

TARTU UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
NARVA COLLEGE  
STUDY PROGRAMME “HUMANITIES IN MULTILINGUAL SCHOOL”

Sergei Gruševski

ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS OF  
ESTONIAN AND RUSSIAN-MEDIUM SCHOOLS IN NARVA IN THE 4<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

Bachelor's thesis

Supervisor: Olga Orekhova, MA

NARVA

2019

## **PREFACE**

Nowadays we live in the century when not only in Europe, but also in many countries all over the world English has become a major language of international communication, a second official or semi-official language, or at least there are a large number of citizens who use it every day. We can hear different accents or dialects of English used by native and non-native speakers of English. Differences in pronunciation can sometimes create difficulties in communication and understanding of spoken language.

The aims of this Bachelor's thesis are: to study differences in pronunciation and examine what an accent is; to reveal the factors contributing to Russian or Estonian accents in English; to examine English pronunciation of primary school learners of Estonian and Russian-medium schools in Narva in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade; to discover primary school learners' pronunciation difficulties and compare them. The present bachelor's thesis hypothesises that primary school learners who are native speakers of Russian or Estonian and those who are bilingual have different pronunciation difficulties in English and that students of Estonian-medium school have fewer pronunciation problems in English since they may start learning English earlier or have more lessons of English, according to the National Curriculum.

The bachelor's thesis consists of four parts: an introduction, two core chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction discusses English pronunciation in general, analyzes the varieties of accents in English and gives an idea of what kind of accent should be chosen as a model pronunciation. Chapter I, which is a theoretical part of the current bachelor's thesis, considers the issue of teaching English pronunciation in primary school in Estonia and presents an analysis of potential English pronunciation problems for Russian and Estonian learners of English. Chapter II presents and discusses the findings of an empirical research into English pronunciation of primary school learners of Estonian and Russian-medium schools of Narva. The conclusion sums up the results of the research and comments on the hypothesis.

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER I. TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.1 Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.2. Foreign language level to be reached by the end of primary school .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.3. English pronunciation problems of Russian speakers.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.4. English pronunciation problems of Estonian speakers .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.5. Analysis of English course books for primary school.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER II. NARVA PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.1. Research method .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.2. Sample .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.3 Results .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.4 Discussion of results .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Appendix 1. National curriculum for basic schools .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Appendix 2. Common Reference Levels: global scale .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Appendix 3. Common Reference Levels: speaking.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>LICENCE.....</b>	<b>31</b>

## INTRODUCTION

English is an international language spoken in many countries, even where it is not official. There are also countries where English is not an official language, but there are also a large number of people who use English frequently (Crystal 2002: 5). Furthermore, there are around 378 million native speakers of English all over the world, mostly in the USA, Britain and Britain's Old dominions (Ethnologue: Languages of the world, 2018). Moreover, more than a billion people use English as a foreign language, as it has become a language of international communication. Every year a number of people who use and learn English language is growing very fast. The English language has become the global language used all over the world, and it gives people an opportunity to do business and communicate quicker and make life easier.

There is a general belief that pronunciation is very important for successful communication. According to O'Connor (2002), in the world, it is impossible to find two different people who speak English and have the same pronunciation. Pronunciation of English is different in all parts of the world, and it depends first what part of the world it is and community where a speaker lives.

If you live in a part of the world like India or West Africa, where there is a tradition of speaking English for general communication purposes, you should aim to acquire a good variety of the pronunciation of this area; such varieties of Indian English or African English and the like are to be respected and used as a model by all those who will need their English mainly for the purpose of communication with their fellows in these areas. It would be a mistake in these circumstances to use as a model B.B.C English or anything of the sort. (O'Connor 2002: 5-6)

If one lives in a country where English is not an official or communication language, then the learner of English should usually choose a variety of native English pronunciation as a model. It also depends on the materials the learner uses or listens to more often, for example, American or B.B.C English. In general, both of these variants of pronunciation have more similarities than differences. Therefore, the learner must not pay too much attention to the type of English pronunciation he listens to if it is English (O'Connor 2002).

Among the previous research papers related to the topic of English Pronunciation of primary school students there is an MA thesis *Improvement of English Pronunciation of Russian Learners in a Russian School with the Estonian Language Immersion* (Art, 2014). The thesis shows what problems Russian students have using English vowels, distinguishing long and short vowels, and how the Estonian language could help Russian students with the improvement of their pronunciation of English vowels. The thesis also offers different techniques that can be used to reduce the Russian accent and to pronounce English words correctly to avoid misunderstanding.

Pronunciation in English has an important communicative value and has to be improved either to follow the requirements of the local community, where the English language is used for

communication, or to follow standard norms of speaking, for example, American or British English.

### **English pronunciation: phonemes, stress, rhythm, intonation**

Kostabi (2004: 86-88) confirms that no one has an identical English accent. Foreigners usually learn and use a standard pronunciation of English. This standard may not have any specific connections with a specific area in the world (e.g. English as an international language */lingua franca*) or it may follow a certain geographic model (e.g. General American accent in the USA or Received Pronunciation in Britain).

Received Pronunciation (RP) is a standard British pronunciation originating in the southeast England, which is similar to but with some differences from English pronunciation in Wales, Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa. In other regions, such as English West County, North America, Scotland, Ireland and the West Indies more transformations of the English pronunciation can be heard in comparison to Received Pronunciation (O'Connor 2002)

According to Yates (2009), sometimes it is very hard to see differences between what an accent is and what a pronunciation is, and it is very important to compare and define, what both of these terms mean. 'Pronunciation' is a general linguistic term which means the act or manner of producing sounds, syllables, words or utterances or an accepted and standard way of pronouncing these; whereas 'accent' is a more specific term and means "the characteristic mode of pronunciation of a person or group, especially one that betrays social or geographical origin" (*Collins online dictionary* 2017).

