

Móðurmál – the Association on Bilingualism:

Enriching language education in Iceland

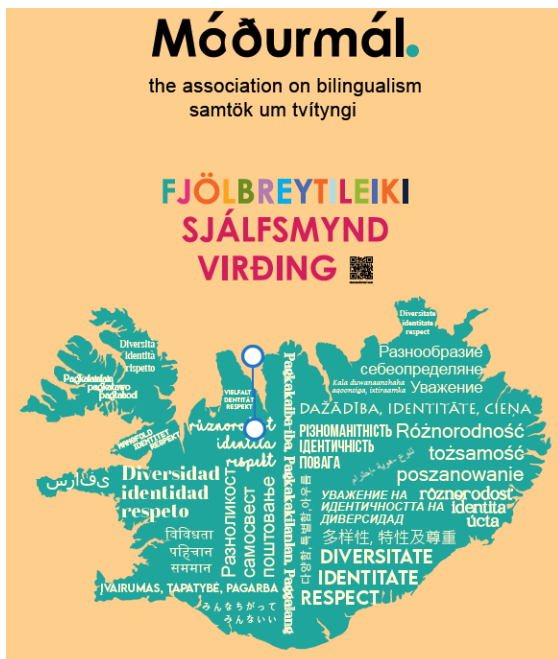
By Dr. Renata Emilsson Peskova*

Móðurmál – the Association on Bilingualism (Móðurmál) has provided **mother tongue instruction in Iceland** for plurilingual children since 1994. It is a volunteer-based, nonprofit, and non-governmental organization that promotes the children’s right to learn their mother tongues other than Icelandic. Móðurmál supports and empowers small and large mother tongue groups and schools, mother tongue teachers, and immigrant parents with information, professional development, teaching space, and occasionally, with financial support. It develops mother tongue instruction, takes part in research on bilingualism and plurilingualism, and it collaborates locally and internationally. Increasingly, Móðurmál has also contributed to formulating Icelandic educational policies for students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.



In the past two years, Móðurmál’s **value for society** was highlighted in connection with contemporary crises and challenges. First, it was during the Covid-19 pandemic when immigrant families became more isolated and more affected than the Icelandic ones. At that point, two Icelandic ministries decided for the first time to financially support mother tongue

instruction, to reach out to the most affected children and their parents with online teaching. The second time that the immeasurable value of Móðurmál is clearly visible is right now, in the middle of the war in Ukraine. Our Ukrainian and Russian groups are working together to support their students and their community, but they are also actively working with the authorities to help receive refugee women and children in Iceland and to coordinate help for Ukraine.



Móðurmál could not function without the many **volunteers** who teach their languages on Saturday morning in two public schools, available to them free of charge thanks to the long-term support of the City of Reykjavík, and in other public spaces,

libraries, churches, and offices. Although the struggle to get formal recognition for the ambitious mother tongue teaching in many Móðurmál groups has not been successful so far, their work has become well known in schools, society, and among many institutions. We have collaborated with cultural centers, libraries, art galleries, the School of Education of the University of Iceland, and not the least STÍL – the Association of Language Teachers in Iceland. We are thankful to the former president of Iceland and the goodwill ambassador of languages at UNESCO, Madam Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, for her patronage.

Throughout the time, around **30 different languages** have been taught in Móðurmál groups and thousands of children have taken part. The active groups today are fifteen and they teach Arabic, Bisaya, Bulgarian, Czech, Filipino, Hungarian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Spanish and Ukrainian. Groups can be contacted [here](#) through the website of Móðurmál.

Móðurmál has received several **awards** from different institutions such as the Human Rights Office of Reykjavík, the National Parents Association, and the Intercultural Center. The most recent award makes us especially proud. In 2021, the project manager of [Móðurmál Library](#) received the Order of the Falcon from the President of Iceland Guðni Th. Jóhannesson for her contribution to promoting literature in other languages than Icelandic. The library is run by a volunteer who is a professional librarian in her daily work. She has registered over 8000 children's and youth books in 86 languages into the national book catalogue and lends out books to individuals, mother tongue groups, and school libraries around Iceland. In 2021, almost 1500 books were borrowed. Schools and communities are increasingly calling for books in languages of the most disadvantaged language groups and books in languages that cannot be easily obtained.



Móðurmál brings together children, families, and mother tongue teachers of various backgrounds through **common activities and projects**. Some of the very giving and successful projects were Móðurmál bilingual book, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) project, [Empowering immigrant youth and children in Iceland](#), Icelandic language map, “Languages of the Heart” - the Guidelines for the Support of Mother Tongues in Schools and Afterschool Programs, or joint celebrations of the International Mother Language Day.

