

Complexity in parental choice of language of instruction: The case of Russian speakers in Estonia

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Abstract

The research corpus tends to lack research into factors affecting the choices of parents of language minority students in educational systems. While linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the choice are significant, it is fundamental to examine beyond them. This paper presents a suggestion for a holistic model of a parental school language choice intended to explain relevant factors in the choice. The paper tries to answer questions related to the influence of contextual, sociolinguistic, and school choice factors together with parental beliefs of second language acquisition on parents' choice of language of instruction.

No empirical data was collected for this investigation; instead, the paper is based on a review of international research as well as research and observation on choice of language of instruction in Estonia among Russian speakers. This paper integrates research from several research domains and proposes that parental choice of school language is a complex phenomenon that needs to be examined holistically, paying attention to contextual, sociolinguistic and school choice factors, and parental beliefs on second-language acquisition. This investigation is expected to help scholars design further research related to choice of language of instruction and inform policymakers as they plan language policies in education.

Keywords: Choice of language of instruction, Mother tongue education, Bilingual education, Language policy, School choice

Introduction

The research corpus on second language acquisition is large and growing, but the existing research is performed in limited contexts and tends to lack in-depth study into factors affecting the choices of parents of language minority students in educational systems. Much of the research on parental motivation for choice is limited to a bilingual context in the USA (Parkes 2008). While there is recent research on parental factors, such as motivation to choose a non-default language option (Parkes 2008; Pugliese 2010; Whiting and Feinauer 2011), there is no attempt to form a comprehensive model of factors influencing parental choices, for example, ignoring society-related aspects of the choice. Whiting and Feinauer (2011, 647) argue that to understand parental choice of school language, it is "imperative" to examine beyond linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This paper presents considerations for a holistic model of parental choice of language of instruction, intended to help explain relevant factors of the choice. It is based on a review of international research, integrating research from several research domains, as well as research and observation on choice of language of instruction in Estonia.

Choice of school language of instruction for children in minority families is a complex phenomenon with many intervening factors. It needs to be examined holistically, with special attention to contextual factors, sociolinguistic factors, general school-choice factors, and parental beliefs on second-language acquisition and the role of the first language in a child's education. This investigation may help scholars design further research related to language choice in education while at the same time informing policymakers as they plan language policies in education.

The investigation of Russian-speaking families in Estonia provides an excellent laboratory to study the language choice. Where, for example, in the US language-related policies and educational arrangements may take decades to develop, the remedies and the results of language policies in a country such as Estonia are relatively immediate. More importantly, the Russian-speaking parents in Estonia have relative freedom as a policy matter to choose their children's language of instruction, which allows the researcher to study the choice when including a mother tongue option. Additionally, the contextual changes regarding the Russian speakers in Estonia enable the researcher to examine the impact of such changes on school language choice.

Historical Background of Russian Speakers in Estonia

Estonia, which gained independence in 1918, experienced dramatic changes during World War II and the decades following the war. The country was occupied first by the Soviet Union and then by Nazi Germany and then again by the Soviet Union. Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union from 1944 to 1991. The annexation led to massive Russian immigration. The proportion of ethnic Estonians in the country declined from 88 percent to 62 percent between the beginning of the war and 1989 (Kirch 1999).

Concurrently during the Soviet era Russian became a largely dominant language in Estonian society, while the Estonian language became a recognized minority language (M. Rannut 1991). A Russian-language school network was established to serve Russian-speaking children, while a parallel school system served the Estonian speakers (Estonian Ministry of Education 1997). With the political changes in Eastern Europe, Estonia regained its independence in 1991, which had a significant influence on the Russian speakers in the country. The independence reversed the prior language policies. Estonian Russian bilingualism was legally established in 1989 (M. Rannut 2001). A new language law in 1995 removed the principle of bilingualism and made Russian a foreign language (Ozolins 2000) lowering its status and making Estonian the state language.

