of the different forms of motivation and that we ourselves are incapable of giving it to learners. However, we are capable of creating conditions in which they become and remain motivated. For example, we can set them fun, interesting tasks that are within their abilities, we can give them positive feedback and we can contribute to the development of supportive relationships within the group. In order to maintain internal motivation, we enable learners to make connections between the topics of the tasks they are undertaking and their own lives and cultural backgrounds. We get the students looking for interesting materials, since the more involved they are in shaping the learning process themselves, the more motivated they will be to play a part in it. Our teachers are willing and able to adapt what they do to bring it into line with their students' abilities and what the students enjoy doing.

WE DEVISE STUDIES SO THAT LEARNING THE LANGUAGE IS WITHIN EVERYONE'S ABILITIES

In teaching Estonian there is no need to emphasise how complex the language is, because we make it as understandable as we can – and make learning it as achievable as we can – in all of our lessons. We are convinced that everybody is capable of learning a language. We know that students have different ways of learning and learning experiences that affect how easily or otherwise they take to a language. As teachers we are capable of choosing activities that support people with different learning styles. That way we help to ensure that every participant enjoys a positive learning experience and is able to overcome the language barrier. We support and encourage adult learners who have made the choice to study Estonian.

WE FOSTER PEOPLE'S COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Our way of looking at things is that a language isn't the end point of learning, but a means to an end – that end being to reach a level at which you are able to communicate in the language. Adult learners want to be able to express their thoughts, their feelings and their wishes and to make a connection with other people. They want to achieve their communication goals and get on with the people they are speaking to in the process. Good language skills help adult learners establish a communication network, improve their prospects on the labour market and give them the chance to play an active role in social and cultural life.

WE ARE EQUAL PARTNERS TO OUR STUDENTS

Every adult learner is unique in terms of what they know, what they are capable of and what they have experienced in life. Students have different interests, which teachers can and should recognise and integrate into the learning process. Good teachers offer adult learners professional assistance and guidance. They do not control or criticise students. We treat adult learners with tact and respect and work on the assumption that they are aware of their own needs.

WE TEACH IN ESTONIAN

Students want to hear, see and experience the language they are learning as much as possible. Estonian lessons and activities and events designed to support learning represent a safe and inspiring opportunity to immerse yourself in a living language environment. As teachers, we are able to adapt our use of language according to the level at which our students speak and understand Estonian. In groups made up of students from different linguistic backgrounds, using Estonian at all times is the best option. Translating from one language to another is time-consuming and strands the students in a safe zone that slams the brakes on their progress.

WE TEACH THE LANGUAGE LEVEL BY LEVEL

We organise Estonian studies on the basis of the levels described in the European language studies framework document. We select topics and tasks that are within the students' abilities, that are appropriate to their level, that will contribute to their development and that will be useful to them in their day-to-day lives. We inform learners that we are not teaching and that they are not studying with an exam in mind, but focussing on the steady improvement of their language skills.

WE TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE DIFFERENT PACES AT WHICH PEOPLE LEARN

We help students set goals for themselves in language-learning. We explain to them that it takes, on average, two years to become an independent user of a language and that it takes longer to move from one level to the next in language studies the further you progress. We explain that everyone is different and that progress can be accelerated with regular learning activities undertaken independently, including alongside taking courses. We also allow students to move forward slowly, taking into account that fast-paced, active development is not for everyone.

WE MAKE LEARNING FUN

We utilise communicative teaching methods and modern approaches to learning. We create conditions in the classroom that allow students, as often as possible, to put their language skills to the test and to improve them. We make the most of pair and group work so as to give students the chance to speak. We integrate grammar-based tasks into communication tasks. As teachers, we initiate tasks and then monitor their progress without intervening unnecessarily, but providing any help that is needed. We plan our time so that students are given as much free rein as possible to play with the language and learn from one another. We take into account that warm-up exercises are needed before launching into communication tasks. We use a wide range of teaching materials and resources, adapting them to each specific group. We bring humour into our lessons wherever appropriate.

WE LET STUDENTS MAKE MISTAKES AND LEARN FROM THEM

We support learners in their attempts to express themselves and draw attention to errors as tactfully as possible. That way the learners' self-confidence is not impacted and they remain willing to speak. We choose which mistakes to correct, doing so indirectly and in a supportive manner. We generate a safe environment within the group that takes a certain level of insecurity among the students into account, showing them that it is okay to make mistakes. The better the students and teacher feel as participants in the learning process, the more effective its results will be. At the start of the learning process we agree with the students on shared goals and rules to abide by. We follow these rules ourselves and monitor the students to ensure that they do as well.

WE TAKE FACTORS THAT AFFECT LEARNING INTO CONSIDERATION

A good mood is catching! We show the learners that teaching them Estonian and interacting with them is something we enjoy. We respond warmly to what they say and foster meaningful dialogue. We are positive and happy and take an interest in our students. We also monitor their moods and, where necessary, do whatever we can to prevent or resolve conflicts. We underscore how effective learning in a group is in acquiring language skills: that way, communicating with fellow students personalises the process and makes it more interesting. The learners become aware of one another's goals, where they are doing well and what they are struggling with, and can support one another. We nip negativity and anxiety in the bud, in our students and in ourselves, focussing on little victories and happy moments.

WE ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO STUDY INDEPENDENTLY

Estonian is accessible everywhere. We encourage learners, based on their interests and language levels, to read topical texts, listen to songs and podcasts and dive into Estonian-language media. We prompt them to use their Estonian in everyday communication. We also make use of a wide variety of tasks and activities in lessons based on modern approaches to learning. We show learners how they can study the language on their own and introduce them to (e-)teaching materials, resources and environments designed for that very purpose.

WE INTERTWINE LANGUAGE-LEARNING AND CULTURE

Estonian culture goes beyond its literature, cinema, theatre, museums and folk traditions to take in everyday life in the country, our customs and what it is that makes us who we are. In showcasing our culture, we start with simpler aspects that the students will understand before moving onto deeper and more complex topics. We integrate cultural quirks that set Estonia apart into language lessons in a fun and appropriate way. We go on excursions with our students during our time together to visit cultural sites and attend significant events. In addition to promoting Estonian culture, we consider the identities of our students to be just as important and valuable. We listen to their stories about their mother tongues and cultures, thereby enriching the learning process.

WE EMBOLDEN STUDENTS TO USE THEIR ESTONIAN

It is perfectly normal for students to lack the confidence to communicate and also to lack opportunities to speak Estonian. From the outset, we encourage learners to make the most of other language-learning formats as well: tandem studies, language clubs

and cafés, film and discussion nights and the programmes offered by cultural institutions and other organisations. The more diverse the opportunities that students have to practise their Estonian, the more likely they are to achieve their language-learning goals.

WE SET AN EXAMPLE BY BEING LIFE-LONG LEARNERS OURSELVES

We work to improve ourselves by learning new things, taking courses and putting ourselves to the test in new situations. We share our learning experiences with our students and instil in them the belief that learning is a wonderful thing. We talk with our colleagues about our triumphs and the difficulties we have faced, amassing success stories and useful lessons and sharing them within the network of Estonian language teachers. By learning from one another's experiences, we can make the field of language studies more visible and more inviting to learners.

Drafting the best practice guidelines was a cooperative effort involving the Integration Foundation, its Estonian Language Houses in Tallinn and Narva, their advisory committees and the Ministry of Culture.

The guidelines have been approved by the Advisory Committee on the National Language.