Pronunciation consists of such components as sounds (phonemes), stress, rhythm and intonation. Pronunciation stands for how we create the sounds that we use in our speech, what the stress, rhythm and intonation patterns are in a given language. It consists of exact consonants and vowels of a language (i.e. phonemes, which are realized in speech as sounds) and quality of our voice (e.g. pitch, volume, tempo) in case of stress, rhythm and intonation. These features of pronunciation differ from language to language but they may also be similar in different languages.

Vasiliev (1980:16) writes about classification of speech-sounds and how they can be classified into vowels and consonants based on their manner of articulation:

A vowel is a voiced sound produced in the mouth with no obstruction to the air stream. The air stream is weak. The tongue and the vocal cords are tense, the muscular tension is distributed more or less evenly throughout the mouth cavity and the pharynx. A consonant is a sound produced with obstruction to the air stream. The organs of speech are tense at the place of obstruction. In the articulation of voiceless consonants the air stream is strong, while in voiced consonants it is weaker.

It is very important to understand how speech sounds are produced.

The root of the mouth is divided into the following parts: a) the alveolar ridge, b) the hard palate, c) the soft palate with the uvula. The vocal cords are situated in the larynx. They can be brought together without

entirely closing the air-passage and when the air stream is forced between them, they vibrate and produce voice. (Vasiliev, 1980:15)

Vowels and consonants (segments) combine to make up syllables and words, which in their turn are strung together into utterances. At the level of words and utterances, operate such pronunciation features as stress, rhythm and intonation, which also differ from one language to another. Stress means emphasizing a certain syllable in a word or a certain word in a sentence; rhythm comes from the alteration of stressed and unstressed syllables and words in a sentence; and intonation is the modification in the pitch of our voice that carries attitudinal and grammatical information (Teaching speaking – Unit 4: stress and intonation, 2014).

### **What is an accent?**

According to Birner (2016), there are two types of accents. When a speaker speaks English as a foreign language, where sounds are different from the language he/she uses every day, then he/she tries to imitate these sounds and make some mistakes. Birner (2016) calls it a “foreign” accent. Learners of a foreign language may replace target language sounds with their mother tongue sounds, which may be perceived as incorrect by native speakers.

Second type of accent depends on the location where you live and/or what community of people live around you. According to that, you can hear a Texas accent, not being from there, because it is different from how you speak in your region. It is also an accent. For example, there are many accents of British English, such as:

London Cockney
Norwich (East Anglia)
Bristol (the west of England);
South Wales
West Midlands (including Birmingham)
Bradford (Yourkshire);
Liverpool (Merseyside);
Newcastle-upon-Tyne (the North-East);
Edinburgh (Scotland);
Belfast (Northern Ireland)

*Table 3. Ten examples of varieties of accents in Britain (Honey 1991:51)*

It is important to understand that accent and dialect are not the same. Honey (1991) highlights important points that accent and dialect consist of:

Dialect:	Accent:
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Pronunciation	Pronunciation
Vocabulary	
Grammar	
Idiom	

*Table 4. Does Accent Matter? (Honey 1991:2).*

According to Birner (2016), incorrect pronunciation or “foreign accent” is often the result of using incorrect speech sounds that are not found in the target language. People are born to produce any type of sounds of any human languages. When a child starts to study what sounds belong to his mother tongue, he or she tries to avoid unnecessary sounds that are not used in his/her native language. By the age of one, a child will have studied to ignore unnecessary sounds that do not belong to his/her native language. That is why, the older you get, the more difficult it becomes to study and to try to imitate new sounds that are not found in your mother tongue.

Shoebottom (2016) explains the differences between Russian and English languages. It is hard for Russian speakers to reach standard English pronunciation, since Russian language has five vowel sounds, and there are no considerable differences between long and short vowels. English language consists of 12 vowel sounds, with five long, seven short and eight diphthongs.

English and Russian pronunciation are not similar in many aspects. Before starting to teach English pronunciation, teachers need to understand what mistakes may often appear and what difficulties foreign speakers can have in English pronunciation. It is better to try to avoid these mistakes in the beginning by trying to predict potential mistakes caused by native language interference through contrastive analysis of two phonetic systems. Usually, the older you become, the more difficult it is to make a correct sound, which is not found in your native language, and start to imitate it.

### **Variety of Accents in English**

An accent can be not only the result of producing “foreign” sounds, but it can also be a variety of native pronunciation inside the country or across different countries. For the past two centuries, English has become one of the main languages in the western world, mainly in Britain, British colonies and the USA and in total, there are about a billion people who use English as a second language and all of them have their own specific accent.