School Choice Options for Russian Speakers in Estonia

Currently Russian-speaking families in Estonia have three options regarding their children's language of instruction. The default option is Russian-language schools. Interestingly, test results indicate that the educational achievement of Russian students is lower than that of Estonian students, even in their former subject matter strengths of Russian-language schools, math and science (Kitsing 2008). About 60 percent of Russian-speaking children attend Russian-language schools at all grade levels. These schools have gradually become bilingual with 2-3 subjects taught in Estonian (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2010; M. Rannut 2008). In addition, official educational decisions have focused on increased and more efficient Estonian language teaching in Russian-speaking schools. The law of Basic and Secondary Education was supposed to shift the language of instruction from Russian to Estonian in Russian-language schools at the secondary level by 2007 (M. Rannut 2001); however, the shift has been delayed in many municipalities because of the lack of teachers with sufficient

Estonian language proficiency (Hogan-Brun et al. 2009). In basic education (K-9), mother tongue education is guaranteed for Russian-speaking children (Kemppainen and Ferrin 2002).

The quality of Estonian teaching, however, varies in these Russian schools, and some non-Estonian parents opt for the second option, Estonian-language schools, to ensure second language acquisition for their children. Educational administrators encourage Russian parents who plan sending their children to Estonian-speaking schools to have the children attend Estonian-speaking preschools as a preparation for a second language environment. About 12 percent of Russian students attend Estonian-language schools, where Estonian is the medium of instruction.

The third option is immersion schools. There are circa 30 Estonian language immersion schools, including late immersion schools (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2010). These immersion schools can be called bilingual schools: instruction in these schools utilizes child's first and second languages, i.e., Russian and Estonian.

Attaining a functional Estonian proficiency is critically important for Russian students; however, roughly half of Russian-speaking secondary school graduates reach the medium level of proficiency in Estonian measured by the common European framework of language competence (Council of Europe 2012). Thus, half of Russian-speaking students are not prepared to continue education in Estonia or to compete for the best jobs in there.

Methodology

No empirical data was collected for this investigation; instead the investigation is theoretical, aiming at identifying potential factors impacting choice of language of instruction. The research is based on a review of international research in several research domains and research and observations in Estonia. This paper combines research from different research domains: contextual backgrounds, research from sociolinguistic aspects of school language choice, general and language-related school choice theories, and parental beliefs of second language acquisition. The research is exploratory in nature and provides a suggestion for factors that can be included in a holistic model on choice of language of instruction.

The research questions

The paper investigates factors impacting parental choice of school language of language minority students and is seeking to answer the following questions:

- 1) how contextual factors influence the choice of language of instruction?;
- 2) how sociolinguistic factors influence the choice of language of instruction?;
- 3) how school-related factors influence the choice of language of instruction?; and
- 4) how parental beliefs of second language acquisition influence the choice of language of instruction?

The investigation suggests several hypothetical factors that may be related to choice of language of instruction. It is hypothesized that contextual factors, such as political, demographic, and social contexts impact the choices parents make regarding their children's school language. In addition, it is hypothesized that sociolinguistic factors, such as social dominance, integration strategies, enclosure, minority language status, parental second language proficiency, ethnic background, attitudes toward the first language and the second language, and attitude towards the native culture and the majority culture, impact the choice of language of instruction (Kemppainen et al. 2004; Kemppainen et al. 2008; Schumann 1978, 1986). It is hypothesized that factors related to general school choice, such as parental socioeconomic status and educational

attainments, may be associated with choice of language of instruction (Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs 2010; Reay and Lucey 2000; Parkes 2008). Also, parental beliefs of second language learning are expected to be associated with choice of language of instruction (Lee 1999; Tuomela 2001). This research combines earlier suggestive research in sociolinguistics, school choice and parental views of second language learning in one model, whereas there exists no clear body of literature on the contextual factors impacting the choice of language of instruction. However, recent research on second language acquisition presents that research on language learners' motivation should take into account the "complex dynamic social realities" and that second language acquisition theory should be contextually grounded (Ushioda 2011, 18).

Contextual Factors in Choice of Language of Instruction

The contextual factors of Russian speakers in Estonia may have a direct or indirect impact on choice of language of instruction. The discussion will focus on political, demographic, and social context of Russian speakers in Estonia. The contextual level here refers to structures and policies in society. Although Russian-speakers are a language minority group—as defined by Capotorti (1979)—they are a unique minority population because of their former political power, size, socioeconomic and cultural strength and the strong informal status of the Russian language.

Political context

The political context examines the political power, minority language rights, and educational policies of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. During the Soviet era, Russians were an elite and a politically and culturally powerful group (Kirch et. al. 1997; Smith 1998); however, since Estonia's independence, the influence of the Russian political elite has diminished. Although Russian speakers have their own political parties in Estonia (Issakov 1999), they are marginal and cannot achieve an electable threshold. Thus, the political shift has had a huge impact on the status of the Russian speakers in Estonian society.

