EDUCATION IN THE STATE LANGUAGE: PROBLEMS AND NECESSARY SOLUTIONS IN PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

In 2018, a new educational strategy was approved in Latvia [1], where a transition to education in the state language and the acquisition of the second language (usually English) is already provided in Grade 1. This strategy, based on the state language, provides equal opportunities to acquire educational content by using qualitative teaching aids and also provides easy inclusion in Latvia’s labour market. The main goal of this strategy is to already develop an inclusive society and qualitative acquisition of Latvian as the state language in the pre-school institutions.

Our previous research shows that in pre-school institutions with Latvian language instruction 5 to 6-year old children’s Latvian language skills are adequate to begin studies at school [2]. It was decided to analyse the survey of parents and guardians, and children’s language testing results of the minority children population in a pre-school education group with the language of instruction in Russian.

Keywords: Latvian language, pre-school education, language acquisition.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a new educational strategy [1] was approved in Latvia, where transition to education in the state language and the acquisition of the second language (usually English) have already been provided in Grade 1. The strategy, based on the state language, provides equal opportunities to acquire educational content by using qualitative teaching aids, and it promotes easy inclusion into Latvia’s labour market. The main goal of this strategy is to develop an inclusive society and the qualitative acquisition of Latvian as the state language in pre-school institutions. Further, the strategy is being developed in the “Regulations on Guidelines in State Pre-school Education and Standards of Pre-school Education Curricula” adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2018, where the foundations of literacy have also been defined in the field of language learning [3, p. 10.1].

Considering the topicality of the problem, this paper will analyse the state language skills of 25 pre-school age children whose native language is not Latvian.

2 METHODOLOGY

Latvian language and previous research on child language. Language acquisition is complicated; it is a complex system where elements of the structure – sounds of the language, vocabulary, and syntactic constructions are only one facet to be learnt; the second entails the functions of each element. Only the joint acquisition of structure and functions provides the possibility of using language. Besides, it should be considered that all languages are dissimilar, they are declinable and non-declinable, they have different sounds and word classes, their number and combinations, the potential of words to form syntactic relations, word components, their usage, and word order in a sentence, various meanings of words and their combinations. Eve V. Clark indicates, “The type of language could influence the order in which children acquire each system of language and could also make some parts of language harder or easier to acquire. Their acquisition could also be affected by social interaction and cognitive development” [4].

The Latvian language is declinable. It is widely known that the category of noun declension, for instance, has seven cases (in comparison to the Finnish language with 14 cases). Latvian has 10 word classes. Nouns, adjectives and numerals are nominals because they have the same grammatical categories – gender, number and case. Pronouns can have the function of nouns and adjectives; in addition, there are six other word classes. Verbs are in semantic and grammatical opposition to nominals, they “express an action or state, and they have grammatical categories of person, time, mood, aspect and voice; they usually function as predicates in the sentence” [5]. The previous studies on Latvian children’s language
have established that at the age of 3-4 children mostly use nouns (63.6%) and verbs (21.2%), other word classes are used considerably less [6, p. 83]. The tendency is not surprising because Latvian speaking adults mostly use nouns (40.3%), verbs (20.5%), although the difference among other word classes is slightly less than in children’s speech [6]. Velta Rūķe-Draviņa believes that the most important stage in language acquisition is the first four years “because an individual’s first language is formed, and also an idea about the language system in general. It is a unique and inimitable process. In later years, one can acquire another language, and many other languages both at school and in life; however, only then has one laid the foundation for LANGUAGE – a notion about the structure of a language, one’s experience with sounds and their articulation, about the functioning of the language when communicating with other people, about the spoken and heard word” [7]. In the first recordings of children’s speech within the National Research Programme “Latvian Language”, we have established the fact that Latvian-speaking children seldom use pronouns even up to their pre-school age, because they prefer to address people by their names. However, in the previous (2013-2015) EEZ and Norway Grant project LAMBA [2] we obtained data on the most difficult sounds in Latvian speaking children’s pronunciation and their position in a word. Overall, our previous research shows that in pre-school institutions with Latvian language instruction, five to six-year old children’s Latvian language skills are adequate to begin classes at school [2].

A group of researchers in the National Research Programme “Latvian Language” has begun a significant task not only important for Latvian linguistics, but also for educational policy, namely, to test pre-school children’s readiness to start classes in the Latvian language in Grade 1, when their native language is not Latvian. The general development of a child is certainly in close correlation with his or her language development; however, the National Research Programme “Latvian Language” does not envisage studying specific language defects, or any physical or mental problems in development. For this reason, in the article we will analyse data on the importance of the impact of the language environment based on the test survey of parents in one pre-school minority group of 25 children. In many cases, parents of the minority population choose Latvian language groups because they consider the choice of sending their children to a school with Latvian as a daily language. The tendency is growing, but in Latvia there are still pre-schools with Russian as a daily language. In this article, we analyse the survey of parents and guardians, and children’s language testing results of 25 children from the minority population in a pre-school education group with the language of instruction being Russian.

Methods. For surveying parents and guardians, the Latvian version of a well-known survey [8] was used. For testing children’s language skills, the language test developed in the National Research Programme “Latvian Language” was used. For the experiment, a group of Russian speaking pre-school age children and their parents were chosen in the Kurzeme region.

