Sociolinguistic Studies

ISSN: 1750-8649 (print)
ISSN: 1750-8657 (online)

Article

Digital technologies and reported language practices in Russophone families in Estonia, Germany, and Sweden

Natalia Ringblom[a], Anna Ritter[b], and Anastassia Zabrodskaja[c]

Abstract

Forty-five Russophone families in Estonia, Germany and Sweden answered semi-structured questionnaires about their sociolinguistic characteristics and participated in in-depth interviews regarding language use, language transmission and maintenance, and attitudes to all these processes. This comparative analysis of the family context helps to explain the variation in the development of linguistic identities and language-use strategies. We identified clear similarities and differences between these families, especially regarding reported digital language practices among immigrant families. The data analysis showed that the use of digital technologies has an impact on the reported language practices among the families but not necessarily on the use of Russian as a heritage language. Most families highlighted the intensification of internet-based communication with extended family members and the supportive effect of digital technologies on intergenerational heritage language transmission, since younger family members gained more access to Russian via the internet. But the role of digital technologies alone is limited when it comes to intergenerational heritage language transmission and other factors, such as the efforts of parents and the agency of children, seem to be more important. Still, the joint use of digital technologies has a positive effect, especially in those families where the children are actively involved in digital communication.

Affiliations

[a] Umeå University, Sweden
natasha.ringblom@umu.se

[b] University of Koblenz, Germany
annaritter@uni-koblenz.de

[c] Tallinn University, Estonia
anastassia.zabrodskaja@tlu.ee / anastassia.zabrodskaja@gmail.com

SOLS VOL 18.1–2 2024 155–174 https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.24778
© 2024, University of Toronto Press

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

KEYWORDS: digitalisation, Family Language Policy, heritage language transmission, immigrants, Russian, Estonia, Germany and Sweden

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

1 Introduction

This article expands the discussion of Family Language Policy (FLP) in conjunction with three interrelated areas, namely, reported language practices, language attitudes, and digital technologies. FLP involves ideologies and approaches to how languages are managed, learned, and negotiated within individual families (Schwartz, 2010; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015; Curdt-Christiansen and Huang, 2020). Using FLP as the theoretical framework, the present study focused on heritage language (HL) maintenance in Russophone families and how these families position themselves in various sociocultural situations whilst exposed to different societal languages: Estonian, German, and Swedish. Reported language practices and language attitudes determined the roles and values to a HL and societal languages, and these were reflected in the families' language behaviour and transmission. The use of digital technologies is looked at to understand its role in intergenerational language transmission.

This study also covered an area that has, to date, received scant scholarly attention in the field of FLP. This is where digital technology enhances reported language practices. Digitalisation is a global trend that strongly influences almost all spheres of family life, including communication and education. The Covid-19 pandemic additionally accelerated technical developments in these two areas (Daniel, 2020). On the one hand, prior to and during the pandemic, increasing aspects of education shifted to the internet, such as language courses and schools online, after-school courses taught partly or entirely online, courses via Instagram, etc. On the other hand, communication in general is increasingly taking place online, from online meetings at work and entertainment to platforms where the comment function can facilitate private communication with friends and relatives.

It is precisely at this point, i.e., the overlap between the areas of digitalisation, education, and communication in a multilingual family, that the present study came into play. This study aimed to explore FLP in multilingual families taking into account the use of digital technologies and their role in intergenerational language transmission using the example of Russophone families exposed to different societal languages: Estonian, German and Swedish. It set out to answer four research questions: (1) How does digitalisation change FLP? (2) Are Russian language heritage speakers actually learning anything by communicating via social networks with family members? (3) How can digital tools

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

be used to promote HL transmission? (4) How is technology used in language policy/transmission? To answer these research questions, our ethnographic and linguistic analysis was conducted at the microlevel of parental interviews. This study took an ethnographical approach in language policy research (cf. McCarty 2011, 2015).

In addition to this introduction, the article consists of six sections. Section 2 outlines a contextual overview of three countries' performance in digitalisation. Section 3 provides a comparative picture of sociolinguistic situations surrounding Russophone families under investigation in Estonia, Germany, and Sweden and how these relate to their minority context. Section 4 overviews research methodology. Section 5 focuses on empirical data. Section 6 discusses and summarises the main findings, themes, and trends, providing directions for future research based on the existing patterns in the area of inquiry.