After independence, most Russian-speakers were declared non-citizens by Estonian law. Attaining the citizenship requires five years of residence as well as successful passing of the Estonian language test (M. Rannut 2001). Since the early years of independence, the number of Estonian citizens has risen constantly. Currently 95,600 of the non-Estonian population (nearly all of whom are Russian speakers) have established Estonian citizenship, 72,800 have Russian citizenship and 78,800 remain undefined. A few thousand are citizens of other states (ES Eesti Statistika 2009a).

Similarly, the status of the Russian language has changed with the new language laws, encouraging Estonian learning. As described above, Russian in Estonia became a foreign language officially (Ozolins 2000). However, the school system provides Russian-speaking students with education in their mother tongue—although Russian-speaking high schools are shifting to instruction in the Estonian language, as described above. In addition, much of the everyday life in Estonia still functions in Estonian and Russian, allowing services in the first language for Russian speakers. Despite these facts, the share of Russian-speakers with at least some level of Estonian language knowledge has significantly increased from 14 percent in 1988 to 60 percent in 2009 (ES Eesti Statistika 2009a). The current political context suggests choices towards the Estonian language, including choice of school language.

Demographic context

The demographic context refers to the size and residential space of the Russians in Estonia. The Russians are a large language minority, but the density of the Russian population varies significantly across Estonia. Russian speakers form a large segment of Estonia's population: about 29 percent, including those Ukrainians and Belorussians whose mother tongue is Russian (Estonia.eu 2013).

This large population has created language enclaves through their sheer numbers. Some areas of concentration are nearly all Russian speaking. In such areas the linguistic environment does not create an urgent need to utilize Estonian in daily interaction or in the labor market communication. With significant differences of Russian speakers' density in Estonian towns (e.g., Narva 96 percent, Tallinn 50 percent, Tartu 16 percent), it is assumed that language choices will be distinguishable between towns and regions. The large enclaves, for example, in Narva may create two choice scenarios: a low interest in Estonian because of the lack of need to use the Estonian language or an increased interest because of the lack of natural opportunities to acquire Estonian.

Social context

The social context refers to the social class, labor market opportunities, and culture resources. The political and linguistic shifts have impacted the Russians' social standing in Estonian society. Many Russians have had to adjust to a lower socioeconomic status because of the lack of language skills (M. Rannut, 2008). Russians comprise more low socioeconomic status individuals and families and are, for example, three times less likely to be company directors than the Estonians. The unemployment rate is significantly higher among Russian-speakers with low educational attainment compared to the Estonians, although among non-Estonians with tertiary education the unemployment rate is lower than that of the Estonians (ES Eesti Statistika 2009b). Overall, the educational attainment of Russian-speakers parallels the educational attainment of Estonian-speakers, but with a heavier focus on vocational education (Pavelson 2000).

An important source of cultural support for Russian-speakers in Estonia is the media. Russian language TV programs are broadcast through one state-owned station (ETV2) and through some private channels, and there is one state-supported Russian-language radio station (Radio4). The city of Tallinn funds a free Russian-language newspaper. Access to Russian culture is also available through TV channels originating from Russia. Despite the availability of Russian language media and cultural and commercial services in Estonia, the Russian speakers are expected to choose Estonian language to an increasing degree to attain an appropriate standard of living due to the social reasons mentioned above.

The political, demographic, and social contexts of Russian-speakers as a formerly privileged group in Estonia, now dealing with major change in status, provide a unique context that may help explain sociolinguistic factors that have an impact on parental choice of language of instruction. Table 1 summarizes contextual factors associated with parental choice of language of instruction.

Table 1. Contextual factors explaining choice of language of instruction

Contextual factors explaining choice of language of instruction
Political context: political power; minority language rights; education policies
Demographic context: size of minority population; residential space
Social context: social class; labor market opportunities; culture resources

Sociolinguistic Factors in Choice of Language of Instruction

The sociolinguistic factors in this paper refer to interaction and relations between the majority population and the language minority and the language behavior of the minority. The discussion on sociolinguistic factors includes firstly social dominance, integration strategies, and enclosure—which are called acculturation factors (Schumann 1978, 1986). Additional sociolinguistic factors that will be discussed are second language status, second language proficiency, ethnic background, and language and culture attitudes.

