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CONGRATULATIONS TO EATE

Ilmar Anvelt

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EATE was founded in 1991, in the initial days of the Republic of Estonia, at a time of great enthusiasm and great hopes. This was the time when many prewar social organizations were revived or new ones founded. The English teachers of Estonia did not have their professional organisation before World War II. Although there was the Academic Anglo-Estonian Society, its membership and goals were quite different from a teachers' association. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the borders opened. Although everyone had learnt a foreign language at school, many had considered it something that they would never need in their lives. Suddenly, there was an urgent need for using foreign language skills in practice, and this language was mainly English. Teachers also understood that they needed to upgrade their language competences and acquire new methods. There was a real boom of language courses everywhere, and many schoolteachers, mostly teachers of Russian, requalified as teachers of English.



I was not an EATE member from the very beginning; I became a member of EATE and its committee in 1997. I was invited by Nora Toots, my colleague at the University of Tartu. As I had no good counterarguments, I agreed. My main task on the committee was editing the EATE Newsletter as it was called then. The first issue edited by me was disastrous as it was full of unpardonable errors. I had had too much trust in technology and other people. This was a good lesson for me, and later I checked everything carefully.

Gradually, the scope of the Newsletter and the themes of the articles broadened. It had surpassed the newspaper format and developed into a journal. The committee organised a name competition which was won by Reet Kotkas from Elva Gymnasium. Our publication has come out under the name of OPEN! from November 2022. We immediately loved the inviting and energetic character of the new name.

The last issues of OPEN! edited by me covered a broad range of topics. As natural for a journal of a teachers' organisation, there were many articles on teaching methodology but not only. A number of articles dealt with teacher-student relations, life and customs in English-speaking countries, history of English studies in Estonia, impressions of foreign lecturers working in Estonia. There were book reviews, interviews with teachers and other English-teaching professionals. The share of photos and other illustrative material has increased over the years.

In addition to editing of OPEN! I participated in the organisation of many EATE events. During my time at EATE, I worked under different chairpersons – Carmen Ruus, Juta Hennoste, Leena Punga and Erika Puusemp – and have good memories of all of them; each had a different character and leadership style. Although over the times some committee members left and new ones came, we formed a tightly-knit team who had learned to arrange things smoothly.

I left the EATE Committee in 2023. I had retired from my job at the university several years earlier and had been away from active teaching for quite a time. The last issue of OPEN! edited by me was No. 62. I felt that someone who is in direct contact with everyday educational problems should take over. I'm glad to see that work continues.

I sincerely congratulate EATE on its 35th anniversary. My great thanks go out to all the authors who have contributed to OPEN! over this long time and all the others who have helped in its publication process. I wish EATE success in the years to come.

Connecting Locally, Impacting Globally: The Role of Estonian Language Teachers' Networks in a Changing World

Ene Peterson

*Chair of the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers (EVÕL),
a member of the Estonian Association of Teachers of English (EATE)*



Introduction

In today's multilingual and rapidly changing world, language teachers are not only classroom practitioners but also active participants in dynamic professional communities that extend far beyond national borders. Estonia is no exception. Through strong national networks and active international engagement, Estonian foreign language teachers contribute to and benefit from global collaboration.

This article explores the role of the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers (EVÕL) and its member organisations particularly the Estonian Association of Teachers of English (EATE) in fostering professional growth, strengthening international cooperation, and shaping the future of language education. It also reflects on my own journey within these networks and the broader value of belonging to both national and international professional communities.

A Strong National Foundation: The Role of EVÕL

The Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers (EVÕL), established in 2009, serves as an umbrella organisation bringing together teachers of English, German, French, Russian, Finnish, and Estonian as a Second Language. Its mission is to promote linguistic diversity, support the professional development of teachers, and strengthen cooperation in an increasingly multicultural educational landscape.

Over the years, EVÕL has grown significantly, with membership tripling to nearly 900 members. The Estonian Association of Teachers of English (EATE), the largest subject association within EVÕL, plays a particularly active role in this network.

The association's work is supported by the Ministry of Education and Research, and its activities focus on two key areas:

- strengthening professional collaboration and teacher development, and
- promoting multilingualism while mediating international knowledge to Estonian teachers.

Activities of key area 1 include organizing a training course for trainers "Bringing the European Language Portfolio to Teachers" (2011-2013); autumn conferences since 2015, regional seminars since 2011, regional seminars combined with visits to upper-secondary schools since 2023, regional seminars combined with language fairs since 2023, roundtables since 2013, hosting international conferences in 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017; involvement in ESF projects: "Foreign language teacher and teaching in the new curriculum" (2011-2013); ESF project "An International Examination" (2017-2022). We have organized training courses to introduce the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and the Companion Volume to teachers.

Activities of key area 2 include involvement in CertiLingua programme since 2014, participation of Estonian representatives at the annual meetings of the CertiLingua network, attending European Centre of Modern Languages (ECML) summer seminars since 2022, involvement of ECML experts for conducting seminars in Estonia, organizing training courses to introduce the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and the Companion Volume. Contact point for the ECML in

Estonia Kati Bakradze-Pank disseminates information and documentation on the Centre's work on a national level.

Recognising Contribution: Celebrating Members

An essential part of EVÕL's work is recognising the people behind these developments. Since 2014, the association has acknowledged outstanding contributions of its members and partners.

At milestone anniversaries — such as the 10th and 15th anniversary conferences — special recognition has been given to those whose work has significantly shaped the association. Members of EATE have consistently been among these contributors, highlighting the strong role of English language teachers within the broader professional community.

These recognitions are more than symbolic — they reflect a culture of appreciation, collaboration, and shared responsibility that sustains the work of the association.

Expanding Horizons: International Cooperation

While EVÕL provides a strong national framework, its impact is amplified through international collaboration. Estonia has been an active member of global networks such as the International Federation of Language Teacher Associations (FIPLV) and its regional Nordic-Baltic Region (NBR). See <https://fiplv.com/>

Our representative in FIPLV /NBR Board is Ene Peterson, Chair of the Estonian Association of Foreign Languages.

Through these networks, Estonian teachers participate in international conferences, contribute to professional discussions, and share their expertise. Since joining the NBR in 2012 and FIPLV in 2013, EVÕL has steadily strengthened its international presence.

Participation in events such as the FIPLV World Congresses and NBR conferences has provided opportunities to present research, exchange ideas, and bring global perspectives back to Estonia. Hosting the NBR conference in Tallinn in 2016 marked a particularly important milestone, demonstrating Estonia's growing visibility in the international language education community.

Learning, Sharing, and Growing: Professional Networks in Action

International engagement is not only about visibility — it is also about learning and growth. Representatives of EVÕL have actively contributed to World Congresses in Niagara Falls, Canada in 2015, and in Warsaw, Poland in 2022. Our representatives have presented at FIPLV / NBR conferences in Vilnius in 2018, in Reykjavik (Iceland) in 2023, and in Helsinki (Finland) in 2025, addressing topics ranging from language policy and teachers' professional development to digital tools and artificial intelligence in language teaching.

Equally important is the contribution to professional publications, such as the FIPLV/NBR newsletters, which serve as a platform for sharing experiences, projects, and ideas. Over the years, Estonian foreign language teachers — including many EATE members (Ilmar Anvelt, Merike Saar, Erika Puusemp, Ene Peterson, Kati Bakradze-Pank, Kai Tammik, Elen Laanemaa, Riina Kuuskor) have played a key role in making the work of EVÕL visible internationally.

A Personal Perspective: My Journey with EATE and IATEFL

My own professional journey reflects the value of these networks. As a member of EATE since 2000 and a regular participant in IATEFL conferences since 2008, I have experienced first-hand the power of international collaboration.

IATEFL conferences have offered a unique opportunity to engage with educators from around the world, gain insight into global trends, and share my own experiences as a teacher and teacher trainer. Presenting at these conferences has been both a professional milestone and a source of inspiration.

Equally valuable has been the opportunity to learn from leading linguists, authors of handbooks, textbooks, methodologists, teacher trainers in the field, e.g. *Tessa Woodward, Jeremy Harmer, David Crystal, Nik Peachey, Gordon Lewis, Russel Stannard, Scott Thornbury, Eric Barber, Keith Kelly, Mario Rinvoluti, Penny Ur, Adrian Underhill, Andrew Wright, Marjorie Rosenberg, Gavin Dudley, Ian Badger, Kieran Donaghy*.

Encounters with well-known experts and practitioners have shaped my approach to teaching, encouraging me to explore areas such as process writing, digital literacies, visual literacy, storytelling, vocabulary development and teaching foreign languages in the age of AI.

These experiences have not remained at the individual level — they have been shared with colleagues through workshops, seminars, and conference presentations in Estonia and outside Estonia, contributing to the wider professional community.

Why Networks Matter

Belonging to professional associations — both national and international — offers numerous benefits. These include opportunities for professional development, access to resources, and participation in collaborative projects. Just as importantly, they provide a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded professionals.

For many foreign language teachers, associations offer practical advantages: access to training, reduced conference fees, professional publications, and opportunities to exchange ideas. At a deeper level, they foster motivation, inspiration, and professional identity.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite their many strengths, teacher associations also face challenges. Active participation requires time, funding, and sustained commitment. Ensuring long-term engagement and involving a wider range of members remains an ongoing task.

At the same time, these challenges are balanced by significant opportunities. International collaboration enables innovation, strengthens advocacy for language education, and supports the development of inclusive and forward-looking teaching practices.

Building a Connected Future

In an age where multilingualism and intercultural competence are increasingly important, the role of teacher networks cannot be overstated. Through organisations like EVÕL, EATE, FIPLV, and IATEFL, Estonian language teachers are part of a global professional community that shares knowledge, supports innovation, and shapes the future of education.

These networks remind us that language teaching is not confined to classrooms or national systems — it is a collaborative, evolving, and deeply human endeavour.

Celebrating Commitment: Recognising Member Contributions to the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers

Ene Peterson

Chair of the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers (EVÕL),
a member of the Estonian Association of Teachers of English (EATE)

The Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers (EVÕL) has been recognising the contributions of its members since 2014, when the association celebrated its 5th anniversary. At the 10th anniversary conference on 22 November 2019, we honoured those members and partners who had made the most significant contributions over the first decade. Similarly, at the 15th anniversary conference on 7 November 2025, recognition was given to those whose dedication and work had shaped the association over fifteen years. Members of the Estonian Association of Teachers of English (EATE) have been among the recipients of these awards and acknowledgements.



2019

Aastate koolitaja Ülle Türk

Recognised as a highly valued trainer over many years, Ülle Türk led numerous training courses between 2009 and 2015 on the European Language Portfolio and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, as well as follow-up courses, assessment training, and state exam preparation. She has been a sought-after speaker at EVÕL conferences and round tables and contributed as a trainer in the project *International Language Examination* (2017–2020).

Uus tegija — Kati Bakradze

A board member of EATE (2016–2020) and EVÕL since 2016, Kati Bakradze has been an energetic generator and implementer of ideas. She was a member of the organising committee of the NBR 2016 conference, an organiser of EVÕL annual meetings, autumn conferences, and round tables, and an active promoter of the association both in Estonia and internationally. Since 2018, she has also served as Estonia's contact person for the European Centre for Modern Languages.

2020

Aasta tegija — Kati Bakradze

Recognised for her key role in the day-to-day organisation of the association and for fostering collaboration among members, as well as for organising training events and bringing international expertise to Estonia through her work with the European Centre for Modern Languages. Her initiative, communication skills, and organisational abilities are highly valued.

2021

Aasta tegu — Online Conference “Let’s Integrate Creatively!” (19 March 2021)

Led by Kati Bakradze, the organising team successfully prepared and delivered this widely appreciated online event.

Aasta koolitaja — Project “International Language Examination” Training Team

Awarded for their effective work in delivering seminars and sharing expertise.

Ülle Türk contributed as a trainer, leading information seminars for English teachers and student teachers.

2022

Aasta koolitaja — Kristi Lõbu

A prolific creator of teaching materials and trainer in various professional development programmes, Kristi Lõbu has also introduced digital learning environments to teachers. Her Facebook group *Ideas for Teachers* has over 9,000 followers, and the corresponding YouTube channel has over 90,000 views.

2023

Aasta tegu — European Day of Languages Event “Multilingualism Enriches!”

The language fair-conference dedicated to the European Day of Languages was successfully organised under the leadership of Ene Peterson.

2024

Aastate panustaja — Kati Bakradze-Pank

An active member and Vice-Chair of EVÕL, as well as Estonia's representative to the European Centre for Modern Languages, Kati has been described as the second heart of the association over the past eight years. She has organised conferences and training events, delivered presentations, and initiated new ideas, including regional training visits to state upper secondary schools. She was also the initiator and moderator of the panel “*Ei saa sotti, kas on motti? #võõrkeeled?*” at the 2024 Opinion Festival.

2025

Aastate koolitaja — Merike Saar

Merike Saar has provided training both in Estonia and internationally in schools, vocational institutions, and universities. Since 2016, she has contributed extensively to EATE summer seminars and EVÕL conferences, language fairs, and seminars. Her work is reflected in an extensive professional portfolio of training sessions, publications, and presentations. She has also contributed as a member of the Ministry of Education and Research working group on foreign language curricula.

Aastate häälekandja — Ene Peterson

Since the establishment of EVÕL, Ene Peterson has consistently supported the visibility and reputation of the association. Through publications on the association's website, contributions to FIPLV and NBR newsletters, social media engagement, articles and opinion pieces in *Õpetajate Leht*, and active participation in conferences, she has helped make both the association and language education more visible in Estonia and beyond.

Aasta tegu — Erasmus+ Project “Personalised Learning Paths: Modern Methods and AI in Language Learning”

Led by **Merike Saar**, the project includes 10 courses and 4 job-shadowing opportunities (November 2024 – April 2026). Its aim is to support the professional development of English teachers in general education schools, focusing on teaching methodology, personalised learning, and the safe use of AI in language education. Participants have shared their experiences in webinars, articles, and conference presentations.

A letter of appreciation — Ülle Türk

A letter of appreciation was awarded to Ülle Türk for 15 years of fruitful cooperation and significant contribution to the association's activities, including training, conference presentations, and active participation in round-tables and discussions.

Our sincere thanks go to all contributors to the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers. We look forward to continuing inspiring collaboration.

A new interactive online platform for teachers of English developed at the University of Tartu

Natalja Zagura and Anneli Sigus

University of Tartu



Teaching is a profession where you are expected to keep learning all the time. According to the updated *Estonian Qualification Standard for Teachers, Level 7* (Kutsekoda 2025: B.3.1.4), teachers should actively develop their professional skills, stay up to date with new ideas in education, and be familiar with relevant research. The standard also emphasises the importance of reflecting on and improving one's teaching using a research-based approach (Kutsekoda 2025: B.3.1.5).



At the same time, everyday reality looks different. Most teachers are understandably focused on planning lessons, teaching and supporting their students. Many teachers are also actively involved in a variety of projects and programmes that call for cooperation between different groups of people inside and outside the school and organising events. Any time left for professional development is often spent on critical issues in general education, such as keeping up with AI developments, different aspects of inclusive education, subject integration, mental health awareness and so on. With the already heavy workload typical of teachers in Estonia, finding time to read academic research on language teaching or keep up with conceptual developments in the field can be very challenging if not impossible.

How could this problem be alleviated?

At the Department of English Studies, University of Tartu, we are currently developing an interactive online platform for teachers of English. The aim is simple: to make research, practical ideas, and high-quality teaching materials easier to access and use in everyday teaching.

The platform will be Moodle-based and accessible via user login. Materials will be organised into clear categories such as worksheets, lesson plans, elective course syllabi and selected MA theses. Importantly, only materials that meet specific quality criteria will be included. Selected theses will also be accompanied by short summaries that highlight their key ideas and practical relevance. We are also considering adding short 4–5-minute podcast-style overviews of the theses, and in the future possibly short video clips introducing useful teaching approaches and techniques.

A key feature of the platform will be interaction. Each section will include a discussion forum where teachers can share their experiences, ask questions and give feedback on our materials. We also plan to organise occasional online discussions via Zoom. The idea is not just to share materials, but to create a space where teachers and the university can learn from each other. Feedback from teachers will also help shape future research and student projects at the department.

Where do the materials come from?

One important source for the materials is something that already exists but is not widely used. As assignments for the courses taught at our department, MA students of teacher training programme create different worksheets, lesson plans and even syllabi for elective courses, which they are ready to

share with other teachers. In addition, each year, at the end of their studies, our MA students complete a large number of MA theses, many of which are highly practical. These projects deal with real classroom challenges, explore new teaching approaches and develop ready-to-use materials. We believe these theses could be genuinely useful for other teachers, but at the moment, not many people know about them. And even if they do, they do not know where to find them.

You can already now find lists of defended MA theses on our department website (*Anglistika magistritööd*), and the full texts are available in the digital archive ADA. However, these resources are not always easy to navigate. The archive includes all theses from the department, not only those related to teaching, and it does not indicate quality differences between them. One of the goals of the new platform is to bring together the most relevant and useful work in a more accessible way.

We also draw on ongoing collaboration with schools. For example, we are currently working with a school in Tartu on a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) project. One MA thesis has already focused on developing and piloting CLIL materials for grades 6 and 7, combining English with personal, social, and health education. This collaboration will continue next year, with another student developing materials for grade 6 in cooperation with a teacher. Both theses will also be available through the ADA archive.

How else do we support teachers?

The platform is part of a broader effort to support English teachers in Estonia. Teacher education has always been one of our core priorities. In our MA programme *Teacher of Foreign Languages*, we introduce students to contemporary approaches in language teaching and help them become reflective practitioners who can use research to inform their work. Writing an MA thesis - often based on action research or materials development - is an important part of this process.

We would also like to support practising teachers more directly. However, our current workload does not allow us to organise regular in-service training. To offer additional opportunities, we have created a one-year micro-credential programme *Contemporary Approaches to Teaching English*, based on a selection of courses from our MA programme. At the same time, we are aware that participation opportunities are limited by the number of places, the workload of 15 ECTS (15 x 26 hours) can be a challenge for full-time teachers and the associated costs may also present a barrier for some.

There are also national resources such as *e-Koolikott*, which offers a wide range of teaching materials. It is certainly worth exploring, but it is not specifically focused on English language teaching, providing materials for teachers of different subjects, its search function is limited, and the quality of materials can vary. Teachers need to make careful and critical choices when selecting resources.

Where can you find our new online platform?

The platform will be linked to the webpage of the Department of English and we will introduce the first version of it at the 35th EATE Summer Seminar in Pärnu (24-25 August 2026). Teachers attending the seminar will be invited to pilot the platform during autumn 2026, and those who volunteer to test it and provide feedback will receive free access.

After further development based on user feedback, access to the platform will involve a modest annual subscription fee, with options for both individual teachers and institutions. This is necessary because the platform is being developed outside our regular workload and requires ongoing technical support from the university team. However, free access will be provided to teachers who supervise the teaching practice of our MA students, with the list updated annually. The information about the platform will be disseminated through teachers' mailing lists and through the webpage of EATE.

We hope this platform will make it easier for teachers to engage with research, find useful materials, and connect with colleagues. More broadly, we see it as a way to strengthen collaboration between schools and the university and to support the continued development of English language teaching in Estonia.

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The European Centre for Modern Languages: Advancing Language Education across Europe

Pille Põiklik

Ministry of Education and Research, Chair of ECML Governing Board

Kati Bakradze-Pank

Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers, ECML National Contact Point



European Centre for Modern Languages: a family of 36 countries

The European Centre for Modern Languages (henceforth the ECML) brings together those member states of the Council of Europe who wish to cooperate in turning language policy into effective language education practice. Currently, the centre has 36 member states; Estonia has been an active member since 1995 and is chairing the ECML Governing Board in 2025–2026.

The ECML is faced with a complicated task: to bring together such varied contexts and needs as can be found in 36 countries and to offer something meaningful to everyone. It is a unique place for two-way collaboration: expertise flowing from the countries to the ECML and being mediated back in the form of activities that support members in addressing their challenges.

As of February 2022, the work done at the centre is also framed by the Committee of Ministers Recommendation (2022)¹ on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture. The recommendation is available in several languages, including Estonian.

