

## "We Can Speak in Livonian"—From Livonian as a Stage and Written Language to a Spoken Language

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For decades, the summer school for children and youth, held annually for ten days, was the sole opportunity to gain basic Livonian language proficiency through instructed learning. However, in the autumn of 2024, with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, the University of Latvia Livonian Institute launched a regular Livonian language learning course. This presentation describes the initial experiences gained from this course, with a focus on the interplay between language attitudes, behaviors, and the methods and approaches employed in instructed language learning. Data was collected through interviews and direct observations, adhering to established research ethics procedures.

A persistent challenge in raising Livonian language proficiency has been helping learners move beyond the beginner level—knowing only phrases and isolated words—due to a lack of opportunities to practice the language (Kļava 2022). In addition to teaching methods and approaches, as well as the domains of language practice, a critical element emerged during the first regular Livonian course: learners' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about the language. These include their previous experiences with Livonian language learning and their associations with the purpose of learning the language, which lacks pragmatic incentives for everyday use.

Building on prior research into the needs of Livonian language learners, a variety of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Heritage Language Acquisition (HLA) methods were employed in the course design (Ernštreits & Kļava 2023). Although Livonian is not the learners' native language, it holds immense symbolic significance for identity and belonging. The course also emphasized the integration of cultural knowledge and heritage language practices alongside linguistic skills.

The analysis of the first lessons highlights a common phenomenon associated with endangered languages (Sallabank 2013: 85-89). Learners often perceive the language as one used for performance, such as on a stage, relying on controlled, predictable phrases rather than engaging in spontaneous, everyday communication. One learner's comment illustrates this: "I know the grammar, but I can't do this; I don't know how to use the language." After engaging in activities designed to foster language use, several

learners expressed surprise and excitement at their ability to use Livonian for everyday conversations on topics of interest.

The experience of addressing learners' inability to converse in Livonian has shown that exposure to authentic language use during lessons—whether through teachers, other participants, or learners themselves—can shift those beliefs and attitudes. This exposure reinforces the idea that Livonian is a fully functional language with practical use, empowering learners and increasing their motivation and willingness to engage with the language. Despite the lack of active language domains, such practices demonstrate the potential for revitalizing Livonian as a spoken language.

## Literature

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