Social dominance, integration strategies, and enclosure

Schumann's (1978, 1986) classic acculturation model, which explains adult immigrants' second language learning, may have applications to parental choice of language of instruction and is borrowed to help explain the choice. The first factor of the model is social dominance, describing the degree to which one of the groups is inferior, equal or superior politically, culturally, technically or economically (Schumann 1978, 1986). Although the Russians might have perceived themselves as superior in the Soviet era, according to Kemppainen et al. (2008), over 80 percent of the Russians in Estonia now think that they are considered inferior by Estonians.

Soviet era in Estonia displayed classic features of Russian social dominance (M. Rannut 1991). Currently the Russians have fallen into a subordinate position in Estonian society. This development may lead to different reactions and choices as suggested in research by Kemppainen et al. (2004) with language and culture orientations playing a pivotal role in the choice. The perceived linguistic threat may enhance the use of the mother tongue. For example, Russian-speaking parents identified as having Russian orientation tend to choose Russian language education, whereas the ones identified as having Estonian orientation tend to choose bilingual or Estonian language education (Kemppainen et al. 2004).

The second factor of Schumann's acculturation model describes the degree of integration between the ethnic groups. It comprises of assimilation, preservation, and adaptation, which are facilitating factors in second-language acquisition. However, a full assimilation is not essential; some degree of adaptation in intergroup contact is needed to create a favorable context for second language acquisition (Schumann 1978, 1986). The Russian-speakers' integration could be described as adaptation as evidenced by instrumental rationales for choosing an Estonian language: employment and higher education opportunities (Vihalemm 1998). The increasing integration into Estonian society is expected to further grow the interest in the second language education.

The third factor of acculturation is enclosure, or isolation; it describes the degree of shared institutions such as churches, schools, clubs, recreational facilities, crafts, and professions (Schumann 1978, 1986). When enclosure is low, second-language acquisition may be facilitated, but conversely when high, the opportunities to acquire and use the second language are lowered. Enclosure between Russians and Estonian speakers continues to be high, as evidenced by isolation in housing areas and work places, practice of cultural habits, and choice of marriage partners (M. Rannut 2004). This, however, appears to be changing with younger Russian individuals' higher level of bilingualism and the increase in interchange taking place through schools and other demographic factors (e.g., lack of own ethnic group in the region). The existing enclosure between the Russians and Estonians would predict a low interest towards the choice of Estonian language. However, decreasing enclosure among the younger generation predicts desire for Estonian learning and increased choice of Estonian as a language of instruction among Russian-speaking parents in the future.

Minority language status, second language proficiency, and ethnic background

Besides the acculturation factors, the status of the minority (or first) language vis-à-vis the majority (second) language plays a critical role in second language acquisition. The high status of a second language may enhance second language acquisition, whereas the high status of the first language may hinder acquiring the language (Ager 2001; Schumann 1978, 1986). During the Soviet era, Russian was the dominant language in Estonia, and Russians perceived Russian as having the higher status (M. Rannut 1999)– which may have impeded the learning of Estonian by Russian speakers (M. Rannut and Ü. Rannut 1995). Interestingly, similarly Estonians considered their own language as having the higher status (M. Rannut 1999). The 1995 legislation that changed the status of Russian to that of a foreign language (Ozolins 2000) may have influenced perceptions of the Russian language status. Current observations in Estonia suggest that Russian speakers in mostly Estonian-speaking areas are beginning to perceive Estonian as the highest status language (M. Rannut 2008). The lowered status of the Russian language is expected to impact the parental choices for school language, favoring the Estonian language.

Research by Kemppainen et al (2008) indicates that second language proficiency is associated with language choices parents make and with their preferences of language of instruction. Parents with any level of Estonian fluency are two and half times more likely to choose Estonian schools than parents with no fluency in the Estonian language. The share of non-Estonians who speak Estonian has increased, as indicated earlier (ES Eesti Statistika 2009a), which is predicted to increase the choice of Estonian-language schools.

According to the research by Kemppainen et al. (2008), ethnic background, which may vary, contributes to school language choice. Russian-speaking parents with at least 50 percent Estonian background are five and half times more likely to choose Estonian schools. Even those with 25 percent Estonian background are four times more likely to choose Estonian schools over Russian schools as parents without Estonian background. Along the same lines, recent research by Whiting and Feinauer (2011) on a two-way immersion program indicates that a large percentage (70 percent) of the Anglo-parents in the Spanish-English program are in fact Hispanic/Latino by ethnicity, which may suggest a relationship between the school language choice and ethnicity. Also Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs's (2010) research suggest that ethnicity is a factor in school choice. Their research, however, found ethnocentric and segregative tendencies among majority

parents in making school choices. The results indicate that the ethnic backgrounds of individuals within a minority group may influence choice of language of instruction.