2 Contextual background

2.1 Target countries' performance in digitalisation

The European Commission has regularly presented the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI 2021) since 2014. This composite index summarises relevant indicators on Europe's digital performance. DESI 2021 focuses on four main dimensions: human capital, connectivity, and the integration of digital technologies and digital public services. Sweden ranks third, Estonia seventh and Germany eleventh of the 27 European Union Member States included in DESI 2021. Compared to Sweden and Estonia, the level of digitalisation in Germany does not seem to be particularly high. This also emerges from the Corporate Digitalisation Index (CDI) developed by the European Investment Bank. CDI was presented in the report of the European Investment Bank *Digitalisation of Europe 2020–2021: Evidence from the EIB Investment Survey* (EIBIS). According to the EIBIS Corporate Digitalisation Index describing the situation of companies in terms of the use of digital technologies, Germany ranks only seventeenth, Sweden fourth, and Estonia sixteenth.

Sweden ranks second of the 27 European Union countries under the section on human capital, scoring above the European Union average on the share of the population with both basic and above average digital skills: 72% and 46% of the population each. With 62% of Estonians having at least basic digital skills, Estonia ranks fifth on human capital while Germany ranks seventh of 27 European Union countries. Thus, all three countries are above the European Union average. Estonia ranks first, Sweden fifth, and Germany sixteenth in the

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

European Union on digital public services. If Sweden ranks fifth on connectivity with 87% of rural households having cess to a broadband connection, then Germany is sixth, and Estonia comes in eighteenth.

The educational systems of Estonia, Germany, and Sweden are highly decentralised: each municipality in Estonia and Sweden and each federal state in Germany provide students and teachers with the digital equipment they need. The situation may therefore be different for each country or even for the municipality and the federal state as a whole. Because of this, it is difficult to obtain statistics. Many schools sourced this equipment even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Digital or digitally associated skills continue to be a focus area in these educational systems.

The situation of Russophones is also diverse in the countries studied. The following is a brief overview of the Russophone communities that have developed in Estonia, Germany, and Sweden. We selected the following countries for our study, based on the following principles: 1) Estonia and Germany have significant Russophone populations, but for different historical and political reasons. Estonia experienced colonisation during the imperial period and the Soviet era, while Germany has a history of post-revolutionary and (post-)Soviet emigration. 2) Sweden has close historical and economic ties with Russia, demonstrated through political and economic unions, strategic partnerships, as well as historical stereotypes and clichés. These relationships carry both positive and negative traits in historical memory. Thus, our study includes Estonia (a post-Soviet state), Germany (representing Western Europe), and Sweden (a Nordic country).

2.2 Russophone population in three countries

The dissolution of the USSR caused intense migration waves. Most post-Soviet citizens immigrated to Germany and Sweden from the USSR or its successor states (including Estonia) in the second half of the 1980s, the 1990s, or at the beginning of the 2000s. In Estonia, Russophones cannot be considered a typical minority group due to socio-historical factors; most Russophones are not recent immigrants but have lived in Estonia for generations.

Russian was the dominant language of a number of different ethnicities in the territory of the Soviet Union (including those who settled in Estonia during the Soviet period). As of 2022, the Russophone population in Estonia forms 29.5% of the total population (1.3 million people). The Russophone population of Estonia lives very compactly: only 20% live in majority Estonian-speaking areas. Almost half of the Russophone population lives in Tallinn and a third in Ida-Viru County, a region which is economically weaker than the rest of the country (see more in Ehala and Zabrodskaja, 2014).

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Many immigrants from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, the majority of whom had little or no command of German, arrived in Germany. They considered Russian to be their mother tongue and often their only language of communication (Achterberg, 2005). Nowadays, the community of Russophone immigrants in Germany consists of about 3.5 million people, of whom 2.7 million have personal immigration experience (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019). In general, Russophone immigrants are divided into three groups (Dietz and Roll, 2019: 103–108). The first and most numerous group consists of ethnic Germans (Russian Germans). Russian Germans are ethnic Germans resettled in the USSR who later returned to Germany from 1987 onwards. The second group consists of 235,000 people of Jewish origin who came to Germany from the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic states, between 1991 and 2015. The third group of at least 506,000 people (own calculation based on data from the Federal Statistical Office; see Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019) are Russophone immigrants who came to Germany to study, work, reunite with their families or as refugees.

The Russophone population of Sweden is not as numerous as in Germany, totalling roughly only 29,000 people (Parkvall, 2015:276). But this number is steadily increasing, including people of different ethnicities and nationalities who use Russian as their primary language (or one of the languages) to communicate on an everyday basis and who transfer Russian to their children. To some extent, this group is unified in their efforts to maintain Russian and to transfer it to their children (Gagarina, Fichman, Galkina, Protassova, Ringblom, and Rodina, 2021). Russian immigrants are heterogeneous, and the opportunities for them to transmit the Russian language to their children vary depending on their place of residence and environment.

To conclude, these groups in the three countries might be called Russophone communities without distinguishing their different ethnic backgrounds because their common identity is constructed mainly by means of the Russian language.