All activities at the centre fall into nine thematic areas, all of which have teacher education at their core. Effective language education relies on teachers' skills and motivation which is why much of what is done at the centre is targeted to (language) teachers.

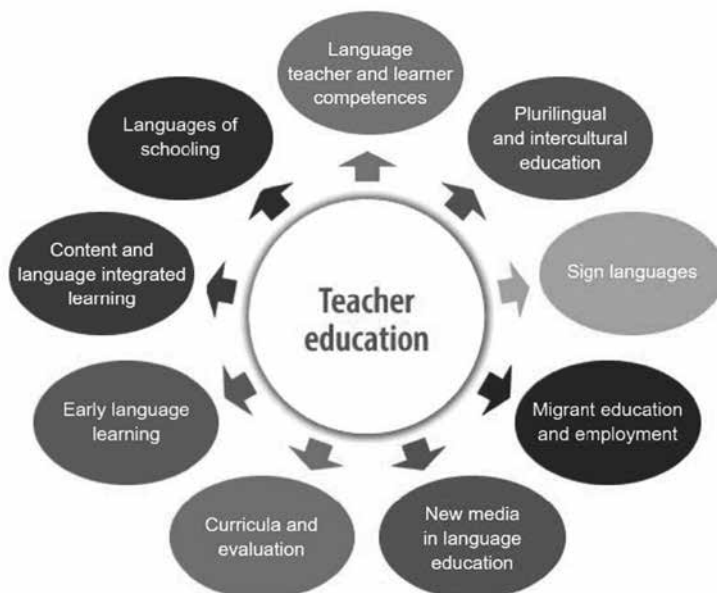


Figure 1. Nine key areas in language education at the core of ECML projects and the work of the Council of Europe in general.

The two pillars of ECML work

The work done at the centre falls mainly into two broad categories: the developmental strand and the mediation strand. The main organising structure of ECML work are four-year programmes that follow the priorities identified by the member states.

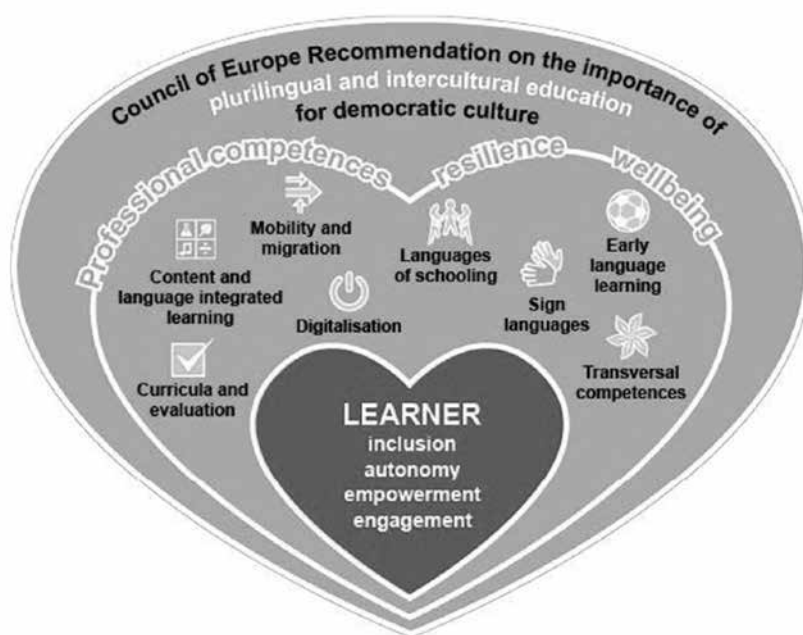


Figure 2. Key topics and core goals of the ECML 2024–2027 programme with the overarching recommendation on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education.

The 2024–2027 programme “Language education at the heart of democracy”, for instance, includes development projects on AI in language education, plurilingual wellbeing of language teachers, CLIL materials for the 21st century, etc. On the ECML website (www.ecml.at), you can find out more under the section “Programme”. Careful readers will find three projects that have Estonian experts on the project teams.

For mediation, the ECML offers training and consultancy as well as disseminates information relevant to language teachers and language education. The training opportunities should be fairly well known in Estonia as well: between 2016 and 2026, Estonia has hosted 13 different events. The training events have addressed topics such as language proficiency assessment, multilingual education, CLIL, implementation of the language education framework, and more.

The latest training event was held in September 2025 on “Fostering digital citizenship through language education”. This was the first ECML event offered in German in Estonia - an excellent decision based on the feedback for the event.



Photos. Participants at the ECML training event “Fostering digital citizenship through language education” in September 2025.

As we are writing this article, another training event is planned for the end of April in 2026. The topic this time is “The CEFR Companion Volume: Mediation and other key concepts”. We were thrilled to see the group fill up in a matter of days — a sign for us that ECML training events continue to have something to offer to teachers in Estonia.

Additionally, the ECML helps celebrate the European Day of Languages (www.edl.ecml.at) and offers online events to everyone interested in language education (available on the ECML YouTube channel [ecmlat](https://www.youtube.com/ecmlat)).

ECML online resources: where to begin?

For more than 30 years, the ECML has been developing resources to aid language teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, policy makers and others in striving towards more efficient language education. This is why it is not surprising that exploring the “Resources” section on the ECML home page can lead to feeling overwhelmed by what is already there.

The ECML online resources offer a rich collection of materials aimed at improving the quality of language teaching and learning across Europe. On the site, users can find practical teaching tools, ready-to-use classroom activities, professional development materials, and research-based publications covering topics such as plurilingual education, digital literacy, CLIL, assessment, and intercultural competence. In addition, the platform provides guidance for implementing frameworks like the CEFR and supports innovation through projects, networks, and training opportunities. A special “treasure chest” of resources is also available for learners and parents, offering engaging activities and tools to support language learning at home or in school. Overall, the website serves as a comprehensive hub for both theory and practice, helping users develop competences, exchange ideas, and stay connected to current developments in language education.

You can make an easier start by sorting the resources by language or by topic, or you can start with the 10 most viewed publications. The ECML is working on developing a chatbot to assist in finding the most useful resources for you on the website.

One key topic in recent years and especially in connection with the new CEFR Companion Volume is mediation. In the 2020–2023 programme, the METLA project (“**Mediation in teaching, learning and assessment**”) produced a comprehensive look at what mediation is and how to teach it. Numerous tasks are available on the project website as well as ideas and guidance on how to develop your own (including “Mediation in teaching, learning and assessment (METLA). A teaching guide for language educators”).

Another project that has produced tasks for language classes is the E-lang citizen project (“**Digital citizenship through language education**”). The Council of Europe is very much concerned with democratic culture and the skills needed to develop it. And so, it is most suitable that ECML projects also deal with how to support these skills and link them to plurilingualism.

These are just two examples, many more can be found on the ECML website.

Stay in touch

An easy way to stay in touch with ECML activities is to subscribe to the **European Language Gazette** or view upcoming events on **the ECML calendar**.

Keep an eye on the activities of the Estonian Association of Foreign Language Teachers — a long-term partner of the Ministry of Education and Research in disseminating ECML work.

Suggestions on which training events to bring to Estonia and which ECML resources to adapt or translate into Estonian are always most welcome and can be directed to both authors of this short overview.

We hope you find your way to the ECML website and to the other channels that provide insight into the centre’s work. As English teachers, you are in a privileged position since everything produced at the ECML is available in the language you teach.

We also hope that getting to know the ECML and its work will reinforce one of its key tenets: there is value in plurilingualism and in the role different languages can play in opening up more cultures, perspectives and experiences to us. This can move us closer to developing motivational ecologies, as described in **the Motivation Manifesto** developed by the European Commission and the ECML for the 2026 European Day of Languages.

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The Development and Practice of Specialised Foreign-Language Education in Soviet Estonia

Merilyn Meristo

Professor of Language Didactics, Tallinn University

The rise of specialised foreign-language classes in Soviet Estonia was part of broader Soviet educational reforms. After the Second World War, foreign languages became increasingly important, shaped by Cold War tensions and the growing need for international communication (Pavlenko, 2003).

The Soviet government recognised the shortcomings of foreign language instruction as early as the late 1940s. A key policy milestone was the 1947 decree *“On improving the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools,”* which aimed to reform language education across the Soviet Union (Maiofis & Kukulin, 2015; Dunstan, 1962). These reforms led to the establishment of the first specialised foreign-language schools in cities such as Kiev, Kharkiv and Odessa in 1946, and later in Moscow and Leningrad in 1947.



Despite these efforts, foreign language teaching continued to face major challenges, including a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching materials. Instruction remained largely grammar-based and focused on translation, with limited emphasis on communicative competence (Garrard, 1962). A more substantial shift came with the 1961 resolution *“Improvements in the Study and Teaching of Foreign Languages,”* which sought to address these shortcomings and modernise teaching methods. This reform marked the beginning of a more systematic expansion of specialised language classes across the Soviet Union (cf. Meristo, Brown, & Varik, 2024).

In Estonia, the establishment of specialised foreign-language classes was facilitated by a strong pre-existing tradition of multilingual education and well-trained teachers from the interwar period (cf. Meristo, Oder & Velberg, 2023), leading to a pilot programme at Tallinn School No. 7 in 1960/1961, followed in 1961/1962 by the opening of such classes in five schools: Tallinn School No. 7 (English),

Tallinn Russian-medium School No. 19 (English), Tallinn School No. 42 (German), Tartu School No. 2 (English) and Rakvere Boarding School (English, programme later transferred to Rakvere School No. 1). Following the initial phase, the network of specialised foreign-language classes expanded further across Estonia during the 1960s. New classes were introduced in additional schools, including Pärnu School No. 1 (English) in 1962/1963, Tallinn School No. 1 (French) in 1967/1968, Võru School No. 1 (English) in the mid- to late 1960s, and Rapla School No. 1 (English) in 1968/1969. English remained the dominant language of specialisation, while German and French were also represented, reflecting both political priorities and the availability of qualified teaching staff.

A key figure in supporting this development was Ferdinand Eisen, who served as the Minister of Education of the Estonian SSR from 1960 to 1980. His close engagement with both schools and academia, as well as his support for differentiated schooling, played an important role in the consolidation of specialised foreign-language education (Heinsalu & Meristo, in press). Eisen actively promoted the development of specialised classes and original teaching materials, while fostering a degree of trust within the education system that enabled school leaders and teachers to implement these reforms effectively.

Specialised foreign-language classes differed markedly from ordinary classes in both structure and learning conditions. While foreign languages were typically introduced only in the fifth grade in regular schools, specialised classes began already in the first or second grade and offered substantially more instructional time (Garrard, 1962; Lewis, 1972). Students were often taught in smaller groups, which allowed for more intensive practice, and some subjects, such as geography or history, were taught in the target language, creating a more immersive environment (Lewis, 1972). In addition, specialised schools were better equipped, including the use of technical teaching aids such as tape recorders and language laboratories, which supported listening and speaking skills (Haas, 1965). Teachers working in these classes also benefited from more favourable conditions: they received a salary increase of approximately 15%, and the reduced group sizes made teaching more manageable and effective. Together, these factors contributed to a more demanding but also more supportive learning environment.

Foreign-language teachers in specialised classes worked within a highly centralised system, where curricula and teaching guidelines were largely dictated by the Ministry of Education. At the same time, the 1960s were marked by a significant lack of suitable teaching materials and limited access to authentic language input. As a result, teachers exercised considerable agency in their everyday practice, creating and adapting their own materials to meet the needs of specialised classes (Meristo, Oder, & Velberg, 2023). Over time, these efforts led to the gradual development of more systematic teaching resources, including the *Step* English-language textbook series compiled by Ingrid Sotter, Leida Vahtra and Laine Hone. Subject-specific materials were likewise developed locally; for example, geography was taught in English using materials compiled by Anne Allpere and Ene-Mall Leiten, used in Grade 6 physical geography and later in Grade 9 economic geography. This illustrates an early form of integrated content and language learning based largely on teacher-created resources.

Interviews with alumni and teachers of specialised classes show that although opportunities to practise English outside the classroom were limited, students admitted to specialised English classes were described by their teachers as highly motivated and eager to learn; in some cases, especially in Tallinn, these classes also benefited from occasional visits by English-speaking guests, offering rare moments of authentic language use (Heinsalu & Meristo, in press; Meristo et al., 2023, 2024). Moreover, students of German sometimes had opportunities to visit the German Democratic Republic, and visitors from there occasionally taught lessons in schools, providing direct exposure to the language. French-track students, for their part, often recalled a strong intellectual and cultural engagement with the language and a close relationship with their teachers, even though their learning remained largely grammar-focused and contact with native speakers was virtually non-existent.

Teaching in specialised foreign-language classes was often experienced as professionally rewarding, as it allowed teachers to exercise a high degree of agency despite the centralised system. Faced with a lack of materials, teachers collaborated closely, developing their own resources and sharing practices

within both formal subject councils and informal networks. Many teachers from specialised schools played a leading role in these local foreign-language subject councils, which gradually evolved from top-down structures into collaborative professional communities (Meristo et al., 2023; Heinsalu & Meristo, in press). Over time, these networks not only supported teachers' everyday work but also laid the foundations for the development of modern foreign-language teachers' associations in Estonia.

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Impressions of IATEFL 2026

Kristi Vahenurm

Having had the honour of attending the IATEFL Conference 2026, I can say with confidence that it is an event every English teacher should experience at least once in their lifetime. Experienced participants often say there is no other event quite as biblically Babel-like as IATEFL. Yet, what struck me most was how the conference made me reflect on the things that we in our tiny country can truly be grateful for.

First and foremost, I am thankful that people in my country live in peace. We do not suffer from physical violence, there are no bombings above our heads, and even the crime rate, alcoholism and drug use are relatively low. At the same time, there are many places in the world that are increasingly affected by conflict, and this reality is reflected in the faces and stories of colleagues who come from troubled regions.

I am also grateful that our mother tongue is thriving. Interestingly, the conference opened with a plenary session comparing the status of colonial languages and non-Western languages, calling for the preservation of smaller languages and the celebration of linguistic diversity. Every language carries something unique. One example shared was the Arabic word *samar* (سمر), which refers to relaxed



evening conversations and storytelling with friends or family, often outdoors, and captures a special sense of connection after sunset. (1) My Finnish colleague and EFL teacher Anna-Leena Haapala mentioned *sisu* or *suomalainen sisu* - a word that describes a deep, stubborn inner strength that helps a person persevere even when they feel they have reached their limit. These examples remind us how rich and nuanced languages are. It is also common to observe teenagers inserting English expressions into their native speech, sometimes claiming they have forgotten the original word. As language teachers, we should encourage students to value and develop their mother tongue just as much as their English.

Another point of gratitude is that IATEFL 2026 helped me better understand different generations, particularly Generation Alpha. This generation is characterised by a shorter attention span, true digital nativity, and formative years shaped by COVID-19. They often seek instant answers and quick rewards, yet they are also highly aware of global issues, especially environmental concerns, and respond well to collaborative and personalised learning. (2) Mark McCrindle's book *Understanding Our Children and Helping Them Thrive* may be a useful resource for teachers working with this generation. Interestingly, it may not only be learners whose attention spans are changing. Some colleagues noted that conference sessions now seem shorter than in previous years. IATEFL explains this as an effort to increase variety and provide more opportunities for speakers. A helpful addition to tackle the abundance issue this year was the conference app, which allows participants to mark favourite sessions and navigate the programme more efficiently.

I am also thankful for the relatively high level of teacher autonomy in Estonia. While we are guided by examination requirements in grades 9 and 12, we are not bound to a rigid syllabus and can move beyond coursebook topics when needed. I learned that this approach aligns with the concept of *emergent language* i.e. the language that arises naturally during meaning-focused interaction rather than being pre-planned. One example shared at the conference was a student suddenly asking, "What's the difference between drool and saliva?" when the word *mouthwatering* was discussed. Such abrupt questions, the panellists claim, can lead to deeper learning and should be encouraged. It later turned out that the student asking the odd question was training to become a dental hygienist, an explanation that makes perfect sense. (3)

In a similar vein, I appreciate the freedom teachers have in designing tasks that challenge students. While this may not always make Estonia a country of the happiest students, it prepares them for real-life situations. For example, asking students to give presentations in front of the class pushes them beyond their comfort zones and helps develop essential skills such as organising ideas, speaking clearly, and articulating thoughts. Estonia's tradition of speaking competitions hopefully has a strong future ahead. Encouraging students to face challenges is, in many contexts, increasingly questioned, yet it remains an important part of preparing them for life.

I am also grateful that teachers in Estonia have access to various opportunities for continuous professional development. Although the system is not perfect, there is a developing and relatively transparent career ladder that allows teachers to improve their qualifications and, ideally, their salaries. In many countries, such structured progression does not exist, and teaching can feel like a static profession unless one moves into administration.

Another reflection concerns the role of artificial intelligence. I am thankful that AI has not taken over education entirely and that many teachers are learning to use it thoughtfully. At the same time, some educators are already experiencing fatigue with AI and are advocating a return to more analogue approaches, for example, revisiting reliable communicative tasks that enrich students' learning experiences. One speaker compared AI to eating crisps – once you start, it is hard to stop. It is a striking and accurate metaphor. (4)

Finally, I am deeply grateful to the EATE for their ongoing efforts to keep Estonian English teachers informed and connected. When evaluated against IATEFL standards, EATE performs strongly in many areas. However, like many teacher associations within the IATEFL network, it would benefit from a growing membership. No one at the conference can clearly say, though, how that can be achieved.

Finally, and above all, I am thankful for the opportunity EATE gave me to represent Estonia at this remarkable “Babel-like” event. I take along great new acquaintances, some teaching tips and a feeling that all is relatively well in Estonia, we just need to keep going and growing.

Credits

1. Patricia Angoy, English Language - the coloniser. A black female leader’s response, IATEFL 2026
2. Katherine Stannett, Keeping It Real: teaching teens, IATEFL 2026
3. Danny Norrington and Davies and Richard Chinn, Emergent language: how we see it and what it can be, IATEFL 2026
4. Alexandra Covaci, Beyond the Black and White: How AI Can Empower Students and Preserve Human Pedagogy, IATEFL 2026

Recognizing and Celebrating the Life and Times of Dashrath Manjhi A Real Mountain Mover

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The purpose of this article is to provide a book review of a picture book biography based on the life and times of Dashrath Manjhi and share an instructional strategy that teachers can use with this, and other picture book biographies and literary genres, to support student reading and learning in the classroom.

Introduction

Like most languages, the English language uses several figures of speech. Among others, they include simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and alliteration. These figures of speech represent creative uses of language that deviate from literal meanings to figurative meanings.

My favorite figure of speech is metaphor. This is largely because my father often talked in metaphors. “Time is money” he stated when I wasted time getting to my part-time job. “Don’t be a couch potato” he scolded my brother for sitting on our couch watching television. “You are a ray of sunshine” he stated to my sister as she sat at the breakfast table already dressed for school.

Recently, I was reminded of the power and potential of metaphor. I saw a picture book displayed at my local public library. The title caught my attention: *Manjhi Moves a Mountain*. The front cover illustrates a man holding up a mountain. He is also wearing non-western clothing. I found myself asking: Who is Manjhi? What is the setting for this story? How can Manjhi move a mountain? It must be fiction.

Suddenly, I remembered my father saying our mother was so strong she could move mountains. He was using another metaphor. My mother was never overwhelmed by a huge task. She succeeded by starting with the simplest actions first.

I started to read the book and soon learned that the title of the book was not metaphorical, but literal, not fiction but nonfiction! It tells the story of how one man literally moved a mountain. Here is his remarkable story.



Book Review

Manjhi Moves a Mountain (Churnin, 2017) is a picture book biography that recognizes and celebrates the life and times of Dashrath Manjhi. Long ago in India, a huge mountain separated two villages. On Manjhi's side there were no crops and people were hungry. On the other side crops flourished and people were prosperous. Manjhi wanted to bring the two villages closer. He had an idea: make a road through the mountains that connected both villages.

Manjhi traded three goats for a hammer and chisel. He climbed the mountain and used the hammer and chisel to chip away the mountain. At first, he got powdered rock and tiny chips. During the day he tended the crops and during the night he chiseled away the mountain. He did this for 15 years. Villagers began to see his vision. Finally, after 22 years Manjhi made an open space, a road, through the mountain. Now, instead of 2 villages there was one.

