

ESTONIAN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN SPEAKING 3RD GRADE STUDENTS

EESTI RAKENDUSLINGVISTIKA ÜHINGU KEVADKONVERENTS 2025

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BACKGROUND

- The study of second language acquisition among students with migration background is a significant area of research, particularly concerning the growing population of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia.
- However, the acquisition of Estonian language in different groups of children and the impact of home language environment to language proficiency has received limited attention.
- Previous research indicates that refugees typically acquire a second language more slowly than other immigrant groups (e.g., Browder 2018; Stolk et al. 2022).



OBJECTIVES

This study aims to assess:

- 1) the level of Estonian language proficiency among Ukrainian refugee students and non-refugee students at the beginning of 3rd grade;
- 1) the extent to which this proficiency is influenced by factors in the students' home language environment, including the timing and nature of their exposure to Estonian.



SAMPLE

3rd grade students:

- 34 Ukrainian refugees from various schools in Tallinn
- 23 children with Russian mother tongue (not refugees)



THE PROCEDURE

- A picture description test (see Kütt-Leedis 2024).
- Parental questionnaire (data on socioeconomic factors).
- For qualitative analysis we measured: vocabulary (richness, division into parts of speech) and using constructions.

CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT SCHOOLS

The study was conducted in 6 schools in 11 different classes.

	Ukrainian children	Russian- speaking children
Language of instruction is Estonian, children with different home languages are together	9	23
Language of instruction is Estonian, children with Ukrainian as their home language study separately from others	23	-

RESULTS 1. CHILDREN'S LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND AT HOME

Ukrainian children relocated to Estonia in 2022.

Home language environment of Ukrainian children:

- 6 mothers and 7 fathers speak only Ukrainian
- 5 mothers and 5 fathers speak only Russian
- 10 mothers and 8 fathers speak Ukrainian and Russian (5 mothers Ukrainian and other)

→ Most homes have both languages present, in 5 homes only Ukrainian, in 5 homes only Russian



RESULTS 2. CHILDREN'S LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

- Non-refugees have lived here since birth (except 2), half attended Estonian-medium kindergarten.

Children have contact with Estonian:

	School	Friends	Relatives	TV/books	Extra-curriculars
Refugees	20h*	1h	1h	2h	1h
Locals	25h*	4h	0h	3h	3h



RESULTS 3. VOCABULARY:

GENERAL OVERVIEW

- Vocabulary of Ukrainian children is **more varied** (longest description 250 words; shortest 6); Russian-speaking peers (resp. 191 and 27 words).
- Average **vocabulary richness** and **diversity** of word forms are higher among Russian-speaking students (R OVIX 68; U 57).
- While the **average number of words** (lemmas) in both groups' texts is similar (70), Russian-speaking students demonstrate a greater variety of vocabulary (R OVR% 90; U 85). Notably, among Ukrainian students, richer texts tend to contain more repetitions of words and forms.



RESULTS 4. VOCABULARY (DIFFERENT SCHOOLS)

Ukrainian

School	Tokens	Types	Word richness	Word variation
6	42,7	29,7	69,5	90%
5	75,7	42,3	56,1	87%
4	18,5	7,5	65,0	82%
3	159,8	66,8	41,8	83%
2	48,5	24,8	60,3	86%

Russian-speaking

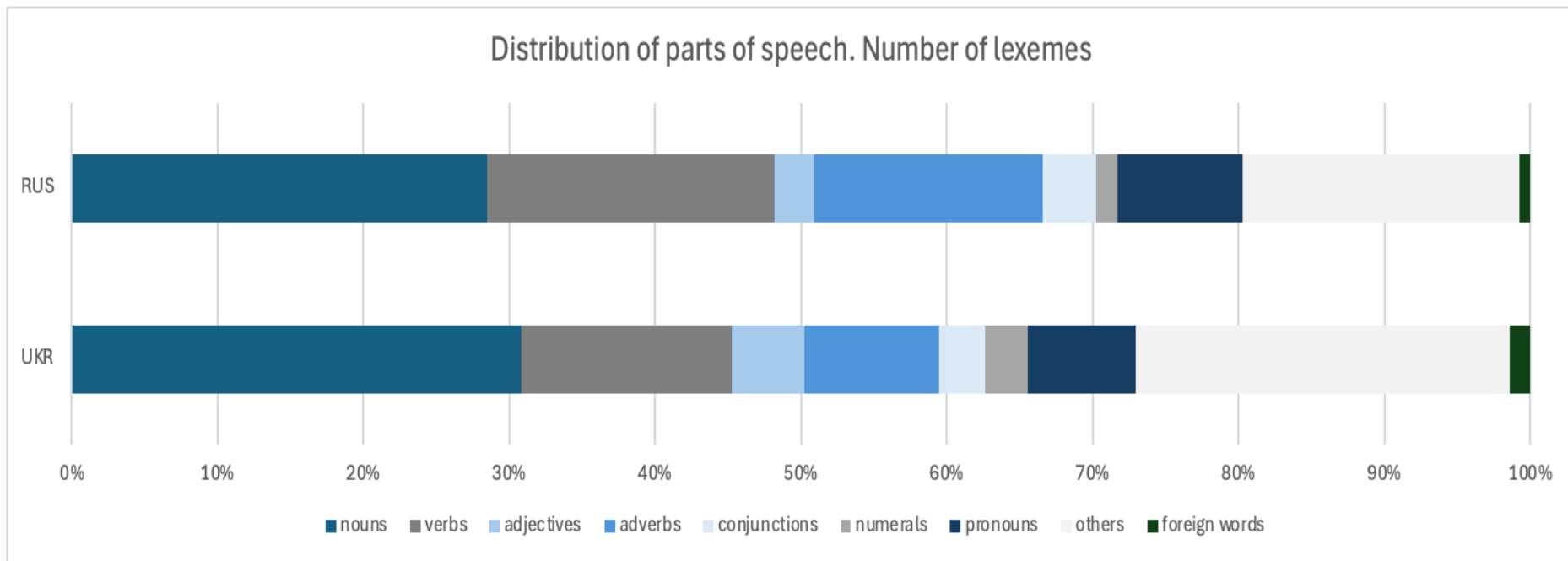
School	Tokens	Types	Word richness	Word variation
6	74,7	46,2	66,9	90%
5	107,6	56,4	58,0	88%
4	49,7	33,0	67,3	90%
1	39,0	29,2	77,2	93%