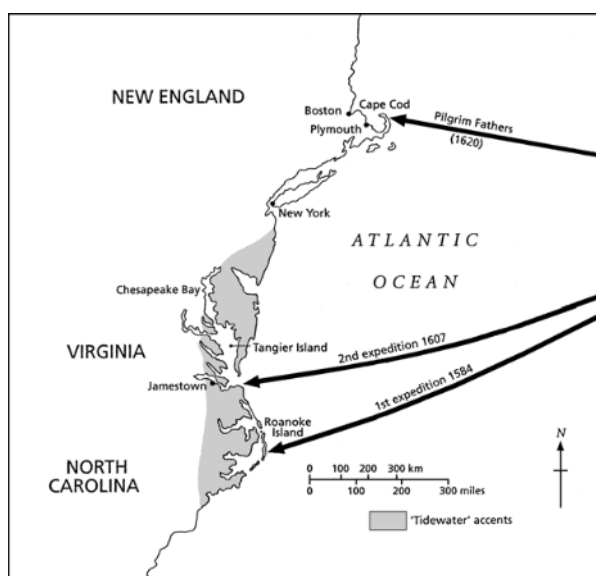


Table 2. Early English – speaking settlement areas on the East Coast of America (Crystal, D. 2002:242)

Honey (1991: 1-11) maintains that speakers of standard American or British English can serve as a model of standard pronunciation for English as a foreign language learners, and if they follow these models, there will be fewer misunderstandings when interacting with speakers of English in any country in the world.

According to an American professor of English linguistics writing in 1980, “until recently there was no doubt that standard English from the international point of view was the British variety”, but the culture prestige of British English as a model for foreign learners is offset by the economic and political power and influence of American English, and two models now seem to be in fairly equal competition in educational system around the world. (Honey 1991:167)

Honey (1991:98) presents an explanation of how English accent varieties are impacted by the mass media. Many factors affect the formation of the British standard pronunciation, as well as many non-standard accents in Britain, which can be described as “popular” London accents. However, it should not be forgotten that the impact of American English is now very big and it influences British English through the shows, films and mass media produced in the United States. As Honey (1991: 98) notes, “American idiomatic usages such as “do have” for “have got” have invaded British English, and I have watched the development in my own TV-addicted children of US grammatical forms such as the simple past rather than the perfect tense with the adverbs *yet*, *just*, or *already*, expressing time (“I already did it” for “I have already done it”).”

In non-English-speaking countries, English as a foreign language learners have an opportunity to learn standard English using British or American English as a model by not only watching films or different TV programs but also by using the Internet, watching videos or other teaching sources, where professional teachers can explain and help students how to improve their



English accent. Students can learn about some poor aspects of their pronunciation, and what should be done to improve it.

To avoid misunderstanding, which may be caused by accent, English has become more and more standardized and in such fields, for example, as air traffic control, aviation, international communication fields, marine navigation, etc. That is why, nowadays especially in the western countries, companies who are seeking for new staff members, in the first place, may often put not the qualification or experience, but the standard accent or comprehensible pronunciation of a candidate.

Honey (1991: 6-7) pays attention to the five main varieties of English that are spoken around the world: “British English, American English, and the Englishes of the Old Dominions, the New Commonwealth, and the Caribbean”. It is very important to study a recognized model of English from the beginning. It can help to avoid misunderstanding and help to get a well-paid job in the future. If accent is incomprehensible or unacceptable, employers do not want to employ such workers since they can damage their business.

It is often recommended to start learning a foreign language early in childhood precisely because of children’s ability to imitate and learn correct pronunciation as well as for them to develop a positive attitude to the foreign language. In Estonia, foreign language learning (usually English) begins formally in primary school. The aim of this Bachelor’s thesis is to examine English pronunciation of primary school learners of Estonian and Russian-medium schools in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade to discover pronunciation difficulties and compare them.

## **CHAPTER I. TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

### **1.1 Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools**

The National Curriculum for Basic Schools in Estonia (*Põhikooli riiklik õppekava*, 2011) is one of the main documents for schools, it helps teachers to understand what goals should be reached, how work should be planned, what to concentrate more or less on, etc. Chapter 15 “Basis for organization of learning and education” of the National Curriculum gives an overview of the weekly number of lessons in basic school, at the first, second and third stage.

The National Curriculum for basic schools (Chapter 2 § 15, see Appendix 1) shows that at the first stage of school (years 1-3 combined) Estonian/Russian or other language of instruction takes up 19 lessons in total per week, in the second place is Mathematics with 10 lessons in total per week and in the third place is physical education with 8 lessons per week. For the foreign language A (first foreign language) there are only 3 lessons per week for years 1-3 combined, and for the foreign language B (second foreign language), there are no lessons at all. To sum up, it may not be an adequate proportion of classes per week to study foreign language A, especially so for Russian-speaking students, since Russian-speaking students concentrate on learning their mother tongue and the Estonian language and at the first stage. In addition, the number of foreign language classes at the first stage may not be enough to work on children’s foreign language pronunciation.

Moreover, students in Estonian-medium schools may have more hours of English and a better chance to focus on English pronunciation, as students in Russian/medium schools have in their first stage of study (years 1-3) 19 lessons per week of Russian, 6 lessons per week of Estonian as a second language, and 3 lessons for foreign Language A. Students at Estonian-medium schools also have 19 lesson of the first language (that is the Estonian language) and 3 lessons per week for foreign Language A. That means that according to the National Curriculum Estonian-medium schools have more hours per week in addition to the pre-determined hours available to them to devote to certain subjects, possibly English:

a basic school where the language of instruction is Estonian shall determine in the school curriculum the use of the following amounts of weekly lessons: eight in the first stage of study, 10 in the second stage of study and four in the third stage of study; and basic schools with a language other than Estonian as the language of instruction, two in the first stage of study, one in the second stage of study and one in the third stage of study. (National Curriculum for Basic Schools, § 15, 2011)