Instructional Strategy

Background

I always want my students to personally experience instructional strategies as part of classroom instruction. *PQNS RESPONSES* (see Figure 1) is an effective strategy to use with biography and other literary genres. We value this strategy for several reasons. One, it is a reader response strategy that can be used with fiction and informational text. Two, it focuses student attention on identifying major ideas and concepts in a text. Three, it invites students to hear and appreciate multiple interpretations of a shared text. Four, it invites students to reflect on and evaluate their selected major ideas and concepts.

Procedure

First, I organize students into small groups (3-4). Next, we distribute a *PQNS RESPONSES* sheet to each student. Then, I display the directions for the *PQNS RESPONSES* strategy on the white board or a PowerPoint slide and discuss it as a class. Here are my directions.

1. I will read aloud this book and pause for 3-4 minutes at different places in the story.
2. When I pause, start listing major ideas or concepts from the reading in column 1.
3. After my reading, complete listing major ideas or concepts from the reading in column 1.
4. Then, in column 2 respond to each of your ideas or concepts with one of the following:
 - The letter **P** to indicate you think this idea or concept is worth praising because...
 - The letter **Q** to indicate you question this idea because...
 - The letters **NS** to indicate you are not sure about this idea because...
5. In your groups, take turns sharing and discussing *PQNS RESPONSES* sheets.
6. Afterwards, flip your sheet over and spend some time writing and sharing your personal reflections on the whole experience.

Moving Forward

I hope this short article will do for readers what this new picture book about Dashrath Manjhi did for me. It motivated me, taught me new information, and inspired me to read more picture books about him. To that end, I recommend *Dashrath Manjhi – The Mountain Man: One Man's Impossible Journey* (Prasanth, 2025) and *The Real Story of Mountain Man* (Prasanth, 2025).

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Figure 1.

PQNS Responses
P = Praise, Q = Question, NS = Not Sure

Major Idea or Concept	PQNS Response

TO ATHENS AND BACK: REMEMBERING BYRON'S LAST ADVENTURE

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"No tolerance
of energy wasting" (Fin.)

*When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
Let him combat for that of his neighbours;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
And get knock'd on the head for his labours.*

*To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,
And, is always as nobly requited;
Then battle for freedom wherever you can,
And, if not shot or hang'd, you'll get knighted.*

(George Gordon Byron, "Stanzas". First sent in a letter to his friend Thomas Moore in 1820. The closing lines of each quatrain create a tone of irony to undercut the initial idealism.)

"Sometimes I think the difference between what we want and what we're afraid of is about the width of an eyelash." (Jay McInerney, How It Ended, 2009)

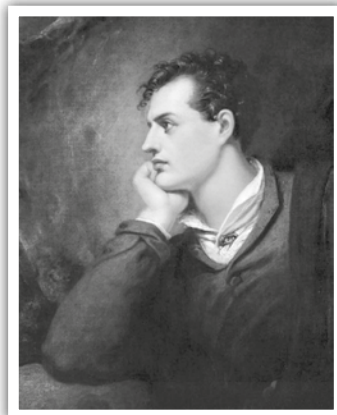
In January this year, I managed to take a short break from work and travelled to Athens for a few days. What could be better than wandering through this ancient city in a gentle seventeen degrees, while Estonia remained in the grip of its seemingly endless winter? And what could be more appealing than a morning glimpse of the sunlit Parthenon from a hotel balcony, even if partially obscured by modern buildings? The morning after our arrival, the first destination was, inevitably, the legendary Acropolis of

Athens. Climbing the sacred hill in bright sunshine and taking in its splendour is a moment that lingers in the memory — made all the more striking by the contrast with the freezing, snow-covered landscape we had left behind only hours earlier.

I will not attempt to describe all the sights we managed to see during those few days. Instead, I would like to focus on George Gordon Byron (1788–1824), who is regarded as a national hero in Greece and honoured in the very heart of Athens. Visitors to the city are naturally drawn to classical antiquity rather than to figures associated with English literature. Nevertheless, while walking through the National Garden and near the Temple of Olympian Zeus, one encounters a striking monument dedicated to Byron (Άγαλμα Λόρδου Βύρωνος). The monument is notable for its allegorical female figure representing Greece, placing a palm branch — a symbol of immortality — upon Byron's head. It is a gesture of gratitude for his wholehearted support during the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829), reflecting both his personal commitment and the enduring bond between Greece and the poet who gave his life for its cause.

First of all, it is worth recalling that the Greek uprising of 1821 was the first successful national movement in modern Europe, helping to inspire similar developments across the continent. In the decades that followed, new nation states emerged, including Belgium, Romania, Bulgaria and eventually unified Germany and Italy. Estonia's own national awakening age, known as *Ärkamisaeg*, began not long after. In the early 20th century, Norway, Ireland, Poland, Finland and the three Baltic states appeared. In the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920), foreign units played a crucial role fighting alongside Estonians, and nearly 200 Finnish volunteers, 130 British naval servicemen and several Swedish and Danish soldiers lost their lives for Estonia's freedom — all of whom will be remembered.

This article does not seek to fill any gap in Byronic studies; rather, it serves as a reminder of the poet's poignant death and its dramatic circumstances. The subject feels particularly relevant today, when questions of freedom and independence once again demand attention and cannot be taken for granted. Byron's final days deserve to be remembered as something truly remarkable, and they have been widely examined by historians and literary critics alike. His life and work continue to attract sustained scholarly interest. Around the world, more than thirty societies affiliated with the International Association of Byron Societies (IABS) keep exploring the many facets of his literary legacy and complex personality.



Portrait of Lord Byron by Richard Westall, 1813.
National Portrait Gallery, London



19th-century sculptural composition by French sculptors Henri-Michel Chapu and Alexandre Falguière. Greece crowning Lord Byron with palm leaves; the inscription: "Greece [honours] Byron".

Lord Byron left England in July 1809, initially to undertake the traditional "Grand Tour" of Europe — a customary pursuit for young aristocrats in search of adventure and inspiration. Yet his departure was driven not only by a desire to explore the Mediterranean, but also by a growing sense of "social exile", which ultimately led him to leave England permanently in 1816 following another public scandal. During his visits to Athens between 1809 and 1811, Byron began to use his rising literary reputation to criticise the removal of artefacts by Lord Elgin and others — objects that became

known as the “Parthenon Marbles”. He strongly opposed their transportation to England, denouncing the act in his poem *The Curse of Minerva*. The dispute over the Marbles between Greece and the United Kingdom remains unresolved. The British Museum maintains that they were acquired legally and should be viewed as part of a shared global heritage. By contrast, the Acropolis Museum argues that it now does have the facilities to preserve the cultural treasures of Greece to the highest standard — something that was not possible in the early nineteenth century. To sidestep the legal complexities surrounding ownership, there have been suggestions that both sides could move towards a mutually beneficial arrangement, potentially involving a long-term loan.



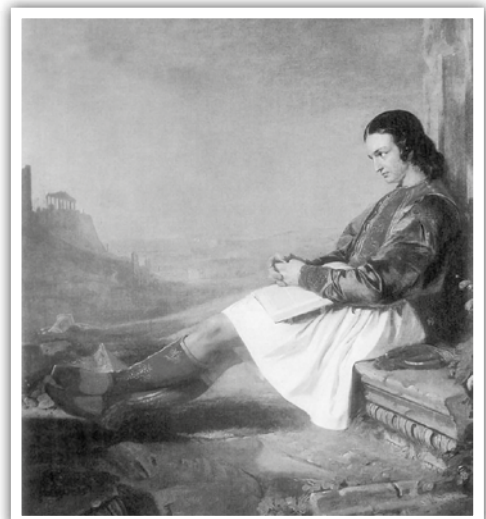
The Parthenon temple on the Acropolis hill, with scaffolding still in place (January 2026)

The restoration of the Parthenon has long been perceived as “endless”, but what is its status today? Since 1975, this emblem of Athens has been undergoing extensive, carefully managed conservation. In October 2025, for the first time in decades, both residents and visitors were able to see the monument largely free of scaffolding. The current major phase of restoration — focusing on structural stabilisation and the western pediment — is expected to be completed by the summer of 2026. Given the Parthenon’s age, at around twenty-five centuries, and its immense cultural significance, such work remains an ongoing process, with smaller-scale conservation continuing even after major phases are finished.

Greece as a modern sovereign state offers a compelling perspective in discussions about imperial ambitions to reclaim so-called “original” lands. Despite long periods of foreign rule, the desire for self-determination has remained central to Greek identity. Even after nearly four centuries of external domination, the country preserved its cultural continuity and strong sense of national character into the early 19th century.

When Lord Byron arrived in Athens for the first time on Christmas Day, 25th December 1809, the city stood far removed from its ancient splendour. Writing to his mother, he described it as “*Sad remnants of past greatness!*”. Yet his attachment to Greece was profound: “*If I am a poet, the air of Greece made me so,*” he confided in one of his letters. During his first visit, Byron was deeply moved by the ancient ruins but dismayed by the state of the Parthenon. The gaps left by the removal of its sculptures by Lord Elgin’s agents fuelled his anger and sharpened his criticism. In the second canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), he lamented the damage to Greece’s classical heritage, contrasting the glory of ancient Hellas with the “sad relic” of a subjugated nation. Byron’s efforts to draw the attention of Europe’s cultural and political elites to the realities in Greece contributed to the rise of **philhellenism** and, in time, to broader support for the struggle for independence.

It was after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* that Lord Byron famously remarked, “*I awoke one morning and found myself famous.*” At the time, in 1812, he could scarcely have foreseen how closely his destiny would become entwined with Greece. What exactly led him, in his later years, to become a “poet of action” and take an active role in the Greek struggle for independence? Was it the influence of the “Byronic hero” — the defiant, cynical and rebellious figure with a troubled past that he cultivated in his works — that prompted him to abandon a life of comfort and embrace risk, ultimately leading to his tragic end? Byron might have remained a committed philhellene at a safe distance, yet he chose otherwise.



“Lord Byron at the Acropolis.” Attributed to Charles L. Eastlake. Athens, Museum of the City of Athens.

The “Byronic hero” is often seen as an idealised version of what Byron aspired to be, rather than a reflection of his entire personality. Even so, his final act — devoting himself to the cause of Greek liberation — can be read as the culmination of the romantic and rebellious impulses that defined both his life and work. Vincent van Gogh’s remark, “I would rather die of passion than of boredom,” rings especially true when considering Byron. His self-sacrifice appears all the more striking when set against his scandalous reputation in early nineteenth-century British society. Despite his extraordinary poetic talent, admired by many, Byron was oftentimes regarded as a restless and provocative figure — a gadabout, a charmer, an impulsive lover and a habitual socialite. His hedonistic lifestyle, combined with open defiance of social and literary conventions, made him a controversial presence. He was memorably described as “mad, bad and dangerous to know,” as well as a “psychological misfit” and a “threat to traditional British values”. The life of a genius is rarely smooth — it is often marked by extremes. Exceptional talent does not always sit easily with others, and those who possess it can be difficult companions. Yet, as scholars have observed, such individuals may also display some of the most admirable qualities of human character:

“Byron’s contemporaries insisted on identifying the author with his fictional characters. But Byron’s letters and the testimony of his friends show that, except for recurrent moods of black depression, his own temperament was in many respects antithetic to that of his heroes. He was passionate and willful, but when in good humor he could be very much a man of the world in the eighteenth-century style — gregarious, lively, tolerant, and a witty conversationalist capable of taking an ironic attitude toward his own activities as well as those of other men. The aloof hauteur he exhibited in public was largely a mask to hide his diffidence when in a strange company; he possessed devoted friends, both men and women, and among them he was usually unassuming, companionable, sometimes even exuberant, and tactful; to his household dependants he was unfailingly generous and tenaciously loyal.” (From the preface to the chapter on Byron in *The Norton Anthology of English literature*, 5th edition, edited by M. H. Abrams, W. W. Norton & Co., New York and London, 1987)

Lord Byron was indeed profoundly contradictory — a “riveting figure and a maddeningly elusive creature of paradox” (Cathy Young, “What’s Still Controversial About Byron?” *The Bulwark*, April 30, 2024) His life was defined by extremes: cynicism and romanticism, narcissism and altruism, social privilege and rebellion. As T. S. Eliot observed, “Byron’s own vices seem to have twin virtues that closely resemble them.” He cherished a luxurious lifestyle, yet sought to be recognised as a vocal critic of social injustice. He could be pretty unfair to those he loved, yet he wrote of all-consuming love. Celebrated as the ultimate Romantic poet, he also frequently mocked Romanticism. He questioned whether poetry was a worthy career, yet produced more than 30,000 lines of distinguished verse, not counting his other writings. Byron often rebelled against social, moral and traditional norms, while simultaneously safeguarding his social status and heritage. He championed individual liberty and cultivated a scandalous public image, yet remained sensitive to criticism and could feel deeply hurt by alienation from those who were infatuated by his talents. In short, his personality combined a striking mix of contradictions. Ultimately, it seems that Byron’s romantic nature prevailed, as exemplified by his heroic death in Greece. Whether this was a conscious act of self-sacrifice or a means of escaping an often hypocritical society, it remains a gesture both dramatic and admirable.

“A broken dandy lately on my travels,” Byron wrote in his poem *Beppo* (1817), blending fictional and autobiographical elements — a hallmark of his distinctive style. His humour was often dark, reflecting a turbulent, intensely emotional personality that constantly oscillated between public adoration and scandal. “There are but two sentiments to which I am constant — a strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant [hypocrisy],” he told Lady Blessington, whom he befriended in 1823 in Italy, shortly before setting out for Greece for the last time. Byron’s volatile, unconventional life, combined with his sharp and cynical intellect, forged a literary archetype that left a profound mark on European literature and culture. Could it have emerged without his possessing such a peculiar character?

In many ways, childhood shapes the individual, and Byron’s reckless, often self-destructive behaviour can be traced, at least in part, to his early years. He lost his father, Captain “Mad Jack” Byron — a fortune hunter who died in poverty — when he was only three. His mother, Catherine Gordon, alternated between over-affection and fits of violent temper, frequently calling him a “lame brat” because of a deformity in his

right foot. The boy grew up moody, intense and rebellious; his later conduct may have been a reaction to childhood traumas, insecurities and a heightened sensitivity to ridicule. His nonconformity, licentiousness and impetuosity can be seen as acts of bravado, yet they also reflect a deeper love of freedom — a passionate revolt against the boredom and pretence of high society. More than a century after Byron's death, W. H. Auden, who admired him greatly, wrote in his long, digressive and witty poem *Letter to Lord Byron*:

*Preserve me from the Shape of Things to Be,
The high-grade posters at the public meeting,
The influence of Art on Industry,
The cinemas with perfect taste in seating.*

Byron was a devoted lover of animals, keeping a variety of pets throughout his life. A well-worn anecdote from his early years at Trinity College illustrates his ingenuity and sense of humour: students were forbidden from keeping dogs, so Byron exploited a loophole in the regulations and kept a tame bear instead. He walked the bear on a leash and even jokingly suggested that it should sit for a fellowship. Byron's fondness for animals extended well into his adult life. While in Italy, where he had lived for seven years before his final journey to Greece, he maintained an impressive menagerie: ten horses, eight dogs, five cats, five peacocks, three monkeys, two guinea hens, an eagle, a crow, a falcon, an Egyptian crane, a fox, a goat and a badger. In his final months in Greece, his household was more modest, but no less devoted; his Newfoundland named Lyon became his constant companion. Byron often spoke to Lyon with deep tenderness, remarking that the dog was more faithful than men. Lyon accompanied the poet's body back to England by ship and was later cared for by Mrs. Leigh, Byron's half-sister.



An independent-looking cat at the glorious ancient port of Piraeus, 10 km from Athens, a place Byron once rode to on horseback

Byron's intellectual engagement with Greece was profound. He studied Greek philosophy and poetry, regarding Greece as the home of the "Muse of Poetry." Though generally critical of the idea of pure "platonic love," he was still influenced by Socrates and Plato, who described love as a "divine mania" and a "divine reminder" of an immortal world (James Chandler, *Confounded fantasies: Byron and Romantic Platonism*, *The Byron Journal*, Vol.53, No.2, 2025). In his poetry, Byron referred to Socrates as "Athena's wisest son" and one of the "loftiest minds" who outran their times. The poet's final love — the love for Greece — was likely purely platonic: a selfless, passionate commitment to helping the idealised Cradle of Beauty to be reborn. Yet he was also human — even during his last months in Cephalonia and Missolonghi, while engaged in military and administrative duties, unrequited personal love caused him immense emotional pain, adding to the stress and depression he experienced before his death. In his poignant short poem *Last Words on Greece* (early 1824), Byron expresses a blend of his devotion to the Greek cause and his own earthly loves:

*What are to me those honours or renown
Past or to come, a new-born people's cry?
Albeit for such I could despise a crown
Of aught save laurel, or for such could die.
I am a fool of passion, and a frown
Of thine to me is as an adder's eye.
To the poor bird whose pinion fluttering down
Wafts unto death the breast it bore so high;
Such is this maddening fascination grown,
So strong thy magic or so weak am I.*

Until the final weeks of his life, he remained passionate and amorous. Overwhelmed by intense emotions, the poet often ignored the consequences, and his love affairs frequently led to public scandal. Neverthe-

less, later generations remember him not for his lack of saintliness — after all, very few are saintly — but for his literary brilliance and, ultimately, his death in a noble cause. Byron emerged as a revolutionary literary figure by blending emotional intensity with biting satire and moving seamlessly between solemn personal poetry and comic realism.

The liberation and rebirth of Greece is often regarded as a remarkable, almost miraculous event. The country faced devastating conditions at the time: civil war, internal divisions, economic collapse and relentless military pressure from its adversaries. An eventual success was far from inevitable, emerging instead from a combination of national uprising, widespread philhellenism and decisive foreign support. It was a moment of fortunate opportunity, and Lord Byron played a significant and symbolic role in that struggle.

In *Faust* Part II (1832), Goethe modelled the character Euphorion on Lord Byron, thereby honouring his memory. Euphorion, the allegorical son of Helen of Troy and Faust, represents a synthesis of classical Greek beauty and Romantic striving. Appearing in Act III, this brilliant, winged youth dies after attempting to fly, embodying pure poetry and mirroring Byron's passionate nature and premature death. Both men held each other's talents in high regard — Goethe referred to Byron as "one of the most productive men who ever lived," while Byron dedicated his historical tragic play *Sardanapalus* (1821) to Goethe. Written in blank verse, the play recounts the fall of the hedonistic King of Assyria in the 7th century BC. When defeat becomes inevitable, Sardanapalus refuses to flee. Instead, he constructs a massive pyre for himself, his possessions and his people, and, along with his Greek lover Myrrha, immolates himself to avoid capture and humiliation. The following lines (Act IV, scene 1) could also be seen as reflecting Byron's own temperament and his fateful choice to die for Greece:

*I am the very slave of Circumstance
And Impulse — borne away with every breath!
Misplaced upon the throne — misplaced in life.
I know not what I could have been, but feel
I am not what I should be — let it end.*

In 1823, Lord Byron sold his estate, Rochdale Manor, to settle debts and fund the refitting of the Greek fleet, comprising fourteen vessels. Beyond the major donation of £4,000 to the Greek provisional government, he used substantial sums of his personal fortune — a considerable amount by today's standards — to unite feuding Greek clans, support the provisional government in Missolonghi and finance the pro-Western forces led by Alexandros Mavrokordatos, who would later become the first Prime Minister of the newly independent state. The poet even organised the "Byron Brigade," a unit of thirty European philhellene officers and over 200 Souliote warriors, entirely funded by himself. His financial commitment, combined with his celebrity status, not only advanced the cause of Greek independence but also helped the provisional government secure much larger, crucial loans in London. Along with other contributions from British philhellenes, Byron's involvement proved decisive in sustaining the Greek movement.

Summoned by Alexandros Mavrokordatos, Lord Byron arrived in Missolonghi on 5th January 1824, travelling from Cephalonia as a representative of the London Philhellenic Committee. The journey was stormy and perilous, requiring careful navigation to avoid naval blockades. Upon arrival, Byron received a warm welcome from both locals and soldiers. He immediately began planning operations to capture



A view of the Parthenon from Dionysiou Areopagitou Street — the walking area around the Acropolis hill, not far from the spot where Socrates was kept imprisoned and executed.