Section 3 introduces the theoretical concepts needed to document and investigate the relationship between family language policies, digital technologies, and reported language practices within the Russophone families in Estonia, Germany, and Sweden.

3 The theoretical framework: Family language policy and digitalisation

The research area of FLP is concerned with language use and management in the family and aims to understand why, how, and when language maintenance

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

and transfer take place in the family environment (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry, 2008; Obojska and Purkarthofer, 2018; Lanza and Lomeu Gomes, 2020; Karpava, Ringblom, and Zabrodskaja, 2022). The term 'family' refers either to the nuclear family consisting of parents and children or to the extended family, which includes grandparents and other relatives. Study of the extended family has been integrated in the current research because we believe that it contributes significantly to the total effect of family background on HL transmission via digital technologies.

In the situation of family language use, especially in the nuclear family, both parents and children are active agents, and the FLP is a complex and bidirectional process in which language changes are partly due to sociocultural dynamics and ideological systems (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry, 2008). Based on these findings, the term FLP is defined in the present study as follows: FLP includes children's and parents' attitudes towards family language, actual preferences in language choice in communication with each other and extended family members, and the measures taken on the part of parents and grandparents for the intergenerational transfer of family languages (see also Schwartz, 2008; Spolsky, 2012; King and Fogle, 2013; Brehmer and Mehlhorn, 2018; Maximova, Noyanzina, Omelchenko, and Maximova, 2018; Karpava, Ringblom, and Zabrodskaja, 2020a).

The (growing) role of digital technologies for the development of language competencies has been demonstrated in numerous linguistic studies over the last two decades, such as motivational aspects of new technologies (e.g., Franklin, 2001), the notion of family digital literacy (e.g., Marsh, Hannon, Lewis, and Ritchie, 2017; Hatoss, 2020), and language use and the wish to be a part of popular culture and social media (e.g., Little, 2020). Curdt-Christiansen and Huang (2020: 188) even call it a 'new phenomenon' and suggest names such as 'cross-boundary connectedness', 'being digitally networked', 'networked FLP', referring to the family cross-border network and its impact on FLP.

Scientists point out that the most important technologies include computer games and apps, YouTube, digital television, and diverse social media. On the one hand, they bring new opportunities as they give access to different languages and language learning programs. On the other hand, the main concerns of the parents remain screen time (cf. Little, 2020:262) and choice of content, which appears to be even more difficult to control. But parents still function as 'gatekeepers at a variety of levels, ultimately controlling access to both hardware and software' (Little, 2020: 269).

The literature indicated in this third section was reviewed to relate this to our four research questions. In what follows, data collection tools and techniques as well as methodological choices adopted to collect and analyse empirical data are presented.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

4 The methodological framework

4.1 Study participants

To gain insight into the reported language practices, we used the snowball sampling method to recruit 45 Russophone families, 15 in each country. These families were middle class, educated, financially stable, and had at least one child between the ages of 4 and 18. All parent participants, aged 30–50, used digital media daily. In the Estonian sample, all were born in Estonia. In Germany and Sweden, they came as early as the 1990s or 2000s and had hardly any contact with their Russian-speaking friends and relatives in their home countries shortly after immigration. Given this fact, it is not surprising that study participants in Germany and Sweden describe the opportunities to use digital media as a great chance and a new era of communication. Through digital media, study participants in the three countries reconnected with many of their friends and acquaintances not only in Russia but around the world and watched more movies and videos in Russian. As a result, especially in Germany and Sweden, the interviewees stated that they use the Russian language (again) to a greater extent. In Estonia, it helps to maintain linguistic and cultural ties within Russophone communities and diasporas.

4.2 Data collection method and analysis

We prepared an interview framework consisting of a list of questions that allowed us to consider the range of topics to be covered in the interview. The broad, open-ended questions were developed on the basis of four research questions (see the introduction): languages in the family communication, teaching and use of Russian as a HL before and during the pandemic, use of digital technologies, and their influence on reported language practices.

All semi-structured in-depth interviews with one parent (a mother or father) from each family (see Table 1) were conducted in person or online in Russian by the authors who are part of the local communities and insiders regarding the topic of inquiry (Holmes, 2020). In the Estonian data, translanguaging examples were detected: for example, parents referred to YouTube by its Estonian name, *YouTube'i kanal*, and not its Russian name, *kanal YouTuba*.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Table 1. Demographic data on the participants.