### **1.2. Foreign language level to be reached by the end of primary school**

Estonian National Curriculum for basic schools shows what benchmarks in the foreign languages should be reached by the end of the 3rd grade. These are:

	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
1 <sup>st</sup> foreign language (usually English)	A1.2	A1.1	A1.2	A1.1
2 <sup>nd</sup> foreign language	A1.1-A1.2	A1.1	A1.1-A1.2	A1.1

*Table 5. National curriculum for basic schools, Annex 2, § 2.2.1.*

Annex 2 to the Estonian National Curriculum for basic schools, section 2.1.3.1., lists the learning outcomes to be reached by the end of stage 1 (year 3) as a result of studying foreign language A (usually English):

After completing the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of study, students:

- 1) can understand simple everyday expressions and short sentences;
- 2) use the expressions and simple sentences learned for communicating their needs and describing their surroundings (family, home, school);
- 3) respond adequately to very simple questions and orders;
- 4) have acquired primary knowledge of the country and culture of the language they learn;
- 5) have a positive attitude towards learning foreign languages;
- 6) use primary learning skills (repetition, linkage) to learn foreign languages; and
- 7) are able to work in pairs and groups under a teacher's supervision.

(National Curriculum for Basic Schools, Annex 2: Foreign languages, 2011).

As can be seen, primary school students are expected to both understand simple everyday words and phrases and use them in speech to communicate their needs and describe their surroundings. Although the learning outcomes do not mention pronunciation directly, they say that students should be able to communicate successfully using very simple everyday language.

The part of the Estonian National Curriculum devoted to foreign languages (Annex 2) is largely based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This document also presents detailed information about the foreign language proficiency levels (A, B and C levels).

A Basic User		B Independent User		C Proficient User	
A1 (breakthrough)	A2 (way stage)	B1 (Threshold)	B2 (Vantage)	C1 (effective operational proficiency)	C2 (Mastery)

*Table 6. The common Reference Levels (CEFR, p.23.)*

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) clearly explains the global scale for all levels from A1 to C2 (see Appendix 2) and Estonian National Curriculum for basic school has the same criteria for basic school students.

CEFR has information for speaking skills, where all criteria, such as: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction and coherence, are explained in detail. The criteria for levels A1 and A2 are

in Appendix 3. CEFR pays more attention than Estonian National Curriculum to phonological competence for all levels.

Phonological control	
A2	Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a noticeable foreign accent, but conversational partners will need to ask for repetition from time to time
A1	Pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group

*Table 7. Phonological competence (CEFR, Chapter 5.2.1.4, p. 117)*

In the table of phonological competence, it can be seen that at the very beginning (levels A1 and A2) school should pay attention to the accent, as it very important to go to the next level in the language, and even though pronunciation should not be perfect and native-like, it should be clear enough.

### 1.3. English pronunciation problems of Russian speakers

The English and Russian languages are not the same as they have different sound systems and interference caused by Russian may cause a noticeable accent, hamper communication and prevent Russian-speaking pupils from speak in English as native speakers (which is not the end-goal according to both the Estonian National Curriculum and the CEFR, but clear and comprehensible pronunciation is). Makarova (2010) points out that Russian language includes five vowel sounds: a, e, i, o, u. Also, the lips perform a rather significant role in the creation of the Russian vowels, much more than they behave in the formulation of the English vowels. English vowel system possesses twice the number of vowels compared to the Russian language and Russian-speaking learners of English need to add to their pronunciation six more vowels that they do not have in their mother language, i.e. Russian.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i[i]		u[u]
Mid	e[ɛ]		o[o]
Low		a [ɐ]	

*Table 8. Russian Vowel System: Articulatory Realization (Makarova 2010:3)*

When it comes to consonants, Russian has a lot of consonant phonemes, but some of them do not match English consonants, as they have a different place or manner of articulation, and some English consonants do not exist in Russian at all.

Therefore, potential problems may arise from the fact that some vowels and consonants are absent from the Russian language, and some of them may sound similar, but actually have different

articulation, so Russian learners may replace them with their Russian counterparts. The table below lists some potential problem areas for Russian speakers, based on the contrastive analysis with Russian sound system, but it may not be comprehensive.

Vowels	Examples	Consonants	Examples
/æ/	hat, bat, cat	/ð/ and /θ/	this, thin
/ɑ:/	card, far, bar	/w/	what, we
/ɪ/	hit, bit, kit	/r/	round
/o:/	port, sort, court	/h/	hear
/ɜ:/	her, fur, err	/ŋ/	ring
/u:/	food, could	/ʃ/	shore, sure,
/eə/	air, hair, fair	devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /v/, /z/ word finally	back instead of bag, pick instead of pig)
/əʊ/	go, row, snow	aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> / word initially	pack – back tide – died

Table 9. Examples of vowels and consonants in English that can be problematic for Russian learners

#### 1.4. English pronunciation problems of Estonian speakers

The Estonian language has nine vowels and 36 diphthongs, where 28 are original to the Estonian language.

	Front		Back	
	Unrounded	Rounded	Unrounded	Rounded
Close	i	y	ɤ	u
Mid	e	ø		o
Open	æ		ɑ	

Table 10. Estonian vowel phonemes (Wikipedia)

Estonian vowels and consonants are partly the same with English but not totally: some vowels and consonants are absent, and some Estonian vowels and consonants may sound similar to English, but actually have different articulation, so Estonian learners may replace them with their Estonian counterparts. In contrast to Russian and English, Estonian has fewer consonant phonemes, so these may need particular attention. For example, the following consonants and vowels can pose potential problem areas for Estonian-speaking students.