"The sunlight and warmth do exist in January!" A view from the top of the Acropolis: the city skyline and the Roman-era Herodeion Theatre (161 AD, renovated in 1950), the best-preserved ancient theatre of Athens.

the fortress of Lepanto. The town of Missolonghi, situated in Aetolia in western Greece near the Peloponnese and the Ionian Islands, held considerable strategic importance during the war.

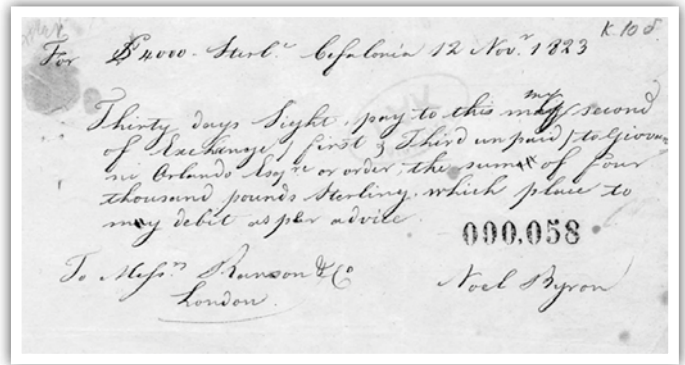
Lord Byron never had the chance to fight on the battlefield. While training on horseback in the cold rain at Missolonghi, he fell gravely ill and succumbed to fever on 19th April 1824 at the age of 36. His presence — and ultimately his death — served as a powerful inspiration, galvanising support for the Greek cause. Shortly before his passing, Byron declared, “I have given her [Greece] my time, my means, my health. And now I give her my

life! What could I do more?” The local newspaper of Missolonghi reported in April 1824: “Greece mourns inconsolably, suddenly deprived of its precious benefactor.” Thanks to the efforts of many, including Byron as a key figure, Greece retained its place as a fundamental part of Europe’s geopolitical and cultural sphere — its “cradle” and enduring symbol of classical civilisation. The 200th anniversary of Byron’s death, commemorated in 2024, saw ceremonial events in Greece and abroad, celebrating the poet as “Greece’s favourite adopted son.” The day of his passing, 19th April, is observed in Greece as Byron’s Day.

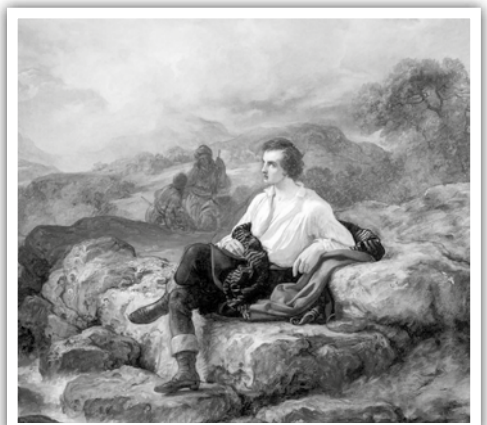
‘Tis time this heart should be unmoved... Lord Byron wrote this final poem on his birthday, 22 January 1824. Titled *On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year*, it reflects on his sacrifices and the inevitability of his approaching death. The poem serves as both a retrospective of his turbulent life and a farewell to all he held dear. It blends despair with hope, pain with joy, grief with upliftment, and loneliness with a sense of unity with the sublime. The fire of love he had once nourished now consumes him, becoming his funeral pyre. Greece was his last love — a truly platonic passion, free of cynicism: “Awake! (Not Greece — she is awake!) Awake, my Spirit!” This love remained for Byron both a burden and an irresistible power, as he expresses in the lines:

*The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
The exalted portion of the pain
And power of Love I cannot share,
But wear the chain.*

What did Byron feel during his last three months at Missolonghi? Perhaps he imagined himself as a heroic commander, leading his own brigade into battle, rather than succumbing to fever in the cold rains of the marshy land. His letters from January to April 1824 reveal the immense correspondence and organisational work he undertook, coordinating the Greek resistance both locally and on a broader scale. During those final months, Byron was managing, funding and attempting to unify the chaotic and disparate groups of Souliote soldiers and foreign advisors, all while his own health deteriorated. He experienced profound frustration and fatigue due to the disorderly, stressful and often disappointing nature of Greek revolutionary politics. Deeply troubled by internal factions and the lack of coordination among Greek leaders, he described his situation as a “bitter experience”, a sense of being “crucified between his ideals and the reality.” Yet, despite these challenges, Byron remained steadfastly committed to the Greek cause — a “chivalrous plan”, as he had earlier declared in his poem *Stanzas* (1820). In the final poem he wrote on his birthday, 22nd January 1824, Byron expressed the intensity of his resolve and awareness of mortality:



Note of exchange for £4,000 signed by Lord Byron to finance the Greek fleet. Photo: General State Archives of Greece



“Lord Byron on Shore of the Hellenic Sea”, oil on canvas by Giacomo Trécourt, 1850; in Musei Civici del Castello Visconteo, Pavia, Italy. © DEA / G. Dagli Orti—De Agostini/Getty Images

*If thou regret'st thy Youth, why live?
The land of honourable Death
Is here — up to the Field, and give
Away thy breath!*

Lord Byron suffered from recurrent fevers over many years, spanning from 1810 until his death in 1824. Based on analysis of his letters and medical history, Byron experienced crises of fever at approximately 540-day intervals, consistent with chronic malaria relapses. Among the causes of the fever there could be also rheumatic inflammation. In his poem *Farewell to Malta* (1811) Byron writes: *Adieu, thou damned'st quarantine, / That gave me fever, and the spleen!* Thirteen years later, he couldn't survive the last attack of a fever.

"Come, come, no weakness! Let's be a man to the last!" Biographers debate the authenticity of these reported final words of Lord Byron, but if he did speak them, they are a testament to his courage and composure in the face of death. As a child, Byron had been warned by a fortune-teller in Scotland to beware of his thirty-seventh year — a prediction that proved eerily prescient, as he fell gravely ill in Missolonghi during that very year. Two young and inexperienced doctors treated him, repeatedly drawing blood, as was common practice at the time. Byron reportedly sensed his imminent death and initially resisted their interventions, calling his physicians a "damned set of butchers." His friend Thomas Moore later recounted the final hours in *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life* (1830): "It was about six o'clock in the evening of this day when he said, 'Now I shall go to sleep'; and then, turning round, fell into that slumber from which he never awoke. For the next twenty-four hours he lay incapable of either sense or motion — with the exception of, now and then, slight symptoms of suffocation, during which his servant raised his head — and at a quarter past six o'clock on the following day, the 19th, he was seen to open his eyes and immediately shut them again. The physicians felt his pulse — he was no more!" In his book, Moore sought to address public rumours of Byron's moral failings that forced him into exile, offering a more nuanced portrait of his friend and defending the poet's character.

Lord Byron had every prospect of obtaining a high position in the newly forming Greek state. Count Pietro Gamba, a member of the Carbonari in Italy, accompanied Byron to Greece in 1823 and remained by his side until the end. Shortly afterwards, Gamba published the acclaimed memoir *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece* (1825). He recalls: "The general government sent to know if Lord Byron would be willing to proceed in person to the seat of government, or if he would accept the office of Governor General of Greece. [...] He could have no difficulty in accepting any office, provided he could persuade himself that any real good could result from it." Byron responded in writing: "*I am willing to serve them in any capacity they please; either commanding or commanded — it is much the same to me, as long as I can be of any presumed use to them.*"

Count Gamba recorded a vivid and detailed account of Byron's final days and hours. "9th April. [...] He had not been on horseback for three or four days; and though the weather was threatening, he resolved to ride. Three miles from the town we were overtaken by a heavy rain, and we returned to the town walk wet through and in a violent perspiration. [...] Two hours after his return home, he was seized with a shuddering; he complained of fever and rheumatic pains. At eight in the evening I entered his room; he was lying on a sofa, restless and melancholy. He said to me, '*I suffer a great deal of pain; I do not care for death; but these agonies I cannot bear.*' [...] During the night of the 17th he had some attacks of delirium, in which he talked of fighting..."

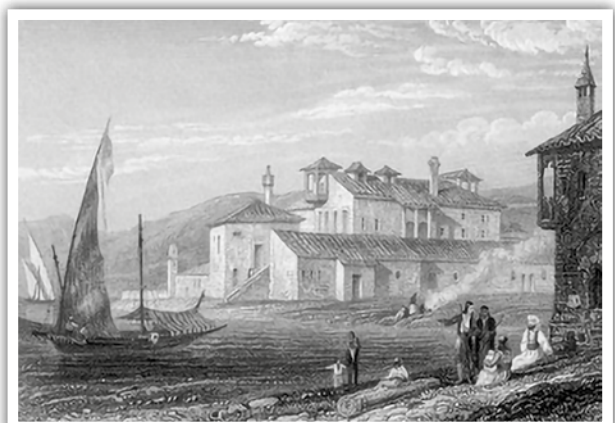
A few hours before his death, on 18th April 1824, Lord Byron rose and went into the next room to read a book that seemed urgently needed at that moment. It may have been his own *Don Juan*, which he was famously reading and quoting from during his final days, or the manuscript of William Parry's *The Last Days of Lord Byron* that he was trying to edit. Count Gamba continues in his aforementioned diary: "He was able to walk across the chamber, leaning on his servant Tita. When seated, he told Tita to bring him a book, mentioning it by name. The servant brought it to him. About this time Dr. Bruno entreated him, with tears in his eyes, to be again bled. 'No,' he said: '*if my hour is come, I shall die whether I lose my blood or keep it.*' After reading a few minutes, he found himself faint, and leaning upon his servant's arm, he

tottered into the next room, and returned to bed. At half-past three, his two doctors, becoming more alarmed, wished to call in two other physicians, [a German and a Greek]. He said, 'Very well, let them come; but let them look at me and say nothing.' They promised this, and were admitted. When about him, and feeling his pulse, one of them wished to speak — 'Recollect your promise,' he said, 'and go away.' [...] At four o'clock, after this consultation of his physicians, he seemed to be aware of his approaching end. [...] He awoke in half an hour. I wished to go to him — but I had not the heart. Mr. Parry went, and Byron knew him again, and squeezed his hand, and tried to express his last wishes. He mentioned names, as before, and also sums of money: he spoke sometimes in English, sometimes in Italian. From those about him, I collected that, either at this time, or in his former interval of reason, he could be understood to say — 'Poor Greece! — poor town! — my poor servants!' Also, 'Why was I not aware of this sooner?' and 'My hour is come! — I do not care for death — but why did I not go home before I came here?' At another time he said, 'There are things which make the world dear to me: for the rest, I am content to die.' [...] It was about six o'clock in the evening when he said, 'I want to go to sleep now,' and immediately turning round, he fell into that slumber, from which, alas! he never awoke. [...] It was just a quarter past six o'clock on the next day, the 19th [April], that he was seen to open his eyes, and immediately shut them again. The physicians felt his pulse — he was gone! [...] His countenance had an air of calmness, mingled with a severity, that seemed gradually to soften; for when I took a last look of him, the expression, at least to my eyes, was truly sublime. [...] Within two days, Mr. Blacquiere arrived, with the fond object of his [Byron's] hopes, the first instalment of the loan! — Oh, the vanity of human ambition!" (*Literary Gazette* No. 418, 22nd January 1825, London; excerpts from the book by Count Pietro Gamba)

T. G. Barber, who investigated the poet's final resting place in Nottinghamshire, portrays "nature's response" to Byron's death in Missolonghi: " 'My God!' said Fletcher, 'I fear his lordship is gone.' He was right. His spirit had flown. Outside a terrific thunderstorm was raging — the lightning flashed — the thunder rolled round the hills — the rain beat fiercely on the windows of the house where the body of Byron lay in its last sleep. In the fury of the storm, which Parry said was the most terrible he had ever witnessed, the news spread rapidly through the town that Byron was dead." (From the book *Byron — And Where He Is Buried* by T. G. Barber, Henry Morley & Sons, Hucknall, Nottinghamshire 1939)

The people present in his final hours and at his bedside included: Fletcher, his loyal valet and servant, who was with him throughout his time in Greece; Tita (Giovanni Battista Falcieri), his bodyguard and valet; Pietro Gamba, a close friend and associate; William Parry, a Major in Byron's Brigade; several doctors in attendance, including Dr. Francesco Bruno, Julius Millingen and Dr. Henry Treiber.

From January 1824 until his death, Lord Byron lived in the house of Christos Kapsalis, located in the Kapsaleika quarter on the west side of Missolonghi by the sea. The poet occupied a room on the upper floor facing the sea. Two years later, in April 1826, the house was destroyed — blown up by its owner, during the third siege of Missolonghi, to prevent it falling into enemy hands. At the time, the town was under a complete naval blockade; the Greeks and their philhellene allies, four times fewer in number than the opposing forces, heroically defended the town for nearly a year, enduring starvation and dwindling supplies of weapons. The failed attempt at exodus, followed by the fall of Missolonghi, became a national tragedy: thousands of captured men were brutally killed, and thousands of women and children were taken into slavery. Missolonghi was finally liberated during the closing stages of the war in 1829 and is considered a "sacred town" (ιερὰ πόλις) in modern Greece for its role and sacrifice in the Greek War of Independence. While a military defeat, the heroism of its soldiers and civilians generated international sympathy for the Greek cause and contributed to eventual independence.



"The house of Kapsalis where Byron died." Drawn by W. Purser and engraved by E. Finden for 'Finden's Landscape and Portrait Illustrations to the Life and Works of Lord Byron', 1833

The bravery and tragedy of Missolonghi inspired Victor Hugo, Eugène Delacroix and Gioachino Rossini to commemorate the siege in their respective works. A marble stela, erected in 1924, marks the original site of the house where Byron died in 1824.

Lord Byron's life and death perfectly embodied the expression "lived too fast, died too young." With his characteristic self-deprecating wit, he often referred to his life as a "wreck" and enjoyed using metaphors such as being a "lump of death" or a "chaos of hard clay." Even in the difficult conditions of Missolonghi and during his physical decline, he strove to maintain control over a situation that was fast becoming tragic. His cynicism perhaps served as a mask for his melancholy or pain. *"I am not afraid of dying. I am more fit to die than people think,"* he told his valet Fletcher shortly before taking his last breath. Earlier, in a letter to his mother, Byron had remarked: *"Always laugh when you can. It's a cheap medicine."* These words are now inscribed on his birthplace plaque at Holles Street, Cavendish Square, London.



Birthplace plaque in London, no caption is needed

Due to his "questionable morality" and scandalous life, the poet, despite ranking among the greatest of all time, was not buried in Westminster Abbey but in the family tomb in Hucknall Torkard, Nottinghamshire. Byron received a memorial plaque at Westminster Poets' Corner only 145 years after his death, in 1969. The words inscribed on the plaque reflect his enduring romantic spirit: *But there is that within me which shall tire / Torture and Time and breathe when I expire.* (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto IV, stanza 137)

Greece became both a tragedy and a triumph for Lord Byron. The Greeks managed to sustain the revolution long enough to transform the political landscape and establish the Republic. The leaders of the uprising were astute in turning what seemed a lost cause into an "international issue," framing their struggle as a matter of European romanticism, as well as cultural and humanitarian concern. This achievement, however, came at a tremendous cost, exacting significant casualties and sacrifice.



Byron memorial plate at Westminster Poet's Corner; no caption is needed

ζηλω δὲ σοῦ μὲν Ἑλλάδ', Ἑλλάδος δὲ σέ.
 εὖ γὰρ τόδ' εἶπας ἀξίως τε πατρίδος
 τὸ θεομαχεῖν γὰρ ἀπολιποῦς, ὃ σου κρατεῖ,
 ἐξελογίσω τὰ χρηστὰ τὰναγκαῖά τε.
 μᾶλλον δὲ λέκτρων σῶν πόθος μ' ἐσέρχεται
 εἰς τὴν φύσιν βλέψαντα γενναία γὰρ εἶ.

Happy in thee is Hellas, thou in Hellas!

*Well saidst thou this, and worthily of our land:
 Thou hast turned away from strife with gods —
 A thing too hard for thee — hast weighed the good Fate spares.
 Yet love for thee now thrills me through the more
 That I have seen thy nature, noble heart.*

These lines are from one of the ninety dramas written by Euripides, who lived in Athens in the 5th century BC. The Greek hero Achilles, deeply moved by young Iphigenia's dignity and courage, praises her readiness to sacrifice her life for Hellas/Greece amid a cruel tangle of circumstances. (*Iphigeneia at Aulis* by Euripides, lines 1406-1411, translated by Arthur S. Way. *Euripides* Vol. I, William Heinemann, London 1912)

In Greece, Byron is called *megalos kai kalos* (μεγάλος κα καλός), “a great and good man.” This is distinct from, yet resonates with, the classical Athenian ideal of *kalos kagathos* (καλ ὁ καγαθός), meaning “beautiful and good,” which reflects the harmony of physical beauty and inner virtue. As a dedicated philhellene, Lord Byron devoted his time, money and health to the cause, ultimately sacrificing his life for Greek freedom. His death in Missolonghi at a young age is often regarded as his final, defining poetic act.

“His philhellenic poetry bears all the hallmarks of romantic poetry as well as the special attributes of Byron’s poetic personality. His poetry stood out owing to the genuine emotions which his lines overflowed with. Byron made use of the old means of expression of the classical form and versification which helped him to succeed in combining the romantic contents of his works with classical elements — a personal trait that differentiates him from the other British romantic poets.” [from the monograph “Byron and the antiquities of the Acropolis of Athens” by Eugenia Kefallineou, The Archeological Society of Athens, 1999.]



“Four Muses with musical instruments mourn Lord Byron on his deathbed”, lithograph by Mathieu Barathier, 1826

Several locations in Greece are dedicated to or associated with Lord Byron, particularly in Missolonghi: the Garden of Heroes (where his heart is buried); the Byron Society and Museum; the statue of Lord Byron; Byron’s House in the town centre; the Monastery of Agios Simeon; and the Church of Panagia of Phoenixia, which he visited. In Athens, notable sites include the statue of Lord Byron with Greece personified at the entrance of the National Garden near the Temple of Olympian Zeus; the Gennadeion Library, housing a collection of Byron memorabilia including personal items; and the Philhellenism Museum. Almost every major town in Greece has a street bearing his name, and one suburb of Athens was named Vyronas (Βύρωνας) in his honour. At the temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, 70 km southeast of Athens, Byron’s name is inscribed at the base of one of the fifteen surviving Doric columns. The poet was so inspired by this location, famed for its dramatic sunset views over the Aegean Sea, that he immortalised it in his poem *Isles of Greece*:

*Place me on Sunium’s marbled steep,
Where nothing, save the waves and I,
May hear our mutual murmurs sweep...*

While standing for a few minutes by the monument of Byron in Athens and reflecting on his last adventure, I also pondered the paradoxes of history. Just a few metres away stands an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great, who conquered vast lands when Greece for a while became a gigantic empire under Macedonian rule. Centuries later, Greece fell under the dominion of the mighty Ottoman empire and was aided in its struggle for independence by a son of Britain — another vast empire. Today, Alexander the Great and Lord Byron stand side by side in Athens, facing the remains of the Temple of Olympian Zeus across the road. Empires rise and fall, but the human longing for freedom endures. As Byron’s poetry reminds us, ultimately it is the eternal, formidable Nature that prevails — over empires, over rulers both good and evil, over the civilised and the barbarian, over birth and death, and over all the joys and sorrows that humankind experiences. These famous lines from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Canto IV, stanza 178) reveal a profound emotional connection to nature, a refuge from the constraints of conventional society:

*There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal.*

This verse may also, somewhat surprisingly, evoke the landscape, sea and forests, as well as the reserved national character of Estonia, the country we return to each time after our travels.