Country		Estonia	Germany	Sweden
Age of parents	Mean	39.73	37.9	45.1
	SD	6.73	6.98	9.94
Education of parents	Range	25–48	26–49	28–63
	Vocational	2	6	4
	Higher	13	9	11
Number of children	Mean	2.46	1.87	2.33
	SD	0.91	1.06	0.61
	Range	1–4	1–5	1–3
Age of children	Mean	9	11.43	10.2
	SD	3.50	6.71	5.65
	Range	2–18	3–24	3–18
Mixed families	Russophone family	14	13	10
	Mixed family	1	2	5

We employed a phenomenological approach to obtain detailed descriptions of each participant's experiences and thoughts (Moustakas, 1994) concerning FLP in their families and the use of digital technologies and their role in intergenerational language transmission. Next, we present qualitative data from the transcribed narratives to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

5 Findings

Our narrative report includes a discussion of the main themes and sub-themes that arose in the course of the interviews. First, we looked at challenges and opportunities that digitalisation brings to FLP and language transmission. Our data shows that, thanks to the Internet, younger members of the family have greater access to HL. Second, we examined whether the use of digital technologies has an impact on the reported language practices within every nuclear family and on the use of Russian as a HL in particular. Third, we described what parents and grandparents undertake and how children define their roles as active users of digital tools in a HL: they want to understand what is written or said in Russian and here social networks may play a positive role. Fourth and finally, we looked at how parental agency can shape FLP and contribute to child agency when technology is used in conveying a HL.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

5.1 How digitalisation is changing FLP

Our qualitative data collected in three countries show that the "new generation" is very keen on digital technologies, and in the parents' view, they are much better at these things than the parents themselves. Sometimes it is not the parent who is helping the child but the child helping the parent. While this may of course change the hierarchy in the family, it also shows the child that (s)he is good at something that a parent is not.

Some parents stated that they actually spend more time with their children by engaging in joint activities and watching programs together. They then discuss these activities and programs afterward. Although the children have a time limit enforced on the usage of gadgets, they watch Russian and Soviet films on YouTube or listen to Russian music together with their parents. Smaller children watch Russian or old Soviet fairytales or cartoons. See, for example, Excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1

> I always show them [children] Soviet cartoons and fairy tales. They are somehow kinder than modern ones. And the faces of the characters are nicer. (*Estonia*)

Digitalisation happens automatically and children spend more and more time with technical devices, but it is not viewed as negative from the perspective of HL perspective. Digital communication allows children to communicate in Russian with their peers living in Russia; see Excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2

> My daughter has a friend in Russia. This is the daughter of my own friend. Thus, both girls speak with each other when I speak with my friend via Skype or WhatsApp. (*Germany*)

In Sweden, the parents noted that children spend more time with their iPads and that they are happy seeing children busy with new digital devices. See Excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3

> I put them with their iPads in order to get something done. (*Sweden*)

The role of the parents is primary here since it is not digitalisation itself or technical devices but what they do with their children that is important. The parents discover new unique tools and methods that are effective for their families.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Some parents also mention that they have discovered new learning tools online and use them actively with their children. It often happens that both generations try to understand new tools together, and, as new tools develop, they continuously discover them, spending quality time together in the process.

To conclude, digital technologies influence FLP. Technology facilitates intergenerational language transfer because it leads to an intensification of Internet communication within families, especially those with extended families. Families highlighted the intensification of communication with extended family members living outside Germany or Sweden, especially through internet-based videoconferencing. During the videoconferences, not only parents but also children were compelled to use the Russian language, which made an additional positive effect on the children. Next, we examined the agency of the child in selecting technologies and internet resources, as well as in learning Russian as a HL.

5.2 Russian language heritage speakers as actual learners by communicating online with family members or larger social networks

Searching for an answer to the second research question, we found that, in Germany, it depends on the age of the family members and on mutual interests. It was stated that children are normally less interested in communication with their grandparents living outside Germany, than in communication with younger family members. They do, however, learn new words or hear familiar words in new contexts and ask for additional explanations, which also leads to HL enrichment; see Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

> They [two daughters] do not really speak Russian themselves. Thus, they cannot speak with my parents who live in Moscow. But they partly understand our conversation, at least the older one. And sometimes she asks me some questions later. (*Germany*)

Before the pandemic, German and Swedish families either visited their relatives and friends in Russia once a year or else hosted them. Thus, children were compelled to use Russian, at least verbally. During the past two years, communication has tended to happen only online (i.e. via Zoom). Nonetheless, parents still note that their children try to communicate in Russian or use Russian when reading/watching the content. Here it becomes an issue as to what Russian language children actually communicate, read, and watch in. For example, in Sweden,

children surfing the Internet become exposed to different registers that their parents (often mothers) – as the only sources of input – do not use. Even if children attend Russian language classes, they are usually not introduced to the lower registers of Russian. Parents allow their children to watch various social media channels in Russian, and some even argue that swear words should not be feared or avoided, seeing such words as a natural part of language; see Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5

> They need to know the language in all its beauty and ugliness; otherwise, it'll just be the language of books. And they need to be exposed to a real language, so it is good that they watch it online since I do not use this language. (*Sweden*)

Nonetheless, Swedish children are also exposed to higher registers of Russian by being exposed (even passively) to the language of the conferences, seminars, and workshops that mothers attend, nowadays often online. They acquire new vocabulary and hear words in different contexts.