3 RESULTS

All 25 parents and guardians who participated had well-developed Latvian language skills. The opposite situation was observed in the case of children using the Latvian language. Respondents recorded that either most children do not have Latvian language skills or they have poor Latvian language skills. The evaluation results of the children’s Latvian language skills (speaking and understanding) were the following - “very poor” or “doesn’t have language skills” (15 children), six children were evaluated as “having some skills, average understanding”. We obtained adequate results as we talked with children about pictures selected in the programme – in most conversations with children understanding was average, responses were made by nodding their heads, difficulties in pronouncing, an inability to reply with word combinations or in sentences, and an inability to ask questions. As the test included questions of comparison (figures, colours, size, number) and questions about home and different activities, children were not able to reply due to poor language knowledge. Only 4 children were evaluated generally as having average Latvian language skills, of the total number only 3 children were fairly fluent, and one – quite fluent (Fig. 1); besides, in the case of the latter, it was indicated that the child also speaks Russian. This was the only child who could read two sentences given in the test in Latvian – one sentence with capital letters, and the second sentence that began with a capital letter followed by printed lower-case letters. It was a typical balanced example of bilingualism in a family where both parents speak Latvian, the grandfather had poor knowledge of Latvian, the grandmother had very good knowledge, but adjusts her speaking to the grandfather by using Russian; the child is fluent in Latvian and Russian. At home, the child communicates with the mother and father in Latvian, but with the grandfather and grandmother - in Russian. Evidently, the role of surrounding people in a child’s proximity and linguistic activity for the balanced development of bilingualism are very crucial. Parents’ answers
about Latvian language skills were adequate for the results we obtained from the conversation about selected pictures from the programme with children.

Figure 1. Children’s Latvian language skills

Surveys and testing results showed with certainty that the reason for children’s poor knowledge of Latvian is the language environment, primarily – their families, see Table 1.

Table 1. Think about the people who have regular contact with your child at home. How often do each of these people speak Latvian and Russian to your child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hardly ever Latvian, almost always Russian</th>
<th>Seldom Latvian, usually Russian</th>
<th>50% Latvian, 50% Russian</th>
<th>Usually Latvian, seldom Russian</th>
<th>Almost always Latvian, hardly ever Russian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister/brother</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister/brother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister/brother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adult family member 1 (please specify)</td>
<td>23 (Grandmother)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adult family member 2 (please specify)</td>
<td>25 (Grandfather)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the case where one of the family members in minority families (most frequently it is the grandfather, less frequently – the grandmother) knows Russian only, all the family speak in Russian, although the native language of the majority of family members is Latvian. In one case, the grandfather only speaks in English, the rest of the family members – in Russian, and the child (5;3) does not know Latvian. The child’s (5;4) knowledge of Latvian is poor when it is only the nanny that can speak Latvian in a family, and she communicates with a child in Latvian, and a brother (17;1) who speaks to a child partly in Latvian, and partly in Russian. Other family members speak with the child in Russian. The Latvian language is an official state language used in all sociolinguistic functions, but it has not become a value taught to the child in the majority of minority families. As a result, children do not acquire Latvian because they are not spoken to in Latvian. In answer to the question about contact with the Latvian language, three respondents indicated ambient language, one respondent – both parents, 1 – nanny/babysitter, and 1 – older sibling (brother), but the majority of the parents did not fill in the table because their answer would be – a teacher in kindergarten, and this was not envisaged in the chart (Fig. 2). Conversations in Russian with other children and teachers exert the dominance of Russian because children attend...
groups where Russian is spoken daily. As in the biggest part of the surveyed families Latvian is not used in everyday life, the only contact for children in a pre-school institution with Latvian is a 30-minute Latvian class twice a week.

![Figure 2. Child’s contact with the Latvian language](image)

In order to obtain information for the survey about children’s contact with Latvian outside a pre-school institution, we also asked a question during the survey, “In general, which language(s) does your child use during such activities; if the child does not participate in the activity, please leave the cell blank (see answers in Table 2).

We can see that outside the kindergarten, participants and friends are factors that have influenced the acquisition of Latvian classes insignificantly. In those cases where Latvian is not used in the family, but the children’s fluency in Latvian has been evaluated as of average skill, sports and dances classes where some of the participants know Latvian were mentioned; the languages of instruction are 50%:50% Latvian and Russian. If both dance partners’ native language is Russian, Latvian is not used during the class – the teacher switches to using Russian only.

Table 2. In general, which language(s) does your child use during such activities (if the child does not participate in the activity, please leave the cell blank)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Hardly ever Latvian, almost always Russian</th>
<th>Seldom Latvian, usually Russian</th>
<th>50% Latvian, 50% Russian</th>
<th>Usually Latvian, seldom Russian</th>
<th>Almost always Latvian, hardly ever Russian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports/clubs</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/DVD/films</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer/tablet</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (dancing)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answering the question, “What is the highest level of education you have completed?” the data of the survey showed that the poor knowledge of Latvian in this particular group at least could have no connection with parents’ specific education. The indicators about their education were diverse – secondary school, college, bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and one doctoral degree (see Fig. 3). The difference is that mothers choose to pursue bachelor’s education more frequently, but fathers – college education, namely, practical training. Three mothers indicated that they are unemployed, but the information about the job of three fathers was not given. We have already indicated earlier that the terminology of the educational field in English and Latvian, and also the social situation, do not always match. For this reason, we could not translate the original survey directly [9]; the seven-cell survey
original of the chart begins with the part of pre-school, but it did not contain information about parents having a PhD, and thus the table was adapted to the context of Latvia. We also retained seven cells and deleted pre-school education, and we added a cell about PhD [6] because it seemed that such a table would be more suitable for the education of parents in Latvia. During the trial phase, we established the correctness of the decision – none of the parents had pre-school education only, but a PhD was only applicable to one father’s education (the child’s Latvian skills were poor