Athens is undoubtedly a place on Earth one should see at least once in a lifetime. Reflecting on Byron and his contribution to the Greek cause has been a stirring experience for me and a motivation to compile this article. The vibrant city of Athens felt inspiring and uplifting, which has been especially important in our uncertain times. The place is friendly and welcoming, with lots of cheerful and helpful people, stunning sights and museums, charming cafés, a convenient subway system to reach most destinations, elegant architecture, bustling markets and squares, and relaxed vibes throughout. Street musicians perform both traditional Greek and contemporary music, while the narrow cobbled streets of scenic Anafiotika in Plaka district offer quiet corners with lovely cafés for relaxing, contemplation and a sense of historical perspective. For instance, Plaka is home to Tripodon Street, which is cited as the oldest street in Europe, having maintained the same path for over 2,500 years! Pericles and Solon, Socrates and Plato, Aristotle and Phidias, Sophocles and Aristophanes walked these streets of Plaka while moving between their homes and the Agora to debate, teach or attend assemblies... The art encountered around the city is imbued with antiquity, philosophy and contemporary social themes. If your time in Athens is limited and visiting large museums like the National Archaeological Museum or the Acropolis Museum feels too time-consuming, I recommend the smaller Benaki Museum at Koumpari Street 1, conveniently near the Syntagma subway station in the city centre, not far from the Parliament. The Benaki Museum offers a comprehensive overview of Greek art and history from Ancient Greece to the 20th century. Five to six hours is generally sufficient to explore all the exhibits of the four floors in this elegant neoclassical mansion. A few large rooms of the museum showcase the history of the Greek War of Independence in detail. Lovers of ancient Greek vases, especially those featuring the exquisite black- and red-figure painting techniques, will be particularly delighted. And do not miss the nearby archaeological site of the ancient Aristotle's Lyceum at Rigillis Street 11! The world owes much to the "Master of those who know," as Dante called Aristotle.



Attic hydria for fetching and storing water. Left to right: Artemis, Apollo with a lyre and their mother Leto with a staff. Mid-5th c. BC. Benaki Museum, Athens

Photos of Athens: Jari Lutta

In Lieu of an Afterword: What does Byron have to do with computers and artificial intelligence?

There are a few intriguing connections between Byron, his work and the development of computing and artificial intelligence. As it has become a trend — or rather a necessity — to adjust ourselves to this novelty, it is worth noting that Byron has an indirect connection to the matter. His only legitimate child, Ada Lovelace (Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace, née Byron, 1815–1852), was a gifted mathematician and is often considered the first computer programmer, earning her the title "Pioneer of Computing." In January 1816, when Ada was only five weeks old, her mother, Anne Isabella Milbanke, left Lord Byron, taking the child along. The couple divorced just over a year after their marriage, and Byron left England for good. Ada never saw her famed father. Educated privately by tutors, Ada developed exceptional mathematical skills. Lady Byron strictly suppressed mention of Byron's name and mandated a rigorous study of mathematics and science for her daughter, hoping to counter the "romantic" and "mad" tendencies inherited from her father. Later, Ada Lovelace worked closely with Charles Babbage, known as the "Father of Computing," and her contributions were recognised in the 1950s when her notes on computer algorithms were republished. Remarkably, Ada wrote in the 19th century about artificial intelligence: "The Analytical Engine has no pretensions whatever to originate anything. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform. It can follow analysis; but it has no power of anticipating any analytical relations or truths." This notion has since sparked much debate on machine "creativity." It is a crucial question in deciding whether AI remains a useful tool for humans or evolves into something that exerts control over them with potentially unforeseen consequences for human history.

Ada Lovelace inherited literary talent from her father — fascinated by his works, she wrote poetry herself. She described her approach to science as “poetical,” believing that intuition and imagination were essential to applying mathematical concepts and uncovering the “poetry” within numerical patterns. She requested to be buried alongside him in Nottinghamshire and died at the age of 36, just like Lord Byron. Could it be that the “Byronic hero”, simultaneously romantic, defiant and visionary, has subtly crept into modern technology as well?

Further reading:

Narrative of a Second Visit to Greece by Edward Blaqui re (1824)
A Narrative of Lord Byron’s Last Journey to Greece by Count Pietro Gamba (1825)
The Last Days of Lord Byron: With His Lordship’s Opinions on Various Subjects by William Parry (1825)
Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life by Thomas Moore (1830)
Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron by Edward John Trelawny (1858)
Byron — And Where He Is Buried by T.G. Barber (1939)
The Late Lord Byron by Doris Langley Moore (1961)
For Freedom’s Battle: 1823-1824, Byron’s Letters and Journals, Vol. 11, edited by Leslie A. Marchand (1981)
Ada: A Life and Legacy by Dorothy Stein (1985)
That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence by William St. Clair (2007)
Byron’s War: Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution by Roderick Beaton (2013)
Ada’s Algorithm: How Lord Byron’s Daughter Ada Launched the Digital Age by James Essinger (2014)

Challenges of AI Integration in Education

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It is no longer a futuristic concept: elementary students are now performing a substantial portion of their reading practice with virtual tutors. As artificial intelligence (AI) transitions from a technological novelty to a foundational pillar of modern education, it offers a future of continuous personalized literacy development and a pedagogical bond that both require rigorous and sustained evaluation. By alleviating the administrative burdens — such as lesson planning and assessment — that have historically fueled educator burnout, AI provides significant professional relief.

Major publishers, including McGraw Hill and Curriculum Associates, are already integrating these capabilities into their curricula. However, the shift from AI theory to classroom reality remains a subject of critical inquiry. While initial results are promising, the long-term implications must still be evaluated.

This article explores the growing use of AI, particularly in education. AI models offer continuous personalized tutoring, support student learning, immediate feedback to students and simplify the teacher’s tasks.

Virtual tutors are now a classroom reality, offering elementary students personalized reading practice while shielding teachers from administrative burnout. However, as major publishers integrate AI into their curricula, the industry must still evaluate how this shift affects long-term literacy and the essential bond between teacher and student.



The practical application of AI theory within contemporary educational environments remains a subject of critical inquiry. While initial results appear promising, the efficacy and long-term implications require rigorous evaluation.

Our society is currently navigating the profound and pervasive integration of AI into the fabric of daily life. This transition is often met with frustration; the era of reaching a live agent for support is rapidly vanishing, replaced by increasingly sophisticated automated systems. Yet, tools like Gemini and various chatbots have become permanent fixtures in our toolkit — versatile assistants capable of everything from suggesting a quick weeknight dinner to drafting a comprehensive business plan for a new professional endeavor.

Beyond personal convenience, AI is increasingly assuming control over critical aspects of the school system, particularly in elementary education where virtual tutors now facilitate a substantial portion of reading practice. Whether this trend ultimately results in a better or worse educational outcome is a complex decision that remains to be seen.

However, by examining the perspectives of current teachers and their supervisory staff, we can identify a variety of pros and cons regarding its implementation.

While these AI models offer continuous personalized tutoring and relieve educators of administrative burdens like lesson planning and assessment, the long-term efficacy and practical application of AI theory in these contemporary environments require rigorous ongoing evaluation.

I have collected a range of perspectives from various educators concerning the implementation of artificial intelligence in schools, revealing a mix of eager approval and deep-seated concern. For those in favor, the primary benefit is the alleviation of significant logistical and administrative tasks. By automating routine student assessments and lesson planning, teachers find they have more capacity to engage directly with their students.

Conversely, many educators are uneasy about AI automating the qualitative evaluation of student growth — a process they consider deeply personal and nuanced. While they acknowledge that AI offers round-the-clock instruction and instant feedback, they argue that displacing human judgment in areas like literacy development raises significant questions. Ultimately, the debate hinges on whether AI methodologies can truly achieve long-term success if they lack the essential element of human discernment. Determining how to effectively integrate AI into the modern classroom without undermining the teacher's most personal and nuanced responsibilities remains a significant challenge.

This tension represents a difficult compromise in contemporary education; while some educators have successfully developed creative workarounds to balance technology with human touch, others have chosen to reject the role of AI entirely to preserve the traditional pedagogical bond.

The core of AI literacy lies in equipping students to interpret and navigate a world influenced by artificial intelligence, even without using the hardware itself. By linking standard academic tasks—such as using context clues — to basic AI concepts like data labeling, educators can clarify how predictive models and linguistic processing work.

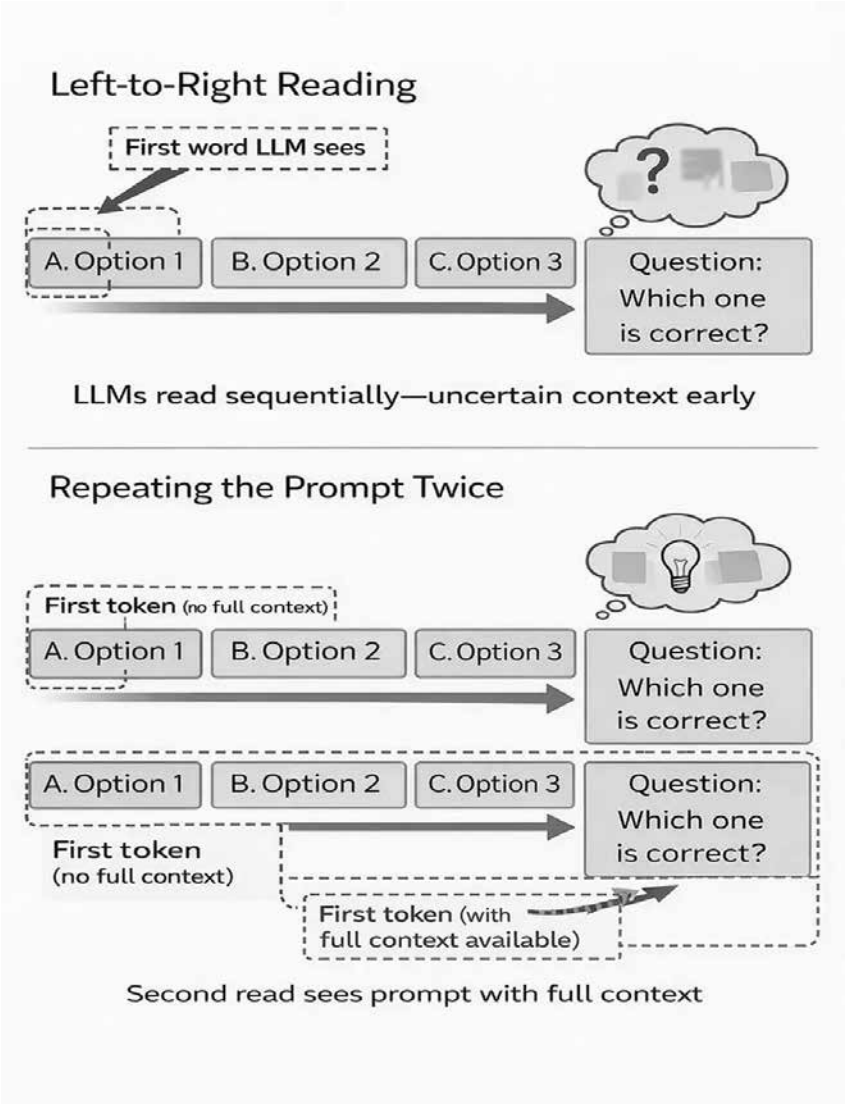
By mapping conventional classroom activities to core AI concepts, teachers foster a level of competence that allows students to grasp the mechanics of data processing without requiring actual hardware. This approach ensures that even without direct instruction through these tools, students gain the necessary skills to understand a world increasingly influenced by AI.

The data presented in the subsequent section outlines methods for teaching students about the effective integration of AI within modern educational environments.

A recent study explored the ability of popular research models (GPT-4, Claude, Llama, Qwen and Gemini) to monitor and regulate their own reasoning processes, adaptability and trustworthiness. These models excel in domains such as code generation and scientific reasoning but often struggle with

error recovery. A key failure has been identified as “step repetition” or looping where these five models repeat failing tools or unproductive strategies. See Table 1.

Table 1



Most large language models (LLMs) utilize a causal training framework. This very design dictates that:

- Options (input) limit their attention solely to any previous data.
- The system lacks any forward-looking visibility.

As a result of these built-in constraints, it is impossible for the AI model to look forward during the processing of the question. The initial Option lacks any context regarding the content of all subsequent Options. *The precise sequencing of cues is vital for the effective performance of AI models.*

Table 2 Evaluated models.

Model	Provider	Context	Access
GPT-4.0	OpenAI	128 K	API
Claude 3.5 Sonnet	Anthropic	200 K	API
Gemini 2.0 Flash	Google	1 M	API
Llama 3.3 70B	Together AI	128 K	API
Qwen 2.5 72B	Together AI	128 K	API

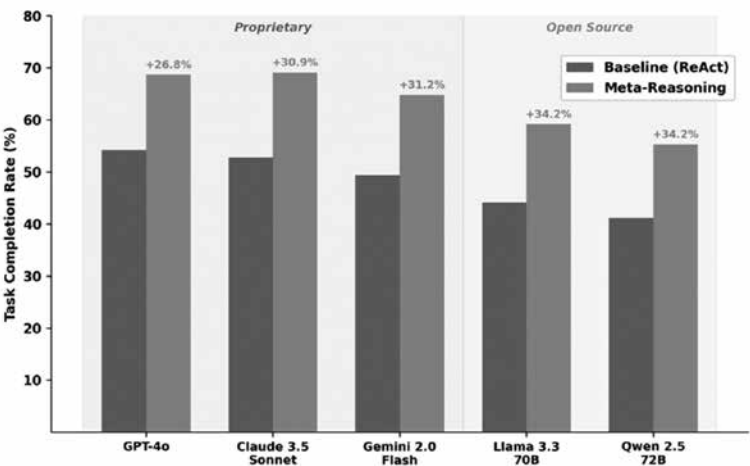
The selection of these specific AI models was predicated on their demonstrated reasoning performance; subsequently, they were rigorously monitored and evaluated within the framework of a controlled study to assess their capacity for information sharing and structural diversity.

Google’s Gemini, featuring a 1M context window, provides the most expansive capacity for rapid retrieval — the functional equivalent of two substantial novels or approximately 750,000 words.

Conversely, the other models, ranging from 128K to 200K, offer context retrieval comparable to a single medium-length novel or 96,000 words.

The utilization of a standardized API (Application Programming Interface) framework facilitates the requisite interoperability for these five models to exchange data with seamless precision; such technical synergy significantly optimizes the retrieval process for the end-user.

Table 3



Drawing from the findings in Table 3, *meta-reasoning* provides large language models with the internal oversight required to oversee their output, identify failure points, and adjust strategies in real time. Research indicates that these self-regulating mechanisms lead to significant and reliable performance gains.

As a robust framework, *meta-reasoning* enables consistent progress across various model designs, though the long-term dependability and stability of these breakthroughs still require further academic validation.

* Meta-reasoning involves active monitoring, control, and assessment of internal cognitive functions to ensure that objective results are achieved.

Given that students at all levels interact with AI on a daily basis, it is imperative for modern educators to understand optimal ways to utilize prominent AI models while also recognizing their existing constraints.

Integrating AI into Modern Elementary Education

Primary-grade students now engage a significant portion of their daily reading time alongside virtual tutoring systems. They have become commonplace. These digital platforms, underpinned by AI, are engineered to monitor the oral reading of young learners — typically ages five and six — providing real-time corrective feedback. AI tutors present a compelling remedy for one of the most persistent hurdles in early literacy instruction: ensuring that students receive ample practice opportunities coupled with instantaneous feedback.

Mastering the ability to connect sounds with their written forms — a process known as phonemic

acquisition — requires students to engage in regular, focused practice with phonics. Yet, in typical classrooms with more than twenty students, teachers struggle to deliver the necessary individualized or small-group instruction for those who are falling behind or those ready to move ahead.

Nevertheless, while educational jurisdictions are rapidly integrating these sophisticated AI reading interventions, the empirical evidence regarding their impact on early literacy outcomes continues to be inconsistent.

Evaluating the true capacity and capability of such platforms is a multifaceted undertaking, necessitating answers to several key questions:

Can these systems accurately parse the unique vocal nuances of a child?

Is the anticipated reduction in teacher workload actually achieved?

Most importantly, do these digital interactions lead to demonstrable gains in academic proficiency?

A final and critical inquiry involves a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of these systems:

Are the literacy gains facilitated by AI-driven interventions demonstrably superior to outcomes observed in their absence, when evaluated against alternative digital platforms or the established pedagogical benchmark of teacher-led independent practice?

The novelty of generative technology means that the educational sector still lacks the definitive, practical evidence required for full endorsement of its utility. Although initial studies are surfacing, it is only recently that the underlying models for literacy intervention have achieved a high level of sophistication. This recent evolution explains the current investigative gap between theory and wide-scale application.

With the expansion of virtual tutoring into various territories, modern studies are placing a greater emphasis on refining “back-end” administrative tasks in the classroom. Current academic investigations are examining how AI systems can support teachers by collecting student prose to guide teaching strategies and by automating the creation of personalized, decodable reading materials.

In the end, AI's greatest potential may lie in its ability to automate and simplify diagnostic procedures. This ensures that instructional choices are not merely faster, but also more accurate and significantly more effective for student learning.

The Implications of AI in Secondary Education

Across the educational landscape, teachers find themselves profoundly unsettled by the mounting pressure from parents and students to diminish professional authority and oversight. The evolving dynamics of the contemporary classroom introduce a unique suite of complexities. However, those particular concerns are more appropriately explored within a separate discourse.

The choices made by adults concerning the integration of AI possess the power to radically transform the underlying culture of our learning environments. These decisions, specifically the dedication to transparency and the pursuit of classroom efficiency, will convert and transform classroom learning.

When invited to pinpoint my concerns regarding the proliferation of AI within the school system, my thoughts have increasingly shifted away from the actions of students at the secondary level.

Rather, the true origin of my apprehension lies with the adults.

Since the five AI models mentioned earlier have been released to the public, media coverage has largely centered on student usage. Educators have frequently circulated stories regarding academic dishonesty in higher education and the potential erosion of critical thinking skills within schools.

However, my recent investigations — *conducted with Gemini's assistance* — suggest a different perspective.

On the surface, the prevailing atmosphere within classrooms of today persists with a striking degree of continuity, depicting the environment that was navigated several years ago. Students continue to engage in meaningful dialogue and remain steadfast in the process of developing their unique voices as writers. Teachers still encounter sporadic lapses in academic integrity regarding AI. *These moments are largely reminiscent of the same human vulnerabilities that have always existed with a minority of students.*

Ultimately, the classroom endures as a vital sanctuary for genuine scholarship and communal growth. Maintaining a vigilant eye on AI developments occurring beyond our classroom walls is essential. My current source of apprehension lies in the specific decisions adults are making regarding the integration and normalization of AI. *Missteps in AI integration will risk delaying the normalization of AI within our school culture.*

I have researched and noted *three emerging patterns* regarding adult choices that carry profound consequences for the students, especially considering the rapid pace of technological change.

The Critical Need for Transparency in AI Integration

It is essential to recognize the significant difference between using AI for preliminary tasks, like brainstorming unit ideas *versus* relying on it to handle the core of our work, such as assessments and feedback.

Unfortunately, current evidence suggests that many teachers are not being open about their use of AI. This lack of transparency can have a significant impact on professional integrity and erode the trust that is essential to the teacher's role.

The foundations of any educational institution are trust, mutual respect, and honest dialogue. *Transparency is the key to upholding these values.*

Shouldn't this be what we prioritize within our schools and the wider educational landscape?

No matter where one stands on artificial intelligence, educators should be able to find common ground on certain fundamental principles. *A commitment to transparency, particularly with students and their families, must be one of them.*

The Gap in AI Application: Teachers vs Students

A study conducted at a local school invited students to discuss their perspectives on AI through various forums and surveys. The results highlighted intense frustration over what was seen as a double standard: teachers employing AI tools while banning student use. This inconsistency led one student to label the practice as hypocritical.

Although AI guidelines require careful nuance, teachers in secondary education should realize that simply being open about their personal and/or professional AI usage is insufficient. Teachers need to address the serious impact this disconnect has on students.

Students deeply value authentic transparency. Teachers should serve as role models by "*walking the walk*". If students are expected to complete a writing assignment without AI, teachers should do the same when creating the prototype. *Maintaining high standards of transparency has become the new norm in our changing world.*

The Cost of Prioritizing Efficiency

The concluding point I wish to raise is offered with a spirit of profound empathy, for I am acutely aware that teachers today are systematically under-resourced regarding the time required to perform their duties authentically. In the current landscape, the prevailing justification for AI adoption among many teachers is not to enhance the depth or quality of their pedagogical work, but rather for the singular, pragmatic purpose of saving time.