The situation of Russian families in Estonia is very specific since one third of the country's population speak Russian, and different Russian language registers are always available. During the interview, one of the parents listed bus routes that can be used to travel around Tallinn where any type of Russian language can be heard without doing anything online (some of these bus routes lead to passport and other document processing points).

If it is a Russian-Estonian family from Tallinn and or the southern part of Estonia with older relatives living in the former Soviet Union countries or Ida-Virumaa, online communication is much like the situation described in Germany and Sweden. But if older relatives live nearby or if children attend a Russian school or a language immersion class, online communication takes place with their friends living nearby. Often it is a mixture of Russian and Estonian, or only Russian (it became an especially frequent language of communication during the pandemic, as many children spent all their days speaking only Russian due to school closures); see Excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6

> With their school friends they chatted in Russian. They spoke in Russian even to those [friends] with whom they speak semi-Estonian [translanguage] during sport practice ... I didn't react to it at all. (*Estonia*)

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

In summary, the use of digital technologies has a supporting effect on intergenerational language transmission. However, their role is limited because parental efforts can run up against the reluctance and even protest of children, as we will see in section 5.3.

5.3 Digital tools used to promote HL transmission

Our results show that, during the pandemic in Germany and Sweden, online communication between all family members intensified, which is especially important for children. For some of them, it became a new motivation to use Russian and improve their knowledge of the HL. Online communication became a compensatory function when travel to Russia and/or informants' country of origin was impossible.

Meaningful communication can also be achieved by communicating online with remote family members. Children began to communicate with grandparents via messengers (Excerpt 7), where it was found that grandparents write in Russian, and children respond in German or Swedish or Russian using the Latin alphabet. Some parents started to teach their children the Cyrillic alphabet and write messages to them (only) in Russian.

Excerpt 7

> Grandparents read fairy tales in Russian and send them to their grandchildren as audio messages in WhatsApp (Telegram). (*Germany*)

Child agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy became a source of enrichment in their day-to-day online activities. Parents listed situations when a child wants to write and speak Russian on their own. As a positive example of online communication, it was mentioned that, although grandparents only had online contact with their grandchildren, their personal relationship with the latter was strengthened (Excerpt 8). Real and meaningful interaction facilitates the transmission of a HL.

Excerpt 8

> She just grabs the telephone and calls her grandma and goes around with it and shows what is around, and then she speaks Russian. (*Sweden*)

Some children watched different channels and websites on their own to gather information and did not do so only in the societal language, which is also a language of education as in Excerpt 9, but in a HL as well. Parents noted that there are now good digital tools for learning Russian.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Excerpt 9

> They downloaded ebooks both in Russian and Estonian (...) We read books more often than previously. In Estonian, they had to read because of homework, but in Russian they read with pleasure, and it was more difficult to make them tidy up their bedroom because they spent hours laying on the beds. Although my husband suspected that they were not only reading but also chatting. (*Estonia*)

Partly negative were those examples of children looking for interactive aspects of communication online, discovering new role models in Russian and being introduced to different registers. Parents also note that children can watch 'real heroes', such as YouTubers or TikTokers, in real time and for much longer than movies or cartoons because they can even interact with them (at least in theory), and it is possible to leave comments (which is impossible in movies). Teenagers find role models on TikTok or YouTube which they can compare themselves to because they are the same age, and the interaction becomes more meaningful when TikTokers are also 13–14 years old. Children find it more interesting to watch and interact with them. In Germany, the situation is very similar to the Swedish one: children find their own new Russian language role models on YouTube (but not TikTok).

Parents and their children use new online learning tools actively, which leads to more joint activities and acquisition of new words. Here, parental involvement and their strategies are the main element in successful language transmission. Some parents stated that if a movie, TV show, or anything else the children were watching was interesting, they wanted to discuss it later – and wanted to discuss it in Russian.

Parents also used technical devices in order to have some free time and make children do something in the HL on their own, but some noticed that kids could become addicted and it might be hard to stop them.

5.4 Technology used in language policy/transmission

In Germany and Sweden, parents admitted that, now, when Russian television and the Internet present, children seldom watch the same content in Russian with them. They mostly watch videos in the societal language, or in English if their parents do not direct them to watch in Russian. Thus, in these countries, promoting a HL in family communication requires that the technology be first used by parents. This is important so that children can get used to the Russian language so that this language becomes part of their everyday life. When children are introduced to the Russian language, they use it in the context of their own interests; see Excerpt 10.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Excerpt 10

> My son likes to play computer games. He found some tips for a better strategy in Russian and started to learn the Cyrillic alphabet on his own. I explained to him only several letters. That was his way to learn to read in Russian. (*Germany*)

In Sweden, similar examples were given about a child who wanted to learn the Russian alphabet so that he could write in Russian on social media. This would allow him to watch more interesting films.