Vowels	Examples	Consonants	Examples
/ɪ/	hit, bit, kit	/ð/ and /θ/	this, think
/əʊ/	go, row, snow	/w/	what
/eə/	air, hair, fair	/r/	round
		/ŋ/	ring

		/ʃ/	shore, sure
		/ʒ/	casual, genre
		/tʃ/	cheer, coach
		/dʒ/	dodge, George
		devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /z/ word initially	<i>pack</i> instead of <i>bag</i> , <i>pick</i> instead of <i>big</i> , <i>sink</i> instead of <i>zinc</i> , <i>team</i> instead of <i>deem</i> , <i>etc.</i> )
		devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /z/ word finally	<i>back</i> instead of <i>bag</i> , <i>pick</i> instead of <i>pig</i>
		aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> / word initially	<i>pack</i> – <i>back</i> , <i>tide</i> – <i>died</i>
		palatalization of /l/ - “soft/clear”	<i>fil’</i> m, <i>well’</i> , <i>etc.</i>
		double consonants (geminate) – should be pronounced as single consonants in English	<i>swimming</i> , <i>running</i> ,

Table 11. Example of vowels and consonants in English that can be problematic for Estonian learners.

### 1.5. Analysis of English course books for primary school

In Estonia, we can find many English language course books for primary schools. These books can help to improve not only grammar, but also can help with vocabulary and pronunciation acquisition. Some of the topical units in these books are about travelling, colors, numbers, clothes, food and drink, modal verbs, how to ask Wh- questions, etc.

Several English course books for primary school available in Narva College of the University of Tartu library were analyzed to see how they focus on pronunciation and speaking: *Excellent 1* (2003), *Welcome 1* (1999), *Way Ahead 1* (1997), *Way Ahead 4* (1998), and *More! Level 3 Student’s book* (2006). These books are colorful, with many pictures in them, but only *More! Level 3 Student’s book* (2006), has a word transcription at the end of the book and it may help students to study pronunciation of words.

*Excellent 1* (2003) consists of 15 units. The first topic is about learning to introduce yourself with simple phrases: “Hello. What is your name? How old are you?” etc. The following units are about animals, family, numbers and colors, clothes, appearance, food, numbers, menu, jobs, sport activities, animals, holidays. Students need to read a text and answer questions or to compare with what they see in the pictures, for example: *What is different? Look and say*. Another important exercise to practice speaking is to listen, then ask and answer. These exercises help the teacher to check the pronunciation of their students and correct, if necessary. In some units there

is an activity named “Talk time”. It is also a part of speaking practice, as it helps students to make a question, then ask it, and get an answer.

*Welcome 1* (1999) consists of 14 units. The main topics are also introductions, numbers, place where you live, clothes, free time, human body, food, weather, time, seasons, animals, travelling, Christmas, etc. At the end of the book, there is a list of new words for each unit, which can be useful for students. These words are presented without transcription. This book also presents many speaking activities, such as listen and repeat, look, say and write or look, ask and answer. These activities help the teacher to check the pronunciation, and work on it, if necessary.

*Way Ahead 1* (1997) consists of 19 units. It has big colorful pictures, with signs in or below each picture, and it helps students to learn words or phrases easier. The main topics are mostly the same as in *Excellent 1* (2003) and *Way Ahead 1* (1997). In each unit, students need to read and listen, and sing, answer or ask their classmates about the theme they have learned.

*More! Level 3 Student's book* (2006), consists of 12 units. This book is also colorful but is more focused on vocabulary exercises, grammar and communication, in a complex. Students need to read a text, then listen and repeat, write words below the pictures. These exercises help to learn new words. They also create and practice dialogues, etc. Every unit has a section called “Sound right”, this section helps students to improve their pronunciation and learn how to use correct intonation in question tags, for example: *when we are sure about something, our intonation goes down at the end*; or: *When a t is followed by another consonant, we don't always say the t sound. Listen and repeat*; or: *Listen to the words. Circle the “r” sounds that you hear*. Some exercises make students work in a team and present their ideas to the class. These exercises help students to practice their speaking skills.

*Way Ahead 4* (1998), consists of 20 units. This book is also as colorful as other course books and has mostly the same units about animals, places, nature, etc. Texts are much larger and students need to look, listen and write, or read and draw lines, and complete the missing parts in the exercises. There are not many exercises for speaking. Just short discussion questions to answer after reading a text.

To conclude, the analyzed course books seem to integrate pronunciation practice into speaking and listening activities, and with the exception of one course book do not have special sections for pronunciation practice. As most course books now come with workbooks and other supplementary resources, these might have some additional speaking or pronunciation activities. In general, teachers have to devote special attention to pronunciation in their lessons, as course book material may not be sufficient.

## CHAPTER II. NARVA PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

The aim of the empirical part of the thesis is to examine English pronunciation of primary school students of Estonian and Russian-medium schools in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade to discover pronunciation difficulties, compare them, and test the hypothesis that primary school students who are native speakers of Russian or Estonian and those who are bilingual have different pronunciation difficulties in English and that students of Estonian-medium school have fewer pronunciation problems in English since may start learning English earlier or have more lessons of English, according to the National Curriculum.