The bilingual book contained stories and histories handwritten by children in their mother tongues and Icelandic. This book was then printed and given to all school directors in Reykjavík. In the SDGs project, mother tongue groups selected one or several goals and worked with them for one school year. In the end, [a short video](#) was created to share the work of the groups with the world. In the language map project, Móðurmál together with its partners helped raise awareness of various languages spoken by children in preschools, schools, and leisure centers around Iceland. Teachers and children discussed languages present in the classrooms and teachers entered the languages into a questionnaire. The languages were then counted – 109 languages altogether – and inserted into an interactive Google Map. [The Guidelines “Languages of the Heart”](#) were written by a group of experts and published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Icelandic, English, and Polish in 2020. This was the first time that the state expressed a clear message that plurilingualism should be valued and promoted in schools.



For nine years, Móðurmál has organized **annual conferences** for its mother tongue teachers, focusing on topics such as language teaching methods, teaching in diverse groups, sustainability of heritage language education, and curriculum development.

Móðurmál conferences

2013 - **Mother Tongues: A Ticket to Better Futures** (Mica Allan, Iceland, and Radka Dalová, the Czech Republic).

2014 - **Languages Stimulation of Children in Diverse Groups on Preschool and Elementary School Level** (Barbara Day, Denmark).

2015 - **The Treasures of Languages** (Deirdre Kirwan, Ireland).

2016 - **Beautiful Languages: Successful and Sustainable** (Olenka Bilash, Canada).

2017 - **Mother Tongue Instruction: Iceland, Sweden and Canada** (Trudie Aberdeen and Josephine Pallard, Canada, and Silvia Cordero, Sweden).

2018 - **The Mother Tongue Curriculum for Iceland** (Anna Reath Warren, Sweden, and Judith Purkarthofer, Norway).

2019 - **Móðurmál: Teaching plurilingual children.**

2020 - **Heritage Language Education Conference** (cooperation with Mother Tongues in Dublin, speakers from Ireland, Australia, Greece, Canada, the Netherlands, and Iceland)

In 2020, Móðurmál collaborated with Mother Tongues in Ireland to organize a common conference about heritage language education. This conference led to establishing a Forum of Heritage Language Coalitions in Europe, [FOHLC Europe](#). FOHLC Europe organized its first international conference in 2021 with a focus on the future-proofing of heritage language education.

Thanks to Covid-19, **mother tongue and heritage language coalitions around the world** started talking, attending each other's online conferences, and collaborating on projects. In 2021, five international heritage language coalitions, including Móðurmál, came together to create common [International Guidelines for Professional Practices in Community-Based Heritage Language Schools](#). These guidelines define universal principles and good practices to guide HL programs in different geographical and political contexts. They are also a strong message to language educators and institutions about the quality and professionalism in heritage language educational settings.

The same coalitions, [Heritage Language Education Network](#) in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, [International and Heritage Languages Association](#) (IHLA) in Edmonton, Canada, [Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools](#) in the US, [Mother Tongues](#) in Dublin, Ireland, and [Forum of Heritage Language Coalitions in Europe](#) (FOHLC Europe), came together again on the occasion of the International Mother Language Day 2022 to create a [common greeting](#) on behalf of their schools and communities.

Throughout these lines shine the concepts of **collaboration, professionalism, and sustainability**. It is in the interest of our students to provide them with quality language education, and it is in the interest of the society we work in to support language educators. Móðurmál is a small association with a strong vision, and it has persevered in its efforts for three decades. Collaboration has been essential to Móðurmál's work and an increased local and international collaboration has led to improved services for its teachers and enhanced quality of its work for children and the Icelandic society.

* The author of the article Dr. Renata Emilsson Peskova works as an Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Education, Faculty of Subject Teacher Education, University of Iceland. She finished a B.A. degree in Andragogy and Personal Management at Charles University in Prague, an M.A degree from Universität Bayreuth with major in Intercultural Communication / German as a Foreign Language. After teaching English and German in a compulsory school in Reykjavik for seven years, she worked on the PhD project School experience of plurilingual students: A multiple case study from Iceland that explored the interplay of linguistic repertoires and school experience of five students on an elementary school level who attended heritage language classes in community-based heritage language schools. Renata's research interests include plurilingualism and multilingualism, linguistically responsive and plurilingual pedagogies, language policies, heritage learning in informal, non-formal and formal settings, and linguistic identities. Her research is complemented by her roles as a co-founder and board member of the Czech School in Iceland and a board member of Móðurmál – the Association on Bilingualism.