In all three countries, child agency has its roots in childhood. Parents in all countries related how they started with the Russian cartoons (i.e., 'Masha and the Bear', 'Gena the Crocodile and Cheburashka'), and this led to children watching other Soviet and Russian cartoons, movies, and TV series on their own or with their parents.

If children can read and write in Russian, they look for Russian videos on YouTube themselves. Some parents allow their children to watch whatever they want, as long as it is in Russian. According to them, children need to know the real language so it is good that they are watching it online. Some parents added that one should not fear slang or incorrect usage because this is part of the language; see Excerpt 11.

Excerpt 11

> Of course to say *lozitj* [correct term: *klastj*] 'to put' is not correct but the children in Russia are exposed to *lozitj* and they [my children] need to understand that it is wrong and they should not use it. But they still hear it, and my kids should hear it as well! (*Sweden*)

Some parents, however, take an active part in teaching the grammatically correct HL because they want to teach grammar and enrich their children's vocabulary; see Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12

> She does not have a rich vocabulary in Russian yet. I taught her letters, also read fairy tales, stories, comics, and she watched Russian cartoons. The comedy series 'The Fixies' is particularly enlightening. It allows me to discuss life situations with her and to pay attention to the vocabulary. (*Estonia*)

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

To summarise, understanding how to deal with and use technology is one of the most important aspects of creating FLP and passing on a HL. Many parents nowadays believe that digital tools have brought about opportunities for HL learning and teaching. While some parents rejoice in their children's increased access to HL information and overlook its actual quality, others are concerned about the appropriateness of the HL in which information circulates on digital networks. Thus, digital tools involve both opportunities and challenges.

6 Discussion and conclusions

There are certain commonalities and differences between the countries in relation to understanding digital literacies and reported language practices within the Russophone families. Due to the intensification of Internet communication in families, especially with distant relatives, parents note the compensatory function of digital tools (cf. Curdt-Christiansen and Huang, 2020; Hatoss, 2020) when travel to Russia and other Russian-speaking countries was not possible. First of all, in Germany and Sweden, children of every age may accidentally learn new words during video conferences between parents and other family members. In Estonia, intra-family online communication allows the families to stay in touch with cultural life and develop the modern Russian language.

What is common to all three countries is the successful use of digital technologies and their transformation into tools for learning a HL. On the one hand, it helps Russophone families preserve and develop linguistic and cultural connections. On the other hand, however, it can contribute to the unregulated acquisition of Russian language registers available on the Internet by children (cf. Franklin, 2001). Thus, learning Russian as a HL is the result of how parents and children choose and organise online opportunities, how they make its content more relevant, and how they create relationships (cf. Little, 2020). The use of and exposure to the Soviet cultural heritage and modern Russian culture (films, cartoons, TV shows) by the parents is another similarity noticed between the three countries.

The importance of child agency (Said and Zhu, 2019; Smith-Christmas, 2021) in the choice of technology and Internet resources, and the fact that parents do not always approve of them, is a similar trend in all countries. In Germany and Sweden, children discover new Russian-speaking role models, and parents note that they can watch 'real heroes', such as YouTubers or TikTokers, in real time for hours – many more than they spend watching movies or cartoons – since they can interact with them (at least in theory) and leave comments. In the most digitised country (see section 2.1), Sweden, parents find that social platforms are

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

actually positive since teenagers listen to different varieties of Russian. Parents noted that even if a child grows tired of watching cartoons, he or she can watch YouTubers constantly. In Germany, children of school age search independently for tips in Russian to play computer games more successfully.

Thanks to the Internet, young family members have greater access to Russian as a HL in Estonia, Germany, and Sweden. Families living in Germany and Sweden seem to benefit even more from digitalisation, and this was especially so during the pandemic, since they get more channels to access the Russian language and new HL learning opportunities. But in the German and Swedish families interviewed, the younger members of the family do not make much use of this opportunity (although the situation is different in Estonia as there is a higher number of schools where Russian is taught and the opportunities to acquire literacy in the HL are certainly better). One of the main reasons is the inability to write in Cyrillic. Nevertheless, children show great interest in communicating with their peers, such as cousins who live outside the country (cf. Curdt-Christiansen and Huang, 2020). In such cases, they try to speak in Russian more and even explain some local words from the majority language. To sum up, the child agency identifies situations where children want to write and speak Russian on their own (cf. Marsh, Hannon, Lewis and Ritchie, 2017).