### 2.1. Research method

The method of testing was used to collect data about primary school students' pronunciation. During the test, each student had two A4 sheets of paper with independent words in English and the same words with their transcription. Each A4 sheet consisted of 21 words to read for Russian speaking students and 23 words for Estonian speaking students. All 20 students decided to read words without the transcription. The words were taken from the following books analyzed above: *Excellent 1* (2003), *Welcome 1* (1999), *Way Ahead 1* (1997), *Way Ahead 4* (1998), and *More! Level 3 Student's book* (2006). The words used in the test are presented in the following table, which is divided into two parts, with the words for the Russian-speaking students given in table N1, and the words for Estonian speaking students given in table N2. The students from a Russian-medium primary school had to read the words only from column N1 and the students from an Estonian-medium primary school only from column N2.

N1 (Russian speakers)		N2 (Estonian speakers)	
<b>Vowels</b>			
/æ/	have /hæv/	/ɪ/	which /wɪtʃ/
/ɑ:/	father /'fɑ:ðə/	/əʊ/	so /səʊ/
/ɪ/	sit /sɪt/	/eə/	air /eə/
/o:/	ball /bɔ:l/		
/ɜ:/	her /hɜ:/		
/u:/	school /sku:l/		
/eə/	hair /heə/		
/əʊ/	no /nəʊ/		
<b>Consonants</b>			
/ð/ and /θ/	this /ðɪs/ three /θri:/	/ð/ and /θ/	this /ðɪs/ Thursday /'θɜ:zdeɪ/
/w/	which /wɪtʃ/	/w/	well /wel/
/r/	running /'rʌnɪŋ/	/r/	rose /rəʊz/



/h/	heal /hi:l/	/ŋ/	seeing /si:ɪŋ/
/ŋ/	seeing /si:ɪŋ/	/ʃ/	she /ʃi:/
/ʃ/	she /ʃi:/	/dʒ/	job /dʒɒb/
devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /v/, /z/ word finally	pig /pɪg/ food /fu:d/ love /lʌv/	/tʃ/	chicken /'tʃɪkɪn/
aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> / word initially	pack /pæk/ take /teɪk/ cat /kæt/	devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /z/ word initially	go /gəʊ/ boy /bɔɪ/ day /deɪ/ zoo /zu:/
		devoicing /g/, /b/, /d/, /z/ word finally	pig /pɪg/ food /fu:d/ love /lʌv/
		aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> / word initially	pack /pæk/ take /teɪk/ cat /kæt/
		palatalization of /l/ - "soft/clear"	film /fɪlm/
		double consonants (geminate) – should be pronounced as single consonants in English	swimming /'swɪmɪŋ/

Table 12. Words used for testing

## 2.2. Sample

4<sup>th</sup> grade students from *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* (Narva Estonian Upper-Secondary School) and Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School participated in the testing. Narva Eesti Gümnaasium is the only school in Narva with 100% instruction in Estonian at all school levels (primary, secondary, upper-secondary). As for the Russian-medium school, several Gymnasiums in Narva city with relatively similar criteria as *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* (e.g. state exam results, upper-secondary school) were chosen as potential participants in the research. E-mails were sent to these schools, where I explained that I am a student of Narva College, and why I need to do my research in their schools. I also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of personal data of students, saying that no names of the students who participated the research would appear in the paper. Then, I received e-mails from these schools, where they asked me why I had chosen their schools, what I pursued in my research, etc. Each school asked me to write a formal letter to convince parents with explanations of what parents, children, school and I would get in as a result of this research. And it was also necessary to obtain a permission from the parents for these 10 students, so that I could test them and record their pronunciation using an MP3 recorder. As all of this seemed quite troublesome and time-consuming, and since only the Head of Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School replied directly to my request, helped to

pass on my permission request letter to the parents in few days, and invited me to do my testing, it was chosen as the Russian-medium school. *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* also asked to write a letter to the parents to get their permission for recording their children in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

A total number of 20 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School and *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* planned to take part in the research. Ten students were tested in Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School, but only 7 out of 10 students were tested in *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* due to the students' health problems. There were ten 11-year-old students from one form in Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School; their native language was Russian. They started to study the English language in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The students from *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* were also 11 years old, there were some students whose mother tongue was Russian too, nevertheless Estonian is the only language of instruction in that school. The pupils started studying the English language also in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Before testing, in both schools, I asked the students when they started learning English, and found that in both school it was the same time, as in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades they had musical English classes. It was an elective English class after the compulsory school lessons. Therefore, it can be concluded already at this stage that either of the two test groups had the same number of English classes, and neither of them had any advantage over the other group in terms of the number of English classes they had had. The only difference could be their exposure to English outside school.

## 2.3 Results

The results of the testing obtained in both schools are presented below. To preserve students' privacy, before reading the words, each student pronounced their number.

Narva 6 <sup>th</sup> School	
Student	Pronunciation problems
N1	<i>Have</i> pronounced with /e/ instead of /æ/. <i>Father</i> /a:/ was too short. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N2	<i>Her</i> pronounced with Russian /r/ at the end. <i>Seeing</i> pronounced with /ng/ at the end and more like /sing/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N3	<i>Seeing</i> pronounced with strong /ing/ in the end. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /

N4	<i>Father</i> with short /a/ and strong /ther/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N5	<i>Her</i> pronounced with a /r/ at the end. <i>Three</i> pronounce like /were/. <i>Running</i> with /k/ at the end. <i>Heal</i> with /ea/ instead of /i:/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N6	<i>Running</i> with Russian /r/ and /ing/ at the end. <i>Heal</i> with /k/ instead of /h/ and /ea/ instead of /i:/, so it sounded more like /keal/. <i>Seeing</i> pronounced with /ng/ at the end and more like /sing/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N7	<i>No</i> pronounced like now /naʊ/, <i>running</i> with strong /-ing/ in the end. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /
N8	<i>Have</i> pronounced with /e/. <i>Ball</i> pronounced with short /ɔ/. <i>School</i> with short /u/, <i>hair</i> pronounced like <i>here</i> /hɪə/. <i>This</i> pronounced like /vis/, <i>heel</i> like /hial/, <i>seeing</i> with /k/ at the end. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /, and <i>pack</i> was also pronounced like /pek/.
N9	<i>Have</i> pronounced with /a/ instead of /æ/. <i>Father</i> with short /a/. <i>Her</i> with /r/ at the end. <i>Hair</i> pronounced like /hɜ:ɪr/. <i>Running</i> with /-ng/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /, and <i>pack</i> sounded like /pak/.
N10	<i>Have</i> was pronounced with Estonian sound /ä/. <i>Hair</i> pronounced like <i>hire</i> /haɪə/. <i>Love</i> pronounced like /lov/. <i>Food</i> pronounced like <i>foot</i> /fʊt/.

Table 13. The results of testing at a Russian-medium primary school

Narva Eesti Gümnaasium	
Student	Pronunciation problems
N1	<i>Air</i> pronounced with –r in the end. <i>Chicken</i> was pronounced like /'tʃɪkən/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /

N2	<i>Air</i> pronounced like /ar/, <i>this</i> pronounced like /his/, <i>Thursday</i> pronounced with /t/ like /'tɜ:zdeɪ/. <i>Seeing</i> pronounced like /si:nk/, <i>job</i> pronounced with Russian /ĕ/. <i>Chicken</i> was pronounced like in student's one case /'ʃiken/. <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /. And <i>swimming</i> with double "m".
N3	<i>So</i> pronounced like /su/, <i>air</i> pronounced like /aer/, <i>chicken</i> pronounced like /'ʃiken/, <i>just</i> pronounced like /just/, which in Estonian means "cheese", <i>pack</i> pronounced like /pak/, <i>swimming</i> with double "m". <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /.
N4	<i>Chicken</i> was pronounced like /'ʃiken/, <i>swimming</i> with double "m". <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /.
N5	<i>Which</i> pronounced like /fiʃ/, <i>air</i> pronounced like /aer/, <i>this</i> pronounced like /diʃ/, <i>Thursday</i> pronounced like /tursdei/, <i>seeing</i> like /si:nk/, <i>chicken</i> was pronounced like /'ʃiken/, <i>pig</i> with double /ii/, <i>go</i> like /ko/, <i>zoo</i> like /sɔ:/, <i>pack</i> like /bæk/, <i>swimming</i> with double "m". <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /.
N6	<i>Air</i> pronounced like /aer/, <i>rose</i> like /rou/, <i>seeing</i> like /si:ng/, <i>chicken</i> was pronounced like /'ʃiken/, <i>pig</i> like /piʃ/, <i>pack</i> like /bæk/, <i>swimming</i> with double "m". <i>Pig, food, love</i> pronounced devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/. <i>Pack, take, cat</i> without aspiration of /p <sup>h</sup> /, /t <sup>h</sup> /, /k <sup>h</sup> /.
N7	This student had no mistakes.

Table 14. The results of testing at an Estonian-medium primary school

## 2.4 Discussion of results

The results demonstrate that Russian-speaking, Estonian-speaking and bilingual students have different pronunciation difficulties. Also, as mentioned in the Introduction, learners of a foreign language may replace the target language sounds with their mother tongue sounds, which may be perceived as incorrect by native speakers.

In Narva 6<sup>th</sup> School, (Russian-speaking students) the most frequent mistake was devoicing /g/, /d/, /v/ and lack of aspiration of /p<sup>h</sup>/, /t<sup>h</sup>/, /k<sup>h</sup>/, also /ng/ at the end of words like *seeing* and *running*. The students' mistakes are caused by the interference from their native language (Russian). The second problem is that they did not "stretch" the long vowel sounds. Due to this, they pronounced the words incorrectly, and when they read it out, it could be mistaken for another

word. For example, student N2 pronounced, *seeing* like *sing*. N6, pronounced *heal* like /keal/, which is similar to the word *kill*. Student N10 pronounced *food* like *foot* /fot/, and *love* sounded like /lov/.

In *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium*, five students were from mixed families, where one parent was Estonian and another Russian. These students are bilingual and only two students, N4 and N7 are only Estonian-speaking. The most common mistake was the word “chicken”, where six students pronounced it using /e/ instead of /ɪ/. However, none of the students had problems with /dʒ/ and /ʃ/, although there are no such phonemes in Estonian (but there are similar phonemes in Russian, and there are loanwords in Estonian that have these sounds too). Devoicing voiced consonants at the end of words and lack of aspiration of /p/, /t/, /k/ are common problems for both Russian and Estonian-speaking students and are caused by the interference from Russian and Estonian. Six students pronounced swimming with double /m/, and one student devoiced initial voiceless consonants in the words *go*, *zoo* (interference from Estonian). Student N2 used Russian /ë/, and student N3 pronounced “just” like in Estonian, as in Estonian it means “cheese” or “exactly”. Some students are also pronounced the word *air* with a trill /r/ at the end and an incorrect vowel sound. To sum up, it can be seen that bilingual children in *Narva Eesti Gümnaasium* have pronunciation mistakes in English, which are caused both by Russian and Estonian language interference, as every day these children use two languages. Student N7 had good pronunciation in English, as she had already learned English for 6 or 7 years. She watched cartoons, learned simple words through listening to music, playing English computer games, plus she likes travelling with her family and very actively uses English outside school.