There are undeniable concerns regarding the long-term impact on the teaching profession when AI is utilized *in lieu of* addressing more fundamental labor issues. However, the focus of my study is on the immediate reality: *the profound costs that emerge when efficiency is prioritized as a professional standard.*

Fundamentally, the strategic allocation of a teacher's most finite resource — time — functions as a profound signal to students concerning the intrinsic value of their scholarly pursuits. Conversely, a retreat from this personal investment sends a discouraging message regarding their potential. It is for this reason that I maintain deep reservations regarding the teacher's delegation of feedback to AI models. Ultimately, how can students be expected to embrace the rigors of the writing process if teachers decline to invest the effort required to truly *engage* with and interpret their students' unique perspectives?

Furthermore, there is an inherent, almost sacred value in the labor itself. The act of meticulously evaluating essays and weaving together meaningful feedback demands significant time. The reward is a profound and authentic understanding of the students' unique needs, both as individuals and as a collective. This synthesized data represents the fundamental cornerstone necessary for orchestrating substantive and authentic change across the contemporary pedagogical landscape.

Ultimately, teachers frequently observe with concern that the contemporary landscape steers students toward a transactional engagement — a shift that fundamentally compromises the pursuit of learning for its own sake.

If efficiency is prioritized as the primary professional standard, then students can be realistically expected to mirror that same transactional mindset within their own academic journeys.

Addressing the Challenges of AI Integration

Currently educators at all levels find themselves at a profound moment of divergence regarding the integration of AI within their classrooms, their professional duties, and the broader societal landscape. It is entirely expected that many will encounter these perspectives with a spirit of disagreement; indeed, such ongoing discourse is not only fair but essential. Teachers must commit to learning from — *and alongside* — their students as this change is navigated.

We stand at a critical juncture concerning the implementation of artificial intelligence in educational systems, professional spheres, and larger communities. While it is natural for conflicting perspectives to emerge during this transition, participating in transparent and exhaustive dialogue is fundamental for advancement. *As this new course is charted, the commitment of educators must be to evolve in partnership with students.*

While this project will investigate broader results, it can also be viewed as a set of vital questions for teachers examining the integration of AI within their own classrooms:

Are you upholding a rigorous standard of openness with students and their families concerning your personal and professional use of AI?

If you employ AI to facilitate your workload while restricting student use, have you made it a priority to investigate the impact of this evident contradiction from the student's perspective?

In your efforts to gain efficiency, have you evaluated the significant hidden costs that arise when productivity is valued above the interpersonal relationships central to the teaching profession?

Ultimately, reaching a universal consensus regarding the appropriate implementation of AI by adults remains a *formidable challenge* during this era of change. Especially as teachers operate within unique and well-entrenched frameworks.

In essence, teachers must be profoundly mindful of the weight their professional choices carry, regardless of their findings. These decisions will fundamentally shape the culture of the classroom and determine the very quality and authenticity of the student's learning journey.

In Conclusion

In evaluating this significant pedagogical shift, three critical areas of concern need to be prioritized:

The Essential Need for Transparency

The Erosion of Trust by the Adult-Student Disconnect

The Importance of Professional Role-Modeling

B.F. Skinner (American psychologist and Harvard professor) famously noted in 1969:

"The real problem is not whether machines think, but whether men do.

The mystery that surrounds a thinking machine already surrounds a thinking man."

Generative AI in education: Amplifying or replacing critical thinking?

Tauri Einberg



In the era of generative AI, teaching may appear to have become easier. Students can use AI to find answers to almost any question, check their own work, and receive immediate feedback. Teachers, in turn, can generate worksheets, presentations, and other learning materials, or even configure AI assistants to help with lesson planning and assessment. At first glance, this seems like a win-win situation: students gain access to personalized support, while teachers save time on routine tasks. However, while generative AI offers substantial support for both learning and teaching, its impact ultimately depends on how it is used — whether it replaces thinking or deepens it.

Improper use of AI can create several significant challenges for students. When learners rely on AI to generate answers instead of engaging with problems themselves, they may experience short-term improvements in performance, but this often comes at the cost of long-term learning outcomes, reduced skill acquisition, and increased dependency on AI tools — overreliance (Lodge, Loble, 2026; Bastani et al., 2025). Moreover, students may develop an illusion of competence if they accept AI-generated responses uncritically. Neurological research suggests that heavy reliance on AI can reduce brain connectivity associated with deep cognitive processing and impair knowledge retention (Kosmyna et al., 2025). Experimental studies further indicate that AI-supported learners may engage less in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes — activities that are fundamental to the development of critical thinking (Fan et al., 2025). These findings highlight that, without careful guidance, the use of generative AI in the learning process can undermine the very cognitive skills education seeks to develop.

For AI use to be beneficial, it must be guided by clear pedagogical principles. AI should function as a tool that supports and extends thinking rather than as a provider of ready-made answers. Research shows that students who engage with AI through probing, Socratic-style questioning, demonstrate statistically significant improvements in critical thinking compared to those receiving traditional instruction (Li, 2025). Such interactions encourage learners to reflect on their reasoning and identify potential biases in their thinking. AI can be effectively used to provide feedback and clarify understanding. Studies indicate that AI-generated feedback can be detailed, immediate, and iterative, enabling students to refine their work step by step (Escalante, Pack, & Barrett, 2023; Wan & Chen, 2023). Educators can deliberately design tasks in which AI produces incomplete or imperfect responses, prompting students to compare outputs with authoritative sources and justify their conclusions. This approach transforms a known limitation of AI — its potential to produce inaccuracies — into an opportunity to strengthen analytical

reasoning (Wazan, 2026). In this way, AI becomes an amplifier of thinking rather than a substitute for it. In my experience as a history and social studies teacher, generative AI can be a valuable support for student learning when used thoughtfully. For example, I often ask students to create mind maps and then use AI to receive feedback on their structure and content. Importantly, students must decide whether to accept or reject the feedback, which encourages active evaluation rather than passive acceptance. I also require students to present their mind maps to the classroom orally. This ensures that they cannot rely solely on AI-generated material — they must demonstrate their own understanding and respond to questions from both the teacher and their peers. Additionally, I have found it effective to ask students to research a topic using AI and then compare the results with more authoritative sources, such as textbooks or other reviewed materials. Students are required to identify discrepancies and evaluate the reliability of each source. In this context, one of AI's key weaknesses — its tendency to produce inaccurate or misleading information — becomes a tool for developing critical thinking, as students must analyse and justify which information they trust.

Ultimately, I think that generative AI does not inherently improve or diminish education; its effects depend on how it is integrated into the learning process. When used uncritically, it can encourage cognitive offloading and weaken essential thinking skills. When used deliberately, however, it can support reflection, feedback, and deeper engagement with content. The responsibility therefore lies with educators to design learning environments in which AI serves as a partner in thinking rather than a replacement for it. By doing so, generative AI can contribute not only to more efficient learning, but to more thoughtful and intellectually engaged students.

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Insights from an English–Language Speaking Competition

Merike Saar

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Public speaking contests offer foreign language learners a powerful opportunity to use English authentically while developing confidence, structure, and audience awareness. This short article draws on a research paper by Villem Vahtrik, a student at Tallinn French School, who collected student feedback from a national English-language public speaking contest in Estonia. The article highlights key learning outcomes and practical takeaways for teachers.

The Contest in Brief

The competition theme was “We know what we are, but not what we may be.” — William Shakespeare, and followed the English Speaking Union (ESU) International model, which values informed, balanced speaking over overt persuasion. Students completed three rounds: a prepared five-minute speech, a short impromptu speech with limited preparation time, and a final prepared speech assessed by a new jury. Prepared rounds included questions from judges and the audience.

This format challenged students to combine planning with spontaneity, manage time pressure, and interact meaningfully with listeners — skills central to real-life communication in a foreign language.

Why Students Participate

Student motivation to participate in the event was both intrinsic and extrinsic. Many participants described a genuine interest in English, public speaking, and self-expression. Others were encouraged by teachers, sometimes joining the contest reluctantly at first. Notably, positive feedback and support often transformed hesitation into engagement, highlighting the strong influence teachers have on students’ willingness to take communicative risks.

Preparation: What Helped Most

Students reported using a range of preparation strategies. Rehearsal – in front of mirrors, friends, or family – was the most common and effective method. Brainstorming helped generate ideas, while choosing personally meaningful topics increased motivation and authenticity. Some students used digital tools, including AI, for idea generation or language refinement, viewing them as supportive aids rather than replacements for independent thinking or teacher feedback.

Confidence and Skill Development

Performance anxiety was a major challenge, especially before the first speech. However, most students reported feeling calmer and more confident as the competition progressed. Successfully completing a demanding speaking task often changed the students’ perception of their own abilities.

Participants highlighted improvements in:

- speech structure (clear openings, logical development, strong conclusions),
- voice use and pacing,
- awareness of body language and eye contact,
- ability to respond to questions spontaneously.

These reflections show a shift from focusing mainly on linguistic accuracy to understanding communication as a holistic, multimodal process.

Feedback and Questions as Learning Tools

Reactions to audience and jury questions were mixed. While some students found them stressful, many valued them as opportunities to demonstrate understanding and think critically. Constructive feedback — especially from listeners — was seen as motivating and informative, helping students improve in later rounds.

Transfer Beyond the Contest

Students reported that skills developed through the contest transferred directly to classroom learning. They felt more confident giving presentations, participating in discussions, and structuring written work. Some also noted increased interest in future careers requiring strong communication skills, such as teaching, law, media, or international relations.

Practical Tips for Teachers of English

- 1) Normalise speaking anxiety: discuss nervousness openly and frame it as a natural part of communication, not a failure.
- 2) Teach structure explicitly: model clear introductions, signposting, and conclusions in speaking tasks.
- 3) Practise spontaneous speaking: use short impromptu tasks (e.g. 1-minute talks with 5 minutes' preparation) to build flexibility.
- 4) Include questions and feedback: encourage peer questions after presentations to develop interactional skills.
- 5) Encourage personal topics: allow students to connect speaking tasks to their interests to increase engagement.

Conclusion

Public speaking contests demonstrate how meaningful, challenging speaking tasks can significantly support language development and learner confidence. For teachers, the key lesson is not the competition itself, but the principles behind it: authenticity, structure, supportive feedback, and repeated practice. Integrating these elements into everyday teaching can help students find their voice in English – both inside and outside the classroom.



Finalists 2025



Participants

Organising a Spelling Bee for Upper-Secondary School Students of Tartu

Author: Kaupo Piir, grade 11 student at Tartu Jaan Poska Gümnaasium

Supervisor: Lembi Loigu



On January 15, 2026, I, Kaupo Piir, organized a Spelling Bee for upper-secondary school students in Tartu as my research project. The idea for the event came from a Spelling Bee I had organized the previous school year as part of International Education Week, a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of State. This year, the Spelling Bee was open for every high school student in Tartu. The objectives of my project were to organize a spelling competition for students of Tartu upper-secondary schools and to promote correct spelling in English. When organizing the event, I was inspired by the Scripps National Spelling Bee held in the United States of America.

I began preparing for the event by selecting 180 words from different materials, including SAT vocabulary lists and the study materials of Scripps National Spelling Bee (SNSB), an annual spelling competition held in Washington, D.C. The words were then sorted by etymology (Latin, Greek, Germanic, French, Italian, and others) and difficulty. I then compiled an information file of the words sorted by etymology, and of the rules that were modified from the rules of the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The words in the information file were divided into a Google Sheets spreadsheet according to difficulty levels (1 – easiest, 5 – most difficult), from which each participant was randomly assigned a sequence number and a word. When determining the difficulty levels, I based my decision on the following aspects: morphology, how many silent letters there were in the word, what different letter combinations were used when writing the word, and how frequent the words were in everyday speech. The Spelling Bee was organized in different rounds, with words of the same difficulty used in each round. In the Google Sheets spreadsheet, I noted whether the participant pronounced the word correctly or incorrectly.

There were several important differences between the SNSB and the pronunciation competition I organized. The SNSB allows participation in written, oral, and online formats, whereas my competition took place only in oral form on site. In addition, I provided all words in advance and divided them according to their etymological background, while SNSB uses extensive, etymologically uncategorized word lists for preparation. Furthermore, my Spelling Bee did not include a written vocabulary round and it consisted only of an oral round.

The event was attended by 17 students from four different Tartu upper-secondary schools: five students from Hugo Treffner Gymnasium, four students from Tartu Kristjan Jaak Peterson Gymnasium, four students from Tartu Jaan Poska Gymnasium, and four students from Miina Härma Gymnasium. It is worth mentioning that Miina Härma Gymnasium organized a school round based on the same rules and principles as my event in order to select their representatives.

The judge of the event was Kadi Sutter, who has studied English philology and language editing and is an experienced translator and English teacher, as well as a Cambridge C1 exam administrator and assessor and an assessor at the HARNO exam center. Kadi Sutter says, "Despite these extensive credentials, I had never actually participated in a spelling bee as a contestant or a judge, so it was a brand-new and exciting opportunity for me. To prepare for my role, I reviewed the official word list beforehand and I admit to double-checking the pronunciations of several tricky terms in order not to embarrass myself in front of the competitors. Thanks to the organizer's thorough preparation, the competition ran seamlessly from start to finish. Ultimately, I was deeply impressed by the caliber of the student participants, noting that the event showcased some truly amazing spellers."

The Spelling Bee was supported by several sponsors. The National Theatre Vanemuine provided three theatre tickets to Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, the city of Tartu contributed five copies of the book *Väikseid varje Emajõe peeglis*, the publishing house Värskes Rõhk provided 20 magazines, Tartu Jaan Poska Gümnaasium contributed ballpoint pens, Minimelts provided 33 ice creams, and Lemon Gym offered 33 three-day gym passes.

While organizing the event, I realized that arranging a spelling competition is both feasible and meaningful, as it can support language learning and build confidence, but it also requires careful planning and attention to detail. I learned the importance of clear rules, appropriate word selection, and smooth organization. In the future, I would focus on involving more participants and improving the structure of the competition—for example, by asking for feedback immediately at the end of the event, since analyzing the impact of the competition on the participants was limited by the low number of responses to the feedback questionnaire.

My project was selected as one of the best research projects of the 2025/2026 school year at Tartu Jaan Poska Gümnaasium. As a result, I was given the opportunity to present my work at the international student research conference at Gymnasiet Grankulla Samskola in Finland. The conference is held in the framework of the Nordplus Junior project NPJR-2025/10175 "Science Conference for Gymnasium Students" and has students participating from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Sweden.

WHY READ BEFORE AND AFTER WRITING

Erika Puusemp

MHG, EATE, DKG

Déjà vu from last year: I'm worried and frustrated, and this feeling is growing by the minute because...

Having recently read the writing tasks of numerous 9th-formers taking the test run of e-exams in English, in which they had to write an email and a story, I am still wondering about how students who have been reading all kinds of texts in their mother tongue for at least eight years and in English for at least six years can still not read and interpret instructions properly, and cannot copy words that are right in front of them without spelling mistakes.

I might be repeating myself but let me exemplify. One of the tasks for the 9th-formers was to write an email, this time to a Cambridge-based friend Sam who was inviting the addressee (i.e. the student writing the email) to visit them in Cambridge in summer. This task was accompanied by an advert for four different tours from which to choose, and read as follows:

Write an email back to Sam. In your email, answer Sam's questions (Which tour(s) do you want to go on? What else in addition to the tours do you want to do in Cambridge?) and ask two trip-related questions of your own. Write about 120 words. Use the pen name Mari/Mart for yourself.

What many students did instead of carefully reading the task and responding effectively was either 1) suggest that one day would be enough for packing two tours plus exploring on one's own (and travel to and from Cambridge, ignoring the fact that they are based in Estonia), or 2) just lift language from the advert, basing their choices mostly on the time when some tour is supposed to start, or how much it costs. Many also ignored Sam's questions or turned them around and directed them at Sam (e.g. *What would you like to do with me? / If you could visit anyplace in the world what would you choose? / Write me your questions.*)



As to the questions they were supposed to ask Sam, many went with “What about you?” or something similar, such a question (especially when asked multiple times) does not really show the student’s ability to use language creatively, which is how exam situations are a little different from real life — a person must show off their language while in real life they might (sometimes) get by with the barest minimum. Sometimes the questions they asked also showed that they had not read the task carefully. For example, asking “When are we leaving to Cam Brige, 11th or 17th April?” ignores the fact that Sam is in Cambridge, which is in a country different from ours, and wants the responder to their email to visit them in summer. According to the task they were also supposed to use a pen name for themselves but unfortunately many did not, most probably providing their own name instead, so after reading 75+ exam emails, I have a list of a whole class-worth of nice boy names (to quote Estonian literature) and girl names (both of which a certain law prohibits me from listing here).

As to the layout of emails — there were many who just ignored the fact that there should be suitable opening and closing salutations and a short block text is not good style either — logical paragraphing makes any text easier and pleasanter to read. Amongst those who had remembered the need for opening and closing salutations there were sadly many who wrote even those as part of the overall block text, or put commas in weird places (e.g. *Dear, Sam*). Generally speaking, punctuation tends to be rather random.

The following is a compilation email, consisting of fragments from the more “interesting” emails that should provide an overview of the kinds of grammar and vocabulary mistakes students make. An additional problem with this is that it is way too long. This issue did not often appear in students’ writing, although the length of emails in the sample I read varied from one word to 162 words. Please turn some personal pronouns “I” into lower case letters yourself, my computer corrects me all the time when I try to keep the lower case versions.

Hei Sam, I'm glad you texted me and I thinked everything over. That s chois is so hard. I not free this weekend, I like the time it can be done. Should we bring someone? Could I bring my dog Koer to? I'm planning to come with a big group of people. I am free on Friday the whole day and Saturday from 5 PM. I just notise for you, I am sleeping long on weekends, I love sleeping so for me I think is hard to wake up. I don't know if iam physical fit enoghe to bysicle ride because on the morning there is too hot. Its good idea to waste time whitch gaided tour to be everyday open then time is suetable or goust tour tomorrow night not that long drip and it is only coast £18. I but my voice on punt. I need to buy local clothes, maybe go to the beach, sailing on punt, just walk, go to cafe's and malls, maybe even see higlits how the vilages look like. I donät know what to doelse but we can watch it. I'm want to go restoraunt eat the deslisious sweats. It's time to say goodbuy! If you have other ideas I appreacitate your write a feedback. Best whishes from John Landeskog aka Mart. (219 words, sorry...)

As to the story-writing task, the students were provided with a prompt in the form of a picture (of a man in a suit sprinting to catch an already moving bus) and the task read as follows:

You are taking part in a story writing competition. Your story should be about 100 words long. The best story will win a prize and be published in a magazine. Write a short story about the situation in the picture below. Start with the words in the box. (When Brian turned around the corner...)

The picture here is a slightly smaller version of the original, published with permission from the compilers of the task.



Students’ creativity is either nonexistent or boundless. Brian turns into Briaat or Ben or I in the middle of the story. And although most believe Brian is late for an important work-related meeting (and will get fired due to being late) or *a promotion day in his office*, there were also versions including a business

meeting with Donald Trump, and the wedding of the prime minister of Estonia, and one in which his mates had stolen a buss, and the police officers whitnest all of the show and gave the buss driver a ticket of a fine, the driver was bored and started bullying him, the boss called him and saw it all happening...

Some more examples (all mistakes are the students'): Hey, Sam, I'm not coming to Cambridge, the bus didn't see me // John was kicking to the bus, never been taken bus before // Ben got mad and smacked bus drivers head with his bag like a woman usually does whe shes mad // Brian saw a man running desperatly to reach his bus and gave him taxi money. Unfortunately the taxi crashed and he wasn't injured. He stilled had the stamina to run all the way to the next bus station, this lets him not be late at his boring office work and his boss wont to kick out of his job. Brian had a good rest of his day. // saw a small electic bike in the corner of his eye he can rent and arrived to work on time in a pink glittering bike draining from sweat like a wet dog, his co worked laughed at him now he cry back home frustruated.