In Estonia, Germany and Sweden, very little is known about the learning opportunities for children and their access to the HL through digital technology, let alone the learning and literacy practices that can result. To fill in the gap, in this article we took it upon ourselves to examine the reported situations and capacities of children and parents, focusing on three countries. Because children under the age of 18 are largely dependent on and supervised by adults, their access to a HL and mastery of digital technologies is strictly controlled by parents (cf. Little, 2020).

Karpava, Ringblom, and Zabrodskaja (2022) observe that even if parents act as teachers of Russian, buy Russian literature, and organise extracurricular activities in Russian, this may not be enough without the conscious and consistent use of the HL by the parents to pass Russian on to their children. Here, we have tried to expand on the topic of parental involvement and child agency and understand the contexts of access and use of Russian online and parental actions that shape FLP. Involving only 45 families from each country was, of course, a limitation of this study. On the other hand, it gave us the opportunity to study each individual case in greater depth.

In addition, it must be recognised that new digital technologies are constantly evolving, penetrating families' homes and daily life in general, and have

implications for everyday language use. Thus, parents must be open to new technologies, and must discover new tools and ways to interact with their children online if they wish to teach them the HL.

Since Covid-19, attitudes toward digital technology have changed due to homeschooling (Daniel, 2020) and the availability of online courses. Consequently, more research efforts need to be directed toward exploring the relationship between digital technologies and HL transmission, expanding the research focus of family language policy. There are lessons to be learned from this that can fruitfully influence family language policy and practice. Exploring such topics is both pedagogically and theoretically important as it can help expand educational practices using digital technologies, as well as redefine the very notion of family language policy.

Our next study will focus on the following questions. How is the choice and practice of language use in families is influenced by the macrolinguistic context (cf. Karpava, Ringblom and Zabrodskaja, 2019; Karpava, Ringblom and Zabrodskaja, 2020b)? What is the foreseeable future of intergenerational transmission of Russian in the diaspora context? How do the language attitudes of parents and children differ in relation to heritage and societal languages?

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript and share co-first authorship.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three reviewers for taking the necessary time and effort to review the manuscript. We sincerely appreciate their valuable comments and suggestions.

About the authors

Natalia Ringblom is a Senior Lecturer and an Associate Professor at the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University (Umeå, Sweden). Her main research interests include bilingualism, heritage language acquisition and maintenance, with a particular focus on Russian in Sweden.

Anna Ritter is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Koblenz (Koblenz, Germany). Her research interests include sociolinguistics, code-switching, family language policy, and German as a second language.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Anastassia Zabrodskaja is Professor of Intercultural Communication at Tallinn University (Tallinn, Estonia). Her primary research interests are identity, language contacts, and linguistic landscapes.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

References

Achterberg, J. (2005) *Zur Vitalität slawischer Idiome in Deutschland*. Munich: Sagner.

Brehmer, B. and Mehlhorn, G. (2018) *Herkunftssprachen*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto.

Curdt-Christiansen, X.L. and Huang, J. (2020) Factors influencing family language policy. In A.C. Schalley and S.A. Eisenchlas (eds) *Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors* 174–193. Berlin and Boston: Mouton de Gruyter. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510175-009.

Daniel, S.J. (2020) Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects* 49: 91–96. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3.

Dietz, B. and Roll, H. (2019) Die Einwanderung aus der Sowjetunion und ihren Nachfolgestaaten. In K. Witzlack-Makarevich and N. Wulff (eds) *Handbuch des Russischen in Deutschland. Migration – Mehrsprachigkeit – Spracherwerb* 101–114. Berlin: Frank and Timme.

Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI 2021) European Commission. Retrieved from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi

Digitalisation of Europe (2020–2021) Evidence from the EIB Investment Survey. European Investment Bank. Retrieved from: https://www.eib.org/en/publications/digitalisation-in-europe-2020-2021

Ehala, M. and Zabrodskaja, A. (2014) Ethnolinguistic vitality and acculturation orientations of Russian speakers in Estonia. In L. Ryazanova-Clarke (ed.) *The Russian language outside the nation* 166–188. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Doi: https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748668458.003.0007.

Franklin, G. (2001) Special educational needs issues and ICT. In M. Leask (ed.) *Issues in teaching using ICT* 105–116. London: Routledge.

Gagarina, N., Fichman, S., Galkina, E., Protassova, E.; Ringblom, N., and Rodina, Y. (2021) How oral texts are organised in monolingual and heritage Russian: Evidence from six countries. In S. Armon-Lotem and K.K. Grohmann (eds) *Language impairment in multilingual settings: LITMUS in action across Europe* 47–76. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1075/tilar.29.02gag.