Language and culture attitudes

Attitudinal factors in school language choice include attitudes toward the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). On one hand, the perceived value of the first language in society plays a role in language choice. As earlier described, the Russians in Estonia used to value the Russian language higher than Estonian, which favored the Russian language (M. Rannut and Ü. Rannut 1995). In contrast, Kemppainen et al. (2008) report that in later years nearly half of the Russians in Estonia started to perceive the Russian language at a low level of importance for the future of Estonia. Such changes in the perceptions are expected to change parental language behavior and language choices in other contexts as well.

On the other hand, valuing the second language is associated with choice of education in the second language. Tuomela's (2001) research in Sweden suggests that Finnish parents who have chosen Swedish as the school language value Swedish as the most important language. A study by Kemppainen et al. (2008) indicates that valuing the second language is the most important factor in parental choice of language of instruction. The likelihood of choosing an Estonian school over a Russian school is nine times higher for parents who value the Estonian language highly or very highly in comparison to those who value it only slightly or not at all. Valuing the second language is also related to the choice of a bilingual program. Thus, it appears that to be motivated to learn or to have one's children learn a second language, one has to perceive the language as a desirable or as a necessary competence.

In addition, attitudes toward the majority and native cultures may explain school language choices. While Hoffmann (1993) believes that willingness to identify with second language speakers may result in better second language learning, in reverse, valuing one's own culture correlates with language behavior. According to research performed in Estonia (Kemppainen et al. 2008), parents who find Russian culture maintenance very important are three times more likely to choose a Russian school over an Estonian school than parents who do not regard it as such. Similarly, Pugliese (2010) reports cultural identity maintenance as one of the main reasons in the choice of a bilingual program. Also, according to Whiting and Feinauer (2011), preserving heritage was one of the major parental rationales in the choice of a two-way immersion program. In short, research strongly suggests cultural maintenance as one of the major reasons for parental school language choice.

In summary, the sociolinguistic elements that are considered in a model of parental choice of language of instruction include social dominance, integration strategies, enclosure, minority language status, level of second language proficiency, ethnic background, attitudes toward the first language and the second language, and attitude towards the native culture and the majority culture. Table 2 describes sociolinguistic factors that are incorporated in the model to explain the choice of language of instruction.

Table 2. Sociolinguistic factors explaining choice of language of instruction

Sociolinguistic factors in choice of language of instruction
Social dominance: inferiority, equality, superiority
Integration strategy: assimilation, preservation, adaptation
Enclosure: shared social institutions
Minority language status
Second language proficiency
Ethnic background
Attitudes toward the first language (L1) and the second language (L2)
Attitudes toward the native culture and the majority culture

When making language of instruction choices, Russian parents in Estonia usually choose a school site and its culture and reputation simultaneously. Therefore, it is relevant to explore school choice literature generally and in the context of choice of language of instruction to understand factors affecting parents' ability and motivation to choose among differing school options, as opposed to simply choosing the default school option.

School Choice Factors

Elements associated with general school choice are also associated with choice of language of instruction. These include factors, such as family's socioeconomic status and school-related factors.

Family's socioeconomic status

International school choice literature indicates an association between family's socioeconomic status and general school choice (without a specific choice of language of instruction). American and British based studies suggest that parents who opt for alternative educational forms tend to have higher socioeconomic backgrounds, be better educated, and have higher expectations concerning their children's education than parents not choosing educational alternatives (e.g., Powers and Cookson 1999; Smrekar and Goldring 1999; Reay and Lucey 2000). For example, families choosing magnet schools were found to have higher incomes and education levels than families not choosing alternative programs (Smrekar and Goldring 1999). Research by Ladd, Fiske and Ruijs (2010) describes socioeconomic division as a result of school choice in the Netherlands. Although parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds have incentives for looking for best school options, economic cost associated with the choice, such as transportation, may limit the options of the disadvantaged families.