Unfortunately, there were also some (thankfully not many) that thought just a picture description was a good idea: *In the box it seems that the man...*

Although the belief that e-exams are not an improvement over hand-written paper-based exams might be rather widespread yet, we probably have to accept that most exams are moving in that direction, and although it makes easier for the assessors to read typed texts instead of handwritten texts that often border on illegible because of the handwriting, there is also a type of mistake that appears when students are typing, namely the kind of spelling errors that are caused by a finger accidentally landing on a letter beside the one necessary (e.g. in abdurldly // stop on the midle of the road cousing a traffic), because students either have or plan no time for reading their text through again in the hopes of spotting mistakes they could potentially notice themselves, or they really cannot spot such mistakes.

Unfortunately, the issues mentioned above are not limited to 9th-formers or single schools but also occur in the papers written during the national exam in English at the end of form 12, and in tests written by students aiming to pass some C1 language level exams.

What should/could teachers do to alleviate this problem of oversight, neglect, inattentiveness (whatever we might call it)?

Some suggestions (not a definitive list):

- insist on reading instructions and underlining key words in them in every lesson, especially if it comes to writing tasks (but students often tend to ignore or misread instructions for reading and listening and grammar/vocabulary tasks too, e.g. as to whether they need to underline something or cross something off, how many words they are allowed to use in a gap or whether to write something in upper or lower case)
- brainstorm (as a class) synonyms for key words,
- insist on planning both the content and layout before writing the text (not writing the same test twice, as a rough copy and clean copy), and on saving some time for reading their text through with the aim of locating and correcting any mistakes before handing it in,
- give students error correction exercises to help with spotting mistakes,
- give students spelling tests, e.g. based on the words misspelled in their previous writing task or test,
- make students correct and comment on each other's writing tasks,
- correct tests and add comments to writing tasks together in class,
- make students correct and grade their own writing while extensively commenting on what they should look for,
- provide students with model texts,
- if you believe that AI can help, ask students to make AI correct their work (under the watchful eye of the teacher, obviously),
- acquaint students with marking scales for exam tasks,
- ask a colleague what else they do and try some of their suggestions out.

Learning Through Job Shadowing: A Spring Visit to Bratislava

Taivi Õigus



Having previously attended Erasmus+ teacher training courses, I decided to try job shadowing this time. The 1st Independent High School in Bratislava (hereinafter referred to as 1SG) was recommended by a colleague of mine. Although I did not take the idea very seriously at first, I eventually found myself in the chilly and slightly sleepy city on the Danube.

The 1st private grammar school and secondary school for students with general intellectual talent was established in 1991, with three co-founders still employed there. The Private Elementary School for Students with General Intellectual Giftedness was opened in 2009. Currently, the school comprises three different private study options: a nine-year elementary school, an eight-year grammar school, and a four-year grammar school. The last two share the same facilities, while the first is located in an adjacent building.

The school's admission requirements are strict. The assessment of giftedness for admission to the first grade of the secondary school for students with general intellectual ability is conducted at a counselling centre. Identifying intellectual giftedness involves not only evaluating a child's intellectual level in relation to their age (e.g. early reading and mathematical skills already evident in preschool) but also assessing their maturity, motivation, memory, social skills, creativity, concentration, and intellectual curiosity. The admission procedure for both the eight-year and four-year study programmes is based on written entrance examinations and school reports from previous studies. The competition is intense.

In most cases, each year group consists of a single class. In both primary and eight-year grammar school, each class is assigned a name (e.g. 'Anchors', 'Jewels', 'Skippers'). In the four-year grammar school, however, only the first two years have named classes. Upon graduation, posters representing the cohort are displayed on the school walls.

Undoubtedly, this is a school of opportunities. In today's fast-changing world, factual knowledge or expertise in a single field is no longer sufficient. Instead, flexibility and creativity, essential prerequisites for the future, are placed at the heart of the learning process. The school's primary aim is to develop key life competencies, such as critical thinking, the confidence to ask questions, the ability to argue effectively, teamwork, and efficient planning, as well as strong IT skills.

These competencies are fostered from an early age and extend beyond individual subjects. They are developed through a variety of learning methods, including project-based learning, experiential learning, case studies, discussions with experts, and a balance of independent and group work, along with open-ended tasks. There is a strong emphasis on intrinsic motivation and collaboration. The school also places considerable importance on non-formal education and extracurricular activities. Learning is reinforced through museum visits and a wide range of excursions (including eco-excursions), where students apply their knowledge in real-life and foreign language settings.

1SG is engaged in several international projects and activities. The prestigious DofE (the Duke of Edinburgh Award) programme focuses on students' independence and responsibility, helping them set

goals for personal growth in different areas. By receiving recognition of their abilities, school-leavers gain a stronger advantage in the admissions process at prestigious universities. An impressive 90% of students continue their studies at universities, mostly abroad.

During their high school studies, a significant number of students are offered an international education through the Centre for Talented Youth, which enables gifted and motivated students to take online courses at American universities and high schools. This initiative has led to 1SG being officially recognised as a Partner School of the Centre for Talented Youth, distinguishing it as one of the few schools in Slovakia to hold this status.

The Erasmus+ Skills Development Fund has enabled many teachers and students to participate in courses and activities abroad. The Pan-European Educational Project is based on week-long exchanges where students from seven European high schools meet and work on a pre-selected topic in the areas of culture, history, and science, complemented by the International Theatre Project organised by one of the schools. The primary aim is to gain international experience, establish contacts, and explore other cultures. No less important is encouraging students' creativity, networking, language and IT skills, and strengthening empathy in young people.

During the final two years of study, the main focus is on preparation for the Maturita school-leaving examination. Students follow a structured programme in which they can shape their academic profile according to their future study plans. While core subjects such as Slovak, mathematics, foreign languages, and physical education remain compulsory, students choose additional subjects and seminars aligned with their intended university pathway. These may include a natural science profile (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics), a social science profile (e.g. history, social science, philosophy), or a mathematical-informatics profile. Students can also choose from different seminar pathways, although timetable constraints may limit such combinations.

In the last two years of study, students from both the eight-year and four-year programmes (forms 7–8 and years 3–4 respectively) are taught together in the jointly selected modules. In English, students taught by the same teacher attend regular lessons alongside optional seminar classes, such as Business English or Humanities English, held in double periods. English is optional in the final year, although most students continue with it. The Maturita examination, which consists of written papers in March and oral exams in May, includes Slovak, a foreign language at B2 level, and two additional subjects chosen according to students' academic focus. Overall, the programme emphasises long-term goal setting, informed subject choice, and systematic preparation for further study.

During my job shadowing week at 1SG, I observed a wide variety of English and CLIL lessons across different year groups, which offered valuable insight into teaching approaches combining traditional and contemporary practices effectively. I attended both 45-minute and 90-minute lessons, including regular English classes, seminars, and CLIL sessions, which allowed me to compare different teaching styles and learning environments for students mostly in the 15–19 age range.

A particularly striking aspect is the strong emphasis on project-based and experiential learning. In CLIL lessons, students are engaged in higher-order thinking tasks such as evaluating historical events, debating contemporary issues (e.g. the use of AI in education), conducting SWOT analyses, and presenting research findings. These activities require students to think critically, justify their opinions, and work collaboratively. In the regular language classroom, a variety of effective teaching methods and approaches are employed to support active learning and student engagement.

Teachers implement authentic materials, e.g. magazines, to enhance relevance, as well as literature, creative writing, role plays, and real-life communication tasks to develop practical language skills in meaningful contexts. I was exposed to effective strategies for vocabulary acquisition and consolidation, pronunciation correction, and formative assessment, including peer feedback, structured reflective tasks, and continuous teacher–student interaction. Lessons incorporate efficient recall and summarising strategies, alongside an emphasis on reasoned argumentation, with students expected to justify their

opinions. Such practices demonstrate how key competencies can be developed across different subjects and learning contexts.

Another important area is the integration of digital tools and technologies into classroom practice. Teachers make effective use of online resources, videos, and interactive tools such as Kahoot to increase engagement and support different learning styles. At the same time, students are encouraged to reflect critically on the role of AI, e.g. in discussions about its advantages, limitations, and ethical use in education. This balanced approach highlights how digital tools can enhance learning while still promoting independent thinking. Overall, the experience provided valuable insights into student-centred teaching and the effective use of ICT, while also encouraging reflection on how these approaches can be adapted to support personalised learning and improve student engagement in different educational contexts.

The school fosters a supportive and low-pressure atmosphere where students are encouraged to communicate freely with both their teachers and peers, collaborate, and view mistakes as a natural part of the learning process. Students are supported in active participation and feel confident to experiment with language.

Teachers act as facilitators and trusted authorities, guiding students through interactive activities, including pair and group work, presentations, discussions and debates, and world-cafe-style activities. Language learning is frequently organised in a circle format, fostering interaction and a sense of equality between the teacher and students. These approaches clearly support meaningful learning and knowledge acquisition. Collaborative, cross-curricular learning is evident and forms an essential part of the everyday learning process.

Beyond the classroom, relationships within the school community stand out as a key strength. Interaction among teachers is notably warm and collegial, creating an atmosphere often described as a "big family", shaped by the leadership of the principal and vice-principal. This positive environment extends to teacher-student relationships, which are characterised by mutual respect and openness. In line with private school standards, strong parental involvement reinforces a shared commitment to students' academic success and overall development.

Despite the many strengths and the admirable, enviable aspects of both learning and teaching practices outlined above, it is important to acknowledge the advantages of our own physical learning environment, such as renovated facilities, well-equipped classrooms, and modern digital equipment. Furthermore, from a teacher's perspective, having a dedicated classroom, rather than moving between rooms with teaching materials, is particularly beneficial for maintaining organisation and lesson continuity. At times, however, the level of freedom and flexibility seemed excessive.

Erasmus job shadowing proves to be an eye-opening experience even for experienced teachers, offering valuable insights into different educational approaches and encouraging reflection on one's own teaching practice. Such experiences contribute to both professional growth and renewed motivation.

Erasmus+ Training Experience: More Than Just a Course

Ineta Puidet

Pärnu Sütevaka Humanitaargümnaasium

“EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR TEACHERS AND EDUCATION STAFF” in Porto, Portugal 8.-14.03.2026

When I found out that I had the opportunity to participate in an Erasmus+ course, I was genuinely excited. I chose Portugal partly because I had never been there before, so naturally, I had quite high expectations - not only for the course itself but also for the overall experience.

Everything leading up to the trip went smoothly. The information was provided on time, and the organisation seemed well-structured. However, my first small disappointment came about a month before departure, when I received details about the accommodation. The promotional materials had created an image of a sunny, almost idyllic setting — people working on terraces, surrounded by greenery and light. In reality, the venue turned out to be a modest three-star building that felt somewhat stuck in the 1990s. It was perfectly clean and comfortable, but not quite what I had imagined. The contrast became even more noticeable during the course itself, as our training room was located in the basement - with no windows at all.

Still, first impressions can be misleading. After reading reviews online, I expected the breakfast to be rather basic — mostly bread, as many reviewers had warned. And while there was indeed a lot of bread, it turned out to be one of the highlights of the stay. The variety was impressive, everything was fresh and delicious, and most importantly, there were freshly made pastéis de nata. I made it my mission to eat as many as possible, convinced I would get tired of them by the time I went home — but that never happened.

Porto welcomed us with green grass, blooming tulips, and palm trees along the ocean coast. We were lucky with the weather and had several warm, sunny days, which made exploring the city even more enjoyable. We crossed the Luís Bridge on foot, visited the well-known Lello bookshop, and even took a trip to the picturesque and colourful town of Aveiro. Along the way, we experienced local culture through food as well — trying the traditional francesinha and bifana.

One place that stayed with me in particular was São Bento train station. I have always liked old train stations with their large waiting halls — there is something about them: the quiet excitement of travelling combined with a sense of history, as if time has been preserved within the walls. But this one — São Bento, in the heart of Porto — felt especially memorable. The blue-and-white tiles covering the hall from floor to ceiling tell detailed stories, and you can easily spend a long time simply observing one scene after another.

These moments outside the classroom added an important dimension to the experience, allowing us to connect more informally and experience the local culture together.

Meanwhile — far from the sunshine of Porto — back in cold and still snowy Estonia, public speaking had gained more importance than ever. In the 2025/2026 school year, it was introduced as the only format of the national Olympiad at the high school level, and it is now also appearing more at lower levels, for example through competitions such as the EATE Open 2026 speech contest held by Tallinn French School for 7th and 8th grade students. This was one of the main reasons why I chose this course, with a



very clear goal in mind: to become a better teacher in this area. Naturally, I hoped to gain concrete tools that I could immediately apply in my classroom.

However, what I gained was slightly different — and, in many ways, even more valuable.

During the course, I had the chance to step back into the role of a student and experience firsthand the kinds of activities I regularly ask my own students to do. And, as it turns out, it is quite different to be on the other side. Instead of just talking about communication, we were constantly expected to act, react, and speak — sometimes with very little preparation. Topics such as creativity, assertiveness, non-verbal communication, and effective feedback were not just theoretical, but something we had to practise ourselves.

The most impactful part of the course was preparing and delivering several speeches throughout the week. We didn't jump straight into long presentations, but built up to them step by step. It started with a short two-minute self-introduction, followed by a prepared speech on an unpopular opinion — which turned out to be both fun and slightly uncomfortable at times. One of the most memorable activities was a PowerPoint Karaoke task: an impromptu speech where we had to improvise on a topic based on random images appearing on the screen. This was a real challenge for the speaker, but highly entertaining for the audience.

The main activity the course was building towards was the delivery of pre-prepared speeches. We presented them in front of the group, recorded them, and later analysed them both individually and with peers, providing structured feedback to one another. Interestingly, this was the moment when I felt slightly out of my comfort zone. Giving feedback is something I am used to as a teacher, but receiving it — especially from peers — felt different. I found myself feeling a bit shy, even though the atmosphere was supportive. At the same time, the feedback I received was valuable and gave me useful pointers for improvement.

During the training, I sometimes felt that much of it was familiar — perhaps a few fresh activity ideas, but nothing entirely new. However, the real impact only became clear after I returned to the classroom, when I found myself quoting the instructor and drawing on ideas we had explored during the course.

For example, one idea that stayed with me was: never apologise before a presentation. Even if you feel underprepared, there is no need to point it out — your audience might not notice, and in any case, they are on your side. Another important insight was understanding how common the fear of public speaking actually is. It is often cited as even greater than the fear of death, as it triggers an immediate sense of social judgment, rejection, and vulnerability. Realising this helped me better understand my students and the anxiety they may feel when asked to speak in front of others. It also highlighted the importance of creating a supportive environment in the classroom. At the same time, it was a good reminder that this discomfort is something we all experience — and that confidence comes with practice.

Another practical takeaway was the idea of structuring thoughts into three clear points — the “rule of three.” This approach can be practised not only in the classroom, but also in everyday situations — with friends, family, or colleagues. You can use a simple “instant speech” to argue for the movie you want to see, to convince your child to clean their room, or even to thank someone for a thoughtful gift. I often find myself drifting into side stories and losing the main point I want to make. This simple structure has helped me become more focused and clearer in my own communication as well.

Overall, this Erasmus+ experience was both professionally and personally enriching. It provided me with practical tools, new perspectives, and, perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to see learning again from my students' point of view. Stepping into the role of a learner reminded me that confidence, clarity, and structure do not come automatically — they need to be practised, supported, and encouraged. This is something I will carry with me into my classroom.

Reading Recommendation

How Emotions Are Made

Lii Kaudne

Psychologist

“How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain” by Lisa Feldman Barrett offers the latest innovative scientific perspective on emotions. The author argues that emotions are not universal, innate reactions (such as anger, joy, or fear), but rather learned reactions that the brain generates on the fly, based on past experiences and memories, bodily sensations, and the context of a specific situation — including the self-perception and resources of the person experiencing these emotions. This approach is called the theory of constructed emotion.

Barrett explains that the brain’s primary goal is to maintain the body’s balance (the so-called “bodily budget”). To do this, the brain constantly predicts what might happen and prepares the body for it. For example, before work or a stressful performance, the brain may, based on past experiences, allocate more resources to perform that task.

Language and concepts also play an important role. The richer a person’s emotional vocabulary, the more accurately they can understand their own states, and consequently, their reactions are more nuanced, and they possess greater ability to self-regulate. Thus, emotions are not simply “things that happen to me due to the external environment,” but we actively participate in their formation, often without realizing it.

Practical tips for everyday life

1. Name your feelings more precisely; if necessary, consciously develop your active emotional vocabulary

Instead of saying “I feel bad,” try to distinguish: is it tension, disappointment, fatigue, or anxiety? More precise wording helps your brain better manage the situation.

2. Take care of your body

Sleep, nutrition, and exercise directly affect your “physical well-being.” When you’re tired or hungry, your brain interprets situations more negatively. If you do work that requires daily thinking and communication, make sure to give your brain a break every day. Engaging in the arts and practicing mindfulness are great ways to do this.

3. Pause automatic conclusions

When you feel a strong emotion, ask: “Could this be something else?” For example, anxiety could actually be excitement or anticipation.

4. Create new experiences

The more diverse your experiences are, the more material your brain has to create emotions. This helps you respond more flexibly in the future.

5. Consciously influence the context

The environment, people, and situations shape emotions. By changing your environment, for example going for a walk or switching social circles, you can also change how you feel.

To sum up, the book “How Emotions Are Made” teaches the reader that emotions aren’t something that simply “happen to you,” but rather something your brain creates — and something that can be consciously influenced.

(Article translated by Erika Puusemp)

What Happened to You?

Helle Saaremägi

Psychologist

The authors of “What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Coping, and Healing”, brain and trauma specialist Dr. Bruce Perry and renowned talk show host Oprah Winfrey, present a groundbreaking and meaningful approach to understanding human behavior.

The book takes the form of a conversation between two insightful and intelligent people, a dialogue in which understanding and clarity emerge through questions and answers. It discusses not only difficult life experiences but also healing and how recovery becomes possible. Above all, it serves as a key to a world that helps us understand many complexities of human relationships by understanding how the human brain works.

Many traumatic childhood experiences lead to behavioral patterns that are often misunderstood. However, if we learn to ask, “What happened to you?” instead of accusingly asking, “What’s wrong with you?”, we can change our perspective on a person. Instead of judging someone, this approach allows us to understand what happened before they began to behave in a certain way or what caused such behavior in them.

This book is worth exploring because you may find explanations for someone’s unusual behavior or state — explanations that are not immediately visible or easy to assume.

Dr. Perry argues that the first six years of a child’s life lay the foundation upon which a person relies throughout their life and which influences them deeply. In fact, he even states that the first two months of life are when a child’s brain forms a sense of whether the world is a safe place or not.

Some specific ideas from the book:

Early experiences strongly influence your mental, physical, and social health. Both positive and negative experiences while growing up shape the biology of your body and brain. Some of these experiences can be traumatic and toxic.

A traumatic experience alters how the stress response is activated in your brain, and this, in turn, has long-term effects.

At the same time, no matter what has happened to you, supportive relationships can help you recover and heal. It is possible to “rewrite your story”, to reflect in a safe environment, transform pain into strength, and move forward.

When reflecting on your past, remember, whatever happened, the mere fact that you are here and alive means you deserve happiness. And know that there is always hope.

See also on YouTube the conversation between Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah about the book “What Happened to You?...”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvY4dZU_Xu4

The book has also been translated into Estonian by Ülle Jälle (“Mis sinuga juhtus?: vestlused traumast, sellega toimetulekust ja tervenemisest”, Helios kirjastus 2022)

(Article translated by Erika Puusemp.)

Come and Share

The MBTI Advantage: How Personality Insights Can Improve Collaboration and Leadership

Anne Clifford

Psychologist, MBTI practitioner (Alberta, Canada)

Walk into any workplace and you will notice something quickly. People do not think, decide, or act in the same way. One person speaks up ideas right away. Another pauses and reflects. One wants clear plans and procedures. Another wants freedom to explore. These are not problems to fix. They are patterns to understand.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) offers a simple way to make sense of these differences. Based on the work of Carl Jung, the MBTI is a personality questionnaire that helps describe how people naturally prefer to work and interact. At its core, it asks four practical questions:

How do you get your energy? How do you take in information? How do you make decisions? How do you organize your work?

These are called preferences. Not skills. Not limits. Preferences.

A Shift in Perspective

Here is where it becomes useful. Many workplace frustrations come from misunderstanding, not ability. A colleague who talks things through may be thinking out loud. A colleague who stays quiet may be thinking deeply before speaking. When leaders understand this, they stop trying to change people and start working with them. This is a small shift. But it powerfully impacts how teams function.