Hatoss, A. (2020) Transnational grassroots language planning in the era of mobility and the Internet. In A.C. Schalley and S.A. Eisenchlas (eds) *Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors* 274–292. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510175-014.

Holmes, A.G.D. (2020) Researcher positionality – A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research – A new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8(4): 1–10. Doi: https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232.

Karpava, S., Ringblom, N., and Zabrodskaja, A. (2019) Translanguaging in the family context: Evidence from Cyprus, Sweden and Estonia. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 23(3): 619–641. Doi: https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2019-23-3-619-641.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Karpava, S., Ringblom, N., and Zabrodskaja, A. (2020a) Family language policy leading to multilingual home literacy environment: Evidence from interviews with Russian-speaking mothers in Cyprus, Estonia and Sweden. *HumaNetten* 45: 11–39. Doi: https://doi.org/10.15626/hn.20204502.

Karpava, S., Ringblom, N., and Zabrodskaja, A. (2020b) A look at the translanguaging space of Russian-speaking families in Cyprus, Estonia and Sweden: On the possible interrelationship between family language policy and linguistic landscape. In L. Sciriha (ed.) *Comparative studies in bilingualism and bilingual education* 75–96. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

Karpava, S., Ringblom, N., and Zabrodskaja, A. (2022) Comparing family language policy in Cyprus, Estonia and Sweden: Efforts and choices among Russian-speaking families. In M. Hornsby and W. McLeod (eds) *Transmitting minority languages: Complementary reversing language shift strategies* 279–304. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87910-5_11.

King, K.A., Fogle, L. and Logan-Terry, A. (2008) Family language policy. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2(5): 907–922. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2008.00076.x.

King, K.A. and Fogle, L.W. (2013) Family language policy and bilingual parenting. *Language Teaching* 46(2): 172–194. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444812000493.

Lanza, E. and Lomeu Gomes, R. (2020) Family language policy: Foundations, theoretical perspectives and critical approaches. In A.C. Schalley and S.A. Eisenchlas (eds) *Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors* 153–173. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510175-008.

Little, S. (2020) Social media and the use of technology in home language maintenance. In A.C. Schalley and S.A. Eisenchlas (eds) *Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors* 257–273. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510175-013.

Marsh, J., Hannon, P., Lewis M., and Ritchie, L. (2017) Young children's initiation into family literacy practices in the digital age. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 15(1): 47–60. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X15582095.

Maximova, S., Noyanzina, O., Omelchenko, D., and Maximova, M. (2018) The Russian-speakers in the CIS countries: Migration activity and preservation of the Russian language. *MATEC Web of Conferences* 212: 1–11. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1051/matecconf/201821210005.

McCarty, T.L. (ed.) (2011) *Ethnography and language policy*. London: Routledge.

McCarty, T.L. (2015) *Ethnography in language planning and policy research.* In F.M. Hult and D.C. Johnson (eds) *Research methods in language policy and planning. A practical guide* 81–93. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Melo-Pfeifer, S. (2015) The role of the family in heritage language use and learning: Impact on heritage language policies. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 18(1): 26–44. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.868400.

Moustakas, C. (1994) *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Obojska, M.A. and Purkarthofer, J. (2018) 'And all of a sudden, it became my rescue': Language and agency in transnational families in Norway. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 15(3): 249–261. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2018.1477103.

Parkvall, M. (2015) *Sveriges språk i siffror* [*Swedish in numbers*].Stockholm: Språkrådet, Morfem and Parkvall.

Said, F. and Zhu, H. (2019) 'No, no Maama! Say "Shaatir ya Ouledee Shaatir"!' Children's agency in language use and socialisation. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 23(3): 771–785. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006916684919.

Schwartz, M. (2008) Exploring the relationship between family language policy and heritage language knowledge among second generation Russian-Jewish immigrants in Israel. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 29(5): 400–418. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630802147916.

Schwartz, M. (2010) Family language policy: Core issues of an emerging field. *Applied Linguistics Review* 1: 171–192. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110222654.171.

Smith-Christmas, C. (2021) Using a 'family language policy' lens to explore the dynamics and relational nature of child agency. *Children and Society* 36(3): 354–368. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12461.

Spolsky, B. (2012) Family language policy: The critical domain. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 33(1): 3–11. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2011.638072.

Statistisches Bundesamt (2019) *Bevölkerung in Privathaushalten nach Migrationshintergrund im weiteren Sinn nach Geburtsstaat in Staatengruppen.* Retrieved from: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/migrationshintergrund-staatsangehoerigkeit-staatengruppen.html

(Received 30th November 2022; accepted 28th February 2023;
final revision received 20th June 2023)

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.24778 - Wednesday, February 11, 2026 5:19:16 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80