In addition, research by Whiting and Feinauer (2011) on parental motivation for school language choice suggests that the choice mechanism may be complex, making a

distinction between socioeconomic backgrounds regarding the choice rationales. For example, educational experiences and opportunities are more frequently mentioned as reasons for choice by parents with higher educational attainment compared to parents with lower educational levels. Along the same lines, Parkes' (2008) research introduces differing reasons for the choice of a dual language education based on parental educational attainment. Thus, while parental socioeconomic backgrounds explain school choices, they may also explain the variety of choice rationales.

The Russian-speaking parents in Estonia who opt for education in Estonian appear to follow these international school choice patterns. Some researchers suggest that Russian students who study in Estonian-speaking schools tend to come from resourceful families with higher socio-economic backgrounds (Pavelson and Jedomskihh 1998). These families have also adjusted successfully to Estonian society (Pavelson 1998), have sought Estonian citizenship (Kemppainen et al. 2008), and tend to have high aspirations for their children's education and expect their children to complete post-secondary which is offered only in Estonian schools (Kemppainen and Ferrin 2002; Pavelson and Jedomskihh 1998). These parental socioeconomic factors are expected to impact school choices in Estonia as well as in other settings globally.

Parental choice of school language should be studied from a socioeconomic perspective, taking into account financial resources available to the family as well as parental educational attainment. Besides socioeconomic opportunities, factors related to the school itself and its reputation impact the school choice.

School-related factors

Parental rationales for general school choice include non-academic and academic reasons (Smrekar and Goldring 1999; Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs, 2010). The non-academic reasons are varied. They include, for example, school size (Vanourek et al. 1997), and location (Greene, Howell, and Peterson 1997), or even the racial makeup in a school (Goldhaber and Eide 2002; Ladd, Fiske, and Ruijs 2010).

According to some researchers, the major rationale for school choice is that of school quality (Smrekar and Goldring 1999). Parental concerns, particularly those of non-native language speakers, over school quality are well founded. Research by the Pew Hispanic Center in the USA seems to highlight the relationship of resources to the attainment of English Language Learners (ELL's). Fry (2008) noted that ELL's tend to attend public schools that have low standardized test scores as an entire school. They observed that these scores are not artifacts alone of the low achievement of ELL's, but of other major student groups in the school as well. They found that the schools where the majority of ELL's attend tend to have high student-teacher ratios, high enrollments, and most significantly perhaps, high numbers of students in poverty. In Estonia, the quality of education has decreased in Russian-language schools, as indicated by academic results (Kitsing 2008). In addition, the level of Estonian language instruction in the Russian-language schools is not sufficient enough for the students to become bilingual.

Research on school choice in the context of choosing a language suggests similar reasons as in the context of general school choice but presents further rationales for parents' choice: e.g., bilingualism and literacy. Whiting and Feinauer (2011) list reasons that are both language choice specific and related to school choice generally, such as educational experience, future career opportunities, culture and diversity, preservation of heritage, and proximity to school. Other researchers emphasize rationales that are language and culture specific, such as ability to speak, read and write in two languages, possibility to relate to one's heritage, ability to relate to different people and cultures, teachers who speak the family's language, and success in global society (Parkes 2008).

The most important reason for parents to choose a school language is their desire for their children to become bilingual (Parkes 2008; Whiting and Feinauer 2011). In addition, choosing education in the first language may be based on culture and identity maintenance (Craig 1996; Kemppainen et al. 2004; Parkes 2008; Pugliese 2010; Whiting and Feinauer 2011). Also, a perceived lack of child’s readiness to learn in the second language may impact parental choice not to enroll a child in a second language program (Tuomela 2001).

Parental beliefs on second language acquisition

A factor that may impact parental choice of language of instruction is parents’ beliefs of second language acquisition and the role of the first language in a child’s education. Although research on the impact of parental views on language choice is scarce, Shin and Krashen (1998) suggest that immigrant parents in the United States tend to believe that the first language is significant in the second language learning process—which would impact parents’ school language choice—and Lee (1999) confirms this suggestion. Finnish-speaking parents in Sweden with children in bilingual Finnish-Swedish programs think that if children first develop their Finnish language to a high level, it will provide a good foundation for learning Swedish later on (Tuomela 2001).

In contrast, some immigrant parents have been advised that heavy immersion in the target language is the most beneficial method for second language acquisition. For example, in the United States immigrant students may be forbidden to use their first language at school, or their parents may be instructed to use the target second language at home even if they do not speak it well (e.g., Nieto 2000). Parental beliefs regarding the role of mother tongue in second language acquisition are expected to impact the choice of language of instruction. Parental theories of second language acquisition should be taken into account in studying school language choice and need to be investigated further.

Table 3 describes elements of language-of-instruction choice associated with general school choice, socioeconomic factors, and parental beliefs on second language acquisition.

Table 3. School-choice factors explaining choice of language of instruction

School-choice factors in choice of language of instruction
Family’s socioeconomic status
School-related factors
Parental beliefs on second language acquisition

The next section will synthesize the discussed factors describing key elements in parental choice of language of instruction.

Building a Model for Choice of Language of Instruction

The purpose of this article was to discuss some of the main elements in choice of language of instruction. It identified contextual factors related to choice of language of instruction and integrated elements from different disciplines, sociolinguistic

perspectives, general school choice theories, and parental beliefs of second language acquisition. Several of the factors described in the model are intertwined. For example, the contextual factors may impact the sociolinguistic environment: the political context may influence social dominance, the integration strategy, and the language status, while the demographic context may predict the degree of shared institutions or isolation, and the social context may have influence on language and culture attitudes. The article contends that choice of language of instruction is a complex phenomenon with a large set of associated factors.

Social dominance and enclosure together with integrative strategies are suggested to be associated with school choices parents make (Kemppainen et al. 2008; Schumann 1978, 1986). Also, several language and culture related factors are associated with school choice. Parental views of the first and second language status and parental second language proficiency are suggested to impact the school language choice (Kemppainen et al. 2008; Ü. Rannut 2005). In addition, ethnicity may be one of the key factors in the choice of language of instruction (Kemppainen et al. 2008; Whiting & Feinauer 2011). Language and culture attitudes are also expected to impact the choice (Kemppainen et al. 2004; Kemppainen et al. 2008; Tuomela 2001). All these factors can be incorporated in a theoretical model of parental school language choice.

Whether parents make an alternative school choice, other than the default, is dependent on several factors, such as school's academic quality (Smrekar and Goldring 1999). In Estonian context, the academic quality and also the level of Estonian language instruction provided in the Russian-language schools may be defining factors in the future for whether parents opt for Estonian-language schools. If the level of Estonian language instruction improves in Russian schools, the need to send Russian-speaking children to the second language education institutions might decrease.

Parents who opt for school alternatives tend to be better educated and have generally a higher socioeconomic status than parents not making alternative choices (e.g., Powers and Cookson 1999; Smrekar and Goldring 1999; Reay and Lucey 2000). This suggests that besides school quality, family's socioeconomic status might have an impact on language-related school choices.

Parents' beliefs of second language learning are expected to relate to their choices of school language for their children. What parents know and believe about how children learn a second language and what role the first language plays in learning may impact the choice (Tuomela 2001) and should be taken in account when building a model investigating parental choice of language of instruction. The described factors function as push or pull factors, either facilitating or hindering the choice of language of instruction.

Figure 1 summarizes the elements presented in the prior chapters and suggests a model for parental choice of language of instruction.