Building Stronger Collaboration

Good collaboration does not mean everyone works the same way. It means the system makes space and respect for different ways of working. Give time to think before discussion. Ask for both facts and ideas. Balance logic with human impact. Set clear plans, but allow room to adapt. These are practical, everyday actions. They reduce friction and increase trust.

Mentoring with Clarity

Personality awareness becomes even more powerful in mentorship. Instead of giving the same advice to everyone, leaders can guide people in ways that fit how they naturally work. The MBTI approach goes further. It shows that even within a type, people express themselves in unique way

In simple terms, no one is a fixed box. A person who prefers structure can learn flexibility. A person who prefers ideas can strengthen follow-through. Growth happens when people use their strengths and stretch, not when they try to become someone else. Strong mentors ask small but powerful questions: Do you want a clear plan or options? Do you like to start quickly or think first? These questions build insight. They also build confidence.

The Real Value

Personality frameworks are not about labels. They are about understanding. When professionals learn to see differences clearly, communication improves. Decisions become more balanced. Teams become more effective and happier. And perhaps most important, people feel seen and valued. That is where meaningful growth, for both individuals and teams, truly begins.

SOME THOUGHTS ON BRITISH UNIVERSITY GRADUATIONS

Kärt Roomäe, PhD

Tallinn, Estonia



In the last few *Open!* issues I wrote about British food and tea culture. This time I have something a bit different to share with the readers. As you might have noticed, my author line no longer features the word 'student'. That's right, I have now graduated from the University of Birmingham with a PhD in Linguistics and Communication. The ceremony took place in December last year, and the day is still fresh on my mind. It was a lovely culmination to a four-year journey that wasn't always smooth sailing but rewarding nevertheless. As a lot of people have said, if doing a PhD was a walk in the park, everyone would do it. I am glad I finished the project and am able to share the rather memorable graduation impressions with you. In the following, you will hopefully get a broad idea of a British university graduation; a rather different one from the Estonian ones as experienced in Tartu.

The weather on the day of my graduation was acting up a little bit; British people refer to it as 'changeable'. It wasn't exactly warm and I had dressed for the occasion already before coming to campus thus wearing a dress that offered little warmth. Little did I know that it would get worse later on. But, blissfully unaware in the morning, I made my way to Aston Webb, the building whose Great Hall serves as the venue for graduations, award ceremonies, and other more notable events. On the right, you can see the main entrance to Aston Webb. As graduation ceremonies are major events involving lots of people, there were different locations for getting your tickets, robing up, etc. In a very British fashion, there were also signs everywhere so that getting lost wasn't really an issue for guests or the graduands. I first went to get tickets for my parents so they would be let in to the ceremony itself — with that many people in attendance each graduand was only allowed two guests and others could attend only if there were tickets left — and proceeded to get my robes. I had prepared my family and friends for this early on, describing the formal attire and the traditions involved. Me and my fellow PGRs, or postgraduate students, had also joked about this, saying that graduating in winter is preferable thanks to fewer people — most undergraduate programs end in summer — and the sheer weight and thickness of the robes. There might have been a mention of mead and tinsel too. Yet, I don't think anyone was prepared for the moment when I had to be helped into the costume. The hat you can see in some of the photos featured in this article, for instance, had to be changed up twice. My head is just too big as it turns out! And even with the right size finally being found, it sat awkwardly at the top of my head, not like a usual hat. This meant that I tried to avoid moving too much pretty much the whole time I was wearing the robes. With the nerves already taut, this added another layer to my nervous state. Additionally, the hood, a cape-like part of the robes, was added separately and fastened with Velcro which was very helpful but still allowed the hood to slip every now and then. So I had to



be really careful wearing the whole costume; with my graduation gown having been hired, too, I couldn't risk it getting torn or anything like that.

Fortunately, no part of the robes truly fell off during the day and with a few occasional adjustments I was ready. Others also took notice of the few PhD robes witnessed among a plethora of Masters ones. I think both the colour and hat play a role in that, as most gowns are primarily black at UoB, with just the hood appearing in various colours.

So, me wearing the silly hat and everyone having their tickets ready, we made our way to the Great Hall which you can see in the picture below. With the number of graduands being in the hundreds, no time was wasted and the ceremony started promptly, with the doors having been closed around 15 minutes earlier. Accompanied by a live brass band called Birmingham Symphonic Brass, there was a procession of members of staff including the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham as well as the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the College of Arts and Law where my program also belonged. The leaders of the procession held the club-like Arts and Crafts University Mace and Centenary Mace, 2000. I had managed to hold it together until then but with the procession making their way to the front, the emotions did finally get to me. A couple of short speeches followed but they were rather brief and to the point, leaving ample time for graduands to be called to the front. Unlike in Tartu, this meant that the students were sitting in assigned seats and when the time came, formed a line that was constantly moving towards the stage to manage the flow better. I dread to think how long it would have taken for people to make their way to the front without this measure in place. As you can probably see from the photo, there were a lot of seats in the hall. The graduands were seated at the back so you can't see any of them in the photo, but we were ushered to get up and join the queue early in the ceremony as PhD degrees are conferred first. To give us a special mention to highlight that we had been conducting original research over the last few years, the Presenting Officer read out a sentence summarizing the dissertation too. It was thrilling to be standing there in front, hearing your name and the applause. I think it was one of the proudest moments of my life thus far. As with any university degree they probably matter the most to us, graduates, followed by friends who shared this journey with us and our families. I was very lucky to have most of my friends there that day, including a large proportion of fellow PhD students with whom I had spent more time during the past four or so years than other friends and family combined. Subsequently, after all the degrees had been conferred, a speech was given by a graduate as is common in Estonia, too, and the congregation was then declared closed. I had become a doctor!



With the schedule for the day rather packed, the ceremony being over really marked only the beginning of celebrations. I had mentioned to my PhD cohort that I would be around after the ceremony and was overjoyed to see all of them waiting, so happy that I accidentally broke away from the procession for a second. Namely, there's a tradition that the graduates all walk through the archway under Old Joe, the well-known free-standing clock tower of the university that also inspired Tolkien. You can see a tired but happy me with Old Joe — and yes, that's a carousel — in the background of the photo on the right. Fortunately, I was told to get back in the line by a friend, and I rejoined them a few minutes later. There were more than ten of us plus my parents who were still trying to get their coats; with a lot of people attending the ceremony, this took a bit of time. But they also made it eventually. By then I had received congratulations and hugs aplenty, been subjected to a rather strong wind as well as a bit of rain. To illustrate, you can see me trying to hold onto my hat in front of the shields from above the entrance of the Old Library. So, you see, the hat has its benefits too. I was feeling rather cold though and several of my friends had to get to back to work, so I parted ways with some. I was going to meet most of them later in the evening at the pub anyway, so it wasn't a goodbye at that point. With the remaining friends and family, we proceeded to the reception taking place in a nearby building. Technically, only the two guests each graduate could take to the ceremony were allowed there, but I knew the person checking the tickets and was allowed to take more people in. The reception was lovely, with plenty of cakes and (non-)alcoholic mulled wine, allowing people to mingle in a more informal setting and, most importantly, indoors. The weather stayed rather murky for most of the day, so every opportunity to be inside was gladly taken. I must admit at this point that the cakes popular in Estonia do differ a little from those offered in the UK, as you can probably gather from the photo included. The cake selection was Christmassy, featuring a mince pie with a decorative star, a stollen slice as well as some cream-topped cakes one of which announced that the University of Birmingham celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2025. With the university catering usually failing to impress, the cakes were surprisingly nice if a bit overly sweet. After everyone had had a chance to enjoy the offerings and some of my friends heading back home, it was decided that it was time for some savoury food, so I took my parents and a few friends to Joe's, a place usually frequented by undergrads. I thought it would be a fun cultural immersion experience for Estonians, and they did enjoy the food and drinks. I didn't eat there myself as some of us still had a pub to get to, to meet those friends who hadn't been able to join earlier, with the graduation falling on a workday. The pub was good as always, having stayed the go-to place for us over the years, with a varied selection of cider, beer, and gin as well as non-alcoholic options, not to mention the pizza. It was also nice to finally lean back and enjoy the fruits of my painstaking labour. A couple of days later, I returned to Estonia and closed the PhD chapter in my life. While there were moments when I wasn't sure I am able to write a good-enough thesis to earn the degree, it all worked out in the end, and I am honoured to have made friends for life in different parts of the world with whom I can discuss anything and everything.

As is probably evident, achievements like earning a PhD degree aren't the result of one person's work only and before finishing I'd like to take the opportunity to thank teachers and mentors from various stages of my educational path, particularly those who taught me at the University of Tartu but also teachers of English at Tallinn French School, most notably Merike Saar, a long-time teacher, mentor, educational technologist, and most recently also a member of the EATE committee. You were strict yet fair, demanding yet rewarding. The example you set now serves as an example to me in my work; thank you for always believing in your students.

With that, I shall conclude. I eagerly await more musings on all things British. But for now, it is time to *müts varna riputada* as Estonians say, pictured on the left.

My PhD studies were funded by Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, Kristjan Jaak scholarship program, and Haridus- ja Noorteamet.



Experienced Educator

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHIL MARSDALE

Interview with Teachers' teacher Phil Marsdale

Why did you come to Estonia in the first place and why did you stay?

I came to the Baltics as a young man in early 1993 to work for an NGO and initially lived in Lithuania. I moved to Estonia a year and a half later, fell in love and have been here with my wife Kadri ever since. My job involved helping to set up language schools and to initiate and run projects for teachers of English in all 3 Baltic countries. Those first few years were an incredibly dynamic time with lots of firsts in language training and unique experiences I could never have had anywhere else. For example, how many people get the chance to run a project which flies in trainers from all over Europe every month to give workshops for teachers? Or the chance to renovate a 14th century building in Tallinn old town and turn it into a language school? Thanks to George Soros, Kadri and I were able to do stuff like that for a few years.



What has running your own language school given you?

After 4 years in the Soros network of schools and projects in the Baltics, I founded International Language Services (ILS) in 1998 with Kadri and one other colleague and soon after opened sister schools in Riga and Vilnius. What has this given me? Lots of highs and lows and everything in-between! I would say that the freedom that comes with owning and running things is great as long as you can accept the fact that sometimes your great ideas fail miserably. Something else is the knowledge that most teachers who have worked for ILS, leave as better practitioners.

How did the English for Refugees (E4R) initiative start and how is it doing at the moment?

I started English4Refugees (E4R) began as an unaffiliated life skills project in spring 2022 in Tallinn Estonia. With the help of a team of 15 fantastic volunteer teachers, some of whom are reading this, and support staff and some invaluable practical and financial support from the business community, we provided an initial intensive course for ~100 newly arrived refugees from the war in Ukraine streamed into levels from Beginner to C1.

International Language Services OÜ took over the provision of year-round courses for refugees, enabling us to extend and expand the reach and capacity of the project in successive years i.e. 6 groups of students in 2022/23, 7 groups in 2023/24, 11 groups in 2024/25 and 13 groups in 2025/26.

Our target group has always been adult women with dependents and to date, almost 7500 hours of classroom time has been provided to over 450 refugees from the war in Ukraine. All courses have been provided completely free of charge. Our only requirement is that students maintain at least a 75% attendance record on these courses.

How are we doing at the moment? Well, at the time of writing, we are attempting to raise sufficient pledges of funding to run a 5th and final year of this project in 2026/7.

What do you most like about teaching English?

I love meeting new and interesting people — often in positions of great responsibility — making a connection and really trying to get to grips with their needs. Like anyone else, I love positive feedback and that results from investing in students, setting relevant, achievable goals and seeing the results. Right now, I really enjoy the opportunities that AI provides to help me to tailor and organise materials often for people with quite specific needs.

How do you unwind?

It's really important to have hobbies outside of your 9-5 environment — especially if you are at the top of the tree. I'm in a rock band called 'Stereotypes' and we play about 3 times a month in a big pub in Tallinn. I also run a golf club called the 'Estonian AllSorts' and we play regularly during the golf season which is usually only 5-6 months long. In the winter we go on tour to warmer climes once or twice a year. I also enjoy a nice claret and a good book!

What do you read for pleasure?

We have a big library at home and recently had a floor to ceiling bookcase built complete with ladder and rails! My reading tastes aren't particularly highbrow. I tend to pick a writer I like and then read everything they've written. For historical sleuths, I recommended the 'Bruno' books by SJ Parris and the Shardlake books by CJ Samson, both set in Tudor England. Then there are the 'Yasmin' novels by Jason Goodwin which are set during the sunset of Byzantine Turkey. For Sci-Fi I have read all of Iain M Banks' 'Culture' novels at least twice. For the world of spooks and crime, Mick Herron, Philip Kerr and Hakan Nesser are all excellent.

Which three books in English do you think every high school student should read?

I couldn't possibly say. Something a bit more contemporary and relevant than Dickens perhaps? From my own teens, I remember ploughing through *The Siege of Krishapur* by J.G. Farrel, *Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. All of them great works of literature, none of which I particularly enjoyed at the time. I think that the next question is more relevant in today's brave new AI obsessed world.

Should compulsory reading be changed at schools and what is a recipe to get young people more interested in reading?

Young people do ask themselves why they really need high level reading and writing skills when AI can produce and distil written text in the blink of an eye. Who seriously expects their students to write anything themselves these days? In my own business, which admittedly deals mostly with adult/corporate learners, recent experience has shown that there is no market any more for improving reading and writing skills because apparently AI tools have made those skills obsolete. That's tosh I know... but it boils down to return on training investment as far as my clients are concerned.

Reading is a bit different, but it seems to me that compulsory reading as part of language studies needs to be more than a means for passing exams. It also seems clear that reading for literary appreciation is not a primary real-life objective for many youngsters. Of course, reading builds vocabulary, trains students to pay attention, exercises our imagination and critical thinking, expands our knowledge base and ultimately, makes us more interesting people to be with. Clearly, it is an indispensable skill. So, we should be asking ourselves not whether reading should be compulsory, but what we should be asking our students to read and how it is relevant to them whilst also serving our purpose as educators.

What has a book taught you?

When preparing a soft skills course for an experimental Tartu university business MA course, I came across a book called 'Getting to Yes'. Much of its content seems quite common sense but the book managed to boil down the essentials of the art of negotiation into digestible and relatable chunks. Lessons learned included: separating people from problems, using strategic empathy, focusing on interests, not positions, seeking out mutual gains. I'm not sure if I can think of an example of what a single novel has taught me.

What is the most vivid memory of your own school time?

I attended a boarding school for boys in the UK (made me the man I am today etc.) which, in many ways, was a great experience. I shared a dormitory with six or seven other boys from all over the world and we suffered under a strict family regime of early morning runs, schoolwork, chores, mealtimes, bedtime and 'lights out'. After the end of the school day, the boys would troop into the school library for 'prep', i.e. supervised homework — something that I hear is becoming widespread here nowadays, albeit for different reasons.

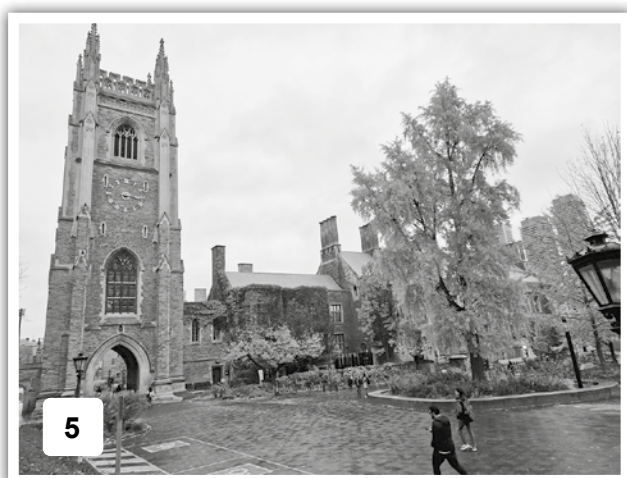
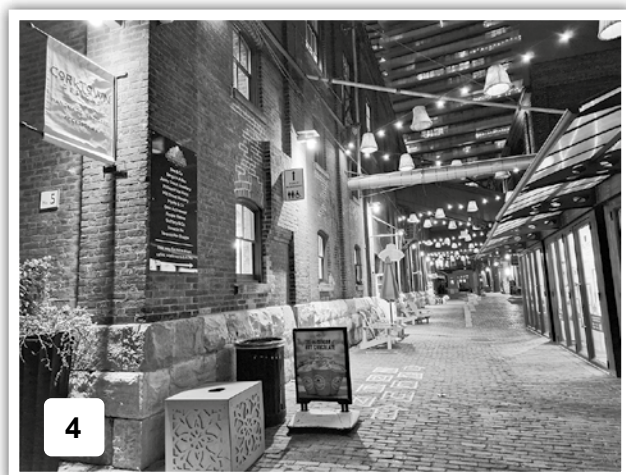
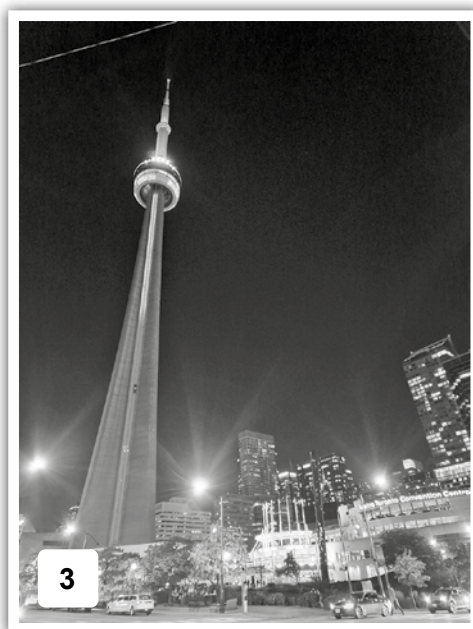
Some of the teachers were certifiable, others merely eccentric. My standout favourite was our English lit teacher — Mr Alexander Smith — a balding, rotund, tweedy type — old before his time and totally devoted to us boys. When he was on duty, 'Alex' would slip into our dorm after lights out, armed with a candelabra and a book of ghost stories. He would perch himself on the edge of one of the beds and regale us with some blood curdling tale before beating his retreat. It was our little secret and we adored him for it.

(Phil was interviewed by EATE committee members Kristi Vahenurm and Erika Puusemp.)

Toronto, Ontario

With its population of 2.9 million, Toronto is the largest city in Canada. It is the capital city of the province of Ontario — the most populous province of Canada, home to over 14 million people — 38.5% of the country's population. Toronto is a multicultural city with almost half of its population having been born outside Canada. It is also said to be the city with the largest number of Estonians outside Estonia.

1. **The Hockey Hall of Fame**, founded in Kingston in 1943 and moved to Toronto in 1958, is the original Stanley Cup and offers visitors a comprehensive look into the sport's rich history and cultural significance. A must-see for all ice hockey enthusiasts!
2. **The Roy Thomson Hall** is a world-renowned concert hall located in downtown Toronto, known for its striking circular architecture and exceptional acoustics. Designed by the Canadian architect Arthur Erickson, it has been the home of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra since 1982.
3. **The CN Tower** is an iconic symbol of Toronto's skyline and a must-visit landmark for tourists and locals alike. Completed in 1976, this 553.3-meter concrete communications and observation tower was the world's tallest free-standing structure for over 30 years.
4. **The Distillery District** is a pedestrian-only neighbourhood known for its preserved Victorian industrial architecture. Originally the site of the Gooderham & Worts Distillery, the world's largest whiskey producer, it has been transformed into Canada's premier arts, culture and entertainment destination.
5. **The University of Toronto** is a leading public research university in Canada, founded in 1827. It offers over 700 undergraduate degree and 200 postgraduate degree programmes to almost 60,000 students. **The Soldiers' Tower** is a bell and clock tower on the St. George campus of the University of Toronto that commemorates members of the university who served in the World Wars. It is 43.6 m tall and houses a carillon of 51 bells.
6. The building site of **the KESKUS International Estonian Centre** — a new cultural and community hub that will celebrate and promote Estonian heritage, innovation and community, set to open in August 2026. The architect is Alar Kongrats, a Canadian of Estonian heritage who has won four Governor General Awards for Architecture, the highest award for architecture in Canada. The Centre's project lead is Ellen Valter (seen in the picture).



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