To conclude, in primary school, a teacher should focus on pronunciation, as it is one of the main criteria that allows to go to the next level in the language, to avoid a heavy accent and misunderstandings in the future. The results of the research demonstrate that students pronounce some simple words incorrectly and it can be difficult to understand what exactly students mean.

## CONCLUSION

The English language is one of the most spoken languages in the world and the number of speakers of English as a second or foreign language is growing very fast, since English has become an international language in many sectors worldwide. Knowing English helps people to communicate easier and faster. However, learners of English should speak and choose for studying a standard form of English, as wrong pronunciation can cause problems because of misunderstanding. Learners of English should understand that dialects and accents are not the same and they need to be able to use correct standardized English to communicate with other speakers.

Estonian National Curriculum for basic schools is the main document for Estonian schools. Estonian National Curriculum suggests beginning with foreign language learning starting from the first stage of primary school (grades 1-3), and there are only three lessons per week allocated for foreign language A (usually English) for the whole stage. Schools in Estonia can decide in what grade exactly they will introduce compulsory foreign language classes, and some schools do that already in the first grade, while others only in the third, however, there may be some elective foreign language classes before that. Also, students in Russian-medium primary schools study Estonian as their second language and may have fewer foreign language classes in primary school than students in Estonian-medium schools.

The section of the National Curriculum devoted to foreign languages is mainly based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, where it is clearly written what outcomes should be reached by the end of every stage in writing, speaking, listening, and reading. From the very beginning English teachers should understand what difficulties may face Russian speaking and Estonian speaking students, since English vowels and consonants are not the same as Russian or Estonian ones. If students make mistakes in pronunciation, it is better to work on these mistakes right at the beginning, or try to prevent them, as the older children become, the more difficult it is to acquire correct pronunciation. It also appears that not all English course books pay special attention to pronunciation practice, so teachers need to take that into consideration when planning their classes.

The results of the empirical research into primary school students' pronunciation at Narva schools presented in Chapter II demonstrate that Russian-speaking, Estonian-speaking and bilingual students have different difficulties with English pronunciation mostly because of the interference from their mother tongue. The pronunciation of bilingual students in English is influenced by both of their native languages and shows signs of interference from Estonian and

Russian. It has been also found that exposure to English outside school has a very positive effect on improving students' pronunciation, as demonstrated by one Estonian-speaking student.

## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö teema on „Narva koolides inglise keelt õppivate õpilaste hääldusraskused inglise keeles 4. klassis”.

Töö eesmärgiks on vene ja eesti kooli algastme (4. klassi) õpilaste inglise keele häälduse testimine selgitamaks välja õpilaste hääldusraskused ja neid võrrelda. Töös käsitletakse järgmist hüpoteesi: vene ja eesti koolilastel on erinevad hääldusraskused ja erinevad inglise keele mõjud väljaspool kooli.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatausest, teoreetilisest ja praktiliselt osast ning kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatavas osas antakse ülevaade riikidest, kus kasutatakse inglise keelt emakeele või teise keelena, kirjeldatakse inglise aktsendi variante ja nende liike. Esimene peatükk koosneb teoreetilisest osast ja käsitleb inglise keele häälduse õpetamist algastmes. Tutvustatakse riiklikku õppekava ja kirjeldatakse inglise keele taset, mille õpilane peab saavutama põhikooli lõpuks. Käsitletakse eesti ja vene laste võimalikke hääldusraskusi. Analüüsitakse algastme inglise keele õppematerjali. Teises peatükis on esitatud laste ingliskeelse häälduse testimise tulemused vene ja eesti koolis, et välja selgitada nende hääldusraskused. Kokkuvõttes on esitatud testimise tulemuste põhjal tehtud järeldused selle kohta, missuguseid ja mis hääldusvigu teevad vene ja eesti lapsed inglise keele rääkimisel.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. National curriculum for basic schools

Subject	Number of lessons in basic school, the 1 <sup>st</sup> stage	Number of lessons in basic school, the 2 <sup>nd</sup> stage	Number of lessons in basic school, the 3 <sup>rd</sup> stage
Estonian/Russian or other language of instruction	19	11	16
Literature	0	4	6
Estonian as a second language	6	12	12
Foreign language A	3	9	9
Foreign language B	0	3	9
Mathematics	10	13	13
Science	3	7	2
Geography	0	0	5
Biology	0	0	5
Chemistry	0	0	4
Physics	0	0	4
History	0	3	6
Human studies	2	2	2
Social studies	0	1	2
Music	6	4	3
Art	4.5	3	3
Manual training, handicraft and home economics, technology studies	4.5	5	5
Physical education	8	8	6

Chapter 1, § 15. Basis for organization of learning and education.

**Appendix 2. Common Reference Levels: global scale**

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans

Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Common Reference Levels: global scale (CEFR p. 24)

### Appendix 3. Common Reference Levels: speaking

	Range	Accuracy	Fluency	Interaction	Coherence
A2	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes	Can make him/herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when he/she is following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like “and”, “but” and “because”
A1	Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire	Can manage very short, isolated, mainly prepackaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communications	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition rephrasing and repair	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like “and” or “then”

Common Reference Levels (CEFR, p. 29.)

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