— Schools 2 and 3:
special classes for
Ukrainians - different
results

— Schools 5 and 6:
3-10 Ukrainians or
Russian-speaking
pupils in class -
different results

— School 1: more than
10 Russian-speaking
pupils in the class

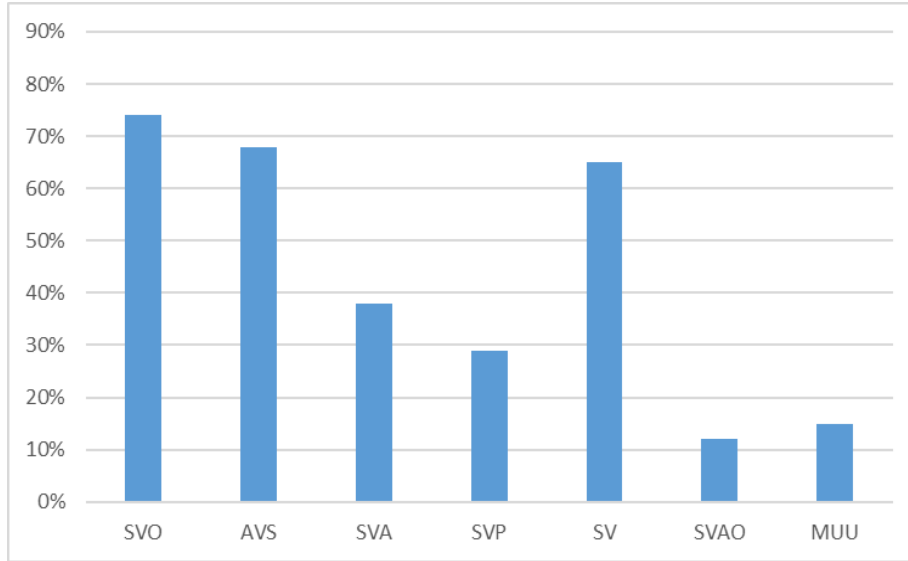
RESULTS 5. VOCABULARY. PARTS OF SPEECH



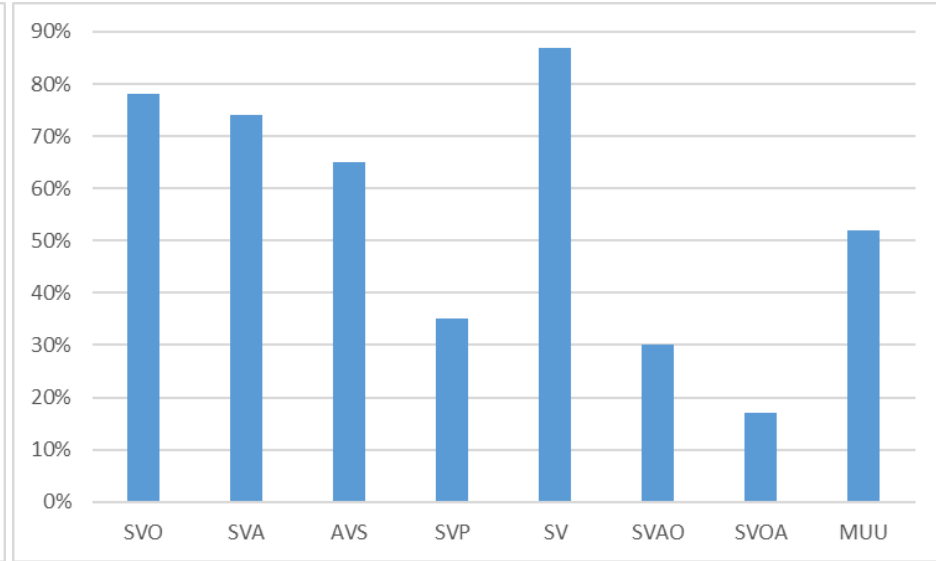
RESULTS 6. CONSTRUCTIONS

Sentence

UKRAINIAN



RUSSIAN

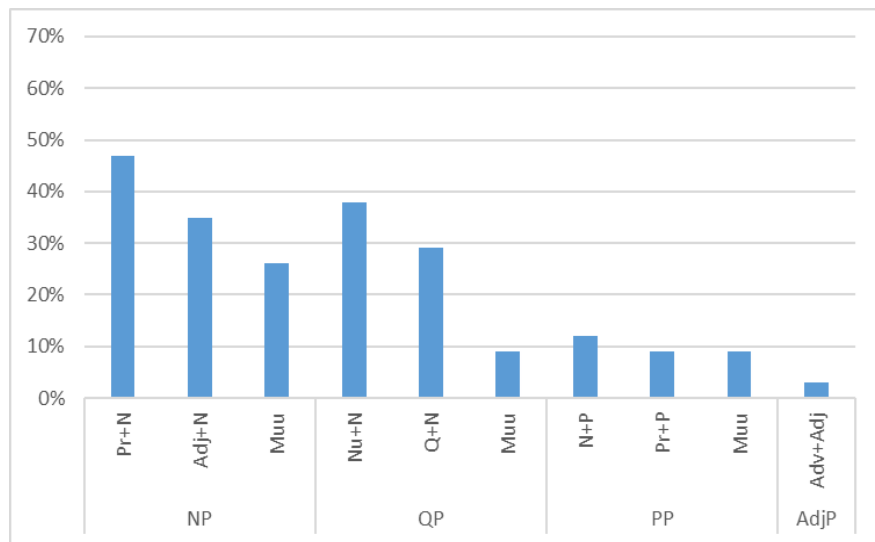


TALLINNA ÜLIKOOL

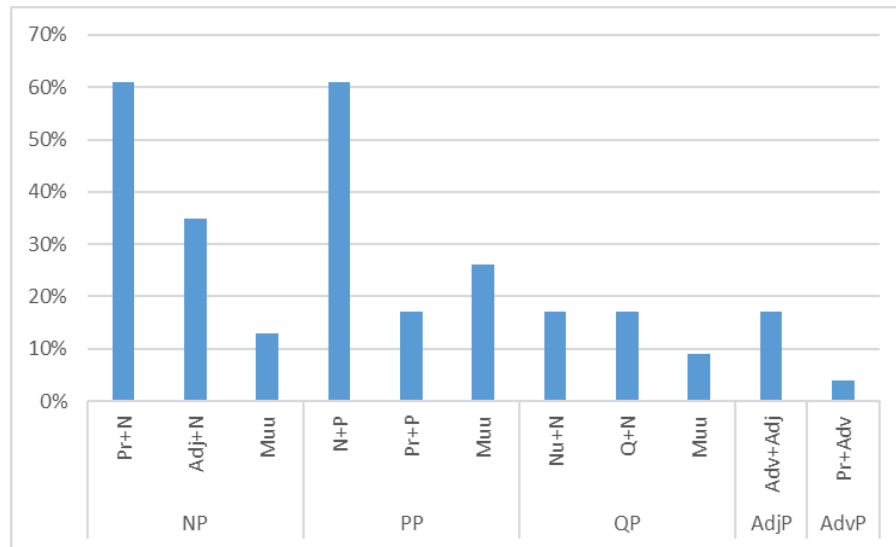
RESULTS 7. CONSTRUCTIONS

Phrase

UKRAINIAN



RUSSIAN



CONCLUSIONS

The level of Estonian language proficiency

Vocabulary:

- richness:
 - refugee children have ~10% smaller vocabulary and variety of vocabulary,
 - big differences between schools (in both groups and also inside school-types)
- division into parts of speech: similar, ukrainians have less adverbs.

Constructions:

- Mostly same constructions, among Ukrainians slightly less users of each construction; the difference is bigger on phrase level.



DISCUSSION 1

- The proficiency of Estonian in the beginning of 3rd grade is in some extent higher in the group of Russian-speaking children. Using statistical tests could demonstrate if this difference is significant or not. Still, the difference is surprisingly small.
- The differences between two groups can be caused by higher degree of exposure to language out of school or some language exposure already in kindergarten of non-refugee children (half of them were in Estonian kindergartens).

DISCUSSION 2

- Results were different in similar types of school, i.e., the general organization of teaching students with different first language does not have a clear impact either to Ukrainian or Russian-speaking children. Therefore, we can not assume that teaching refugee children in separate class would be better or not.
- Differences between schools can be caused by different teachers and their methods of teaching.
- Children having more contacts with Estonian outside the school have (in most cases) better results in both groups.
- Multilingual home environment (in Ukrainian group) seems also have a positive impact to Estonian proficiency.



REFERENCES

Browder, Christopher T. 2018. Recently Resettled Refugee Students Learning English in US High Schools: The Impact of Students' Educational Backgrounds. *Educating Refugee-background Students*. Multilingual Matters.

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Stolk, Yvonne; Kaplan, Ida; Szwarc, Josef 2022. Majority language acquisition by children of refugee background: a review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2210593>