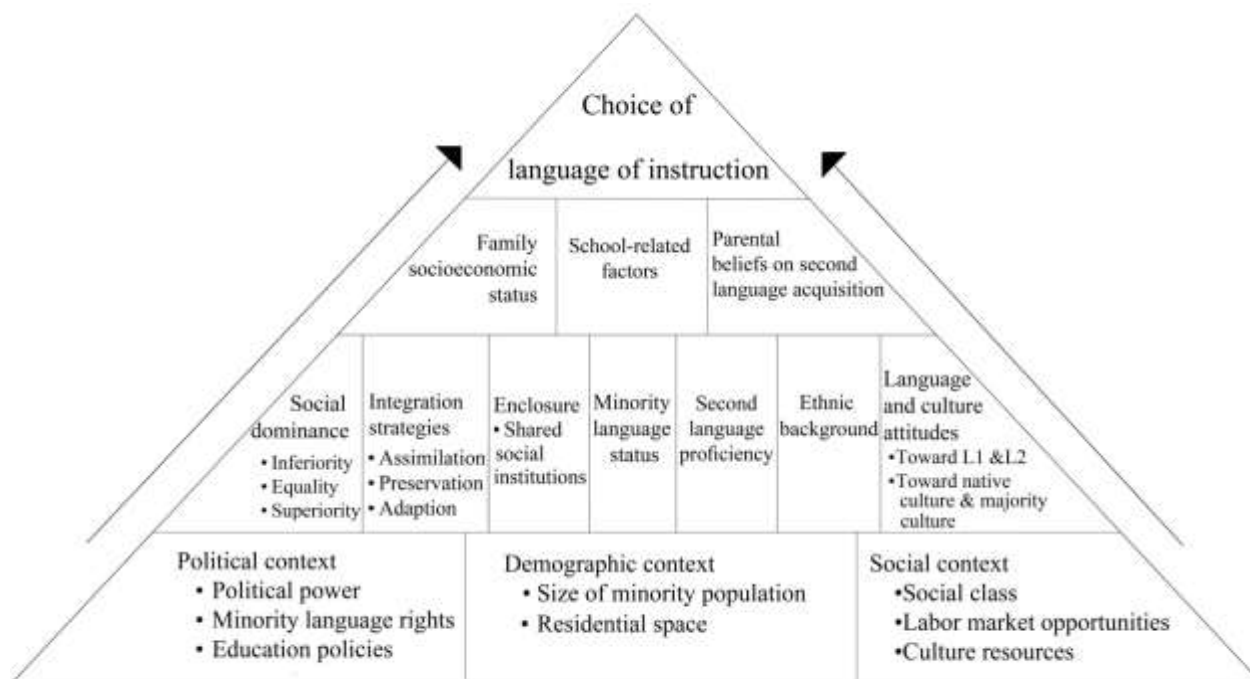


Figure 1. Model for parental choice of language of instruction

Theoretical and Practical Suggestions for a Choice of Language of Instruction

The presented model hypothesizes a situation where families speaking a minority language have some options regarding the school language and where parents are seen as proactive actors in their lives and their children's lives. However, parental choice of language of instruction does not occur in a vacuum and is not necessarily static. Choice of language of instruction has several determinants on the nature of the choice and whether it can occur.

Choice is partially tied to policies, such as language minority rights and language-related laws and policies. For many language minorities, the context creates an environment that suppresses the first language where choice is not possible. Privileged language minorities with some political power and social advantages have more choice options, such as Swedish-speakers in Finland, or to some extent Finnish-speakers in Sweden, and Russian-speakers in Estonia. Although it is difficult to examine their influence, such contextual factors are relevant in comprehending parental choices holistically. Future research designs should identify ways of including contextual factors into the research.

Of the presented sociolinguistic factors, parental second language proficiency and ethnicity are least discussed in prior research. It is important to understand that parents may not feel comfortable choosing education for their children in the second language because of their poor second language proficiency (Kempainen et al. 2008). As for minority families' backgrounds, they do not come from homogenous groups and may represent various ethnic backgrounds (Kempainen et al. 2004; Kempainen et al. 2008; Whiting and Feinauer 2011), and parental ethnic backgrounds seem to make a difference

in school language choices (Kemppainen et al. 2008). Future research should address parental second language proficiency and particularly ethnicity and examine their impact on school language choices.

Minority families often lack access to education in their own language or lack information about the choice options. Also, even when choice options exist, it appears that school choice advantages privileged families. Although it is critical that language choices be provided for families with language minority backgrounds, it is important to know who opts for choices to ensure that the less advantaged families also benefit from choice options. Parents may have economic obstacles that prohibit exercising language choices. Parents might also lack social networks to attain information for making choices, as Parkes (2008) argues that parents may be poorly informed about the language options and program contents.

Similarly parents should be provided with accurate information about the role of the first language in their child's linguistic and academic development. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of parental beliefs regarding second language acquisition. While studies on language minorities suggest that parents understand the importance of mother tongue in the process of learning a second language (Shin and Krashen 1998; Tuomela 2001), some parents may not support the first language education if they believe that submersion in the second language works the best for acquiring the second language. Parental beliefs on second language acquisition and the impact of those beliefs on choice is an under examined area and should receive more research attention.

Also the co-effect of ethnicity and family's socioeconomic position should be examined in the context of school choice. Ethnicity and family socioeconomic status together may determine access to knowledge. Ethnic minorities may have limited access to quality education and particularly access to education in their own language. Equality of choice, or the lack of it, should receive attention by researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners.

To conclude, choice of language of instruction is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon with several intervening and intertwined factors. The presented components of a model are intended to help researchers identify factors in further research on school language choice and policy-makers consider such factors in language-of-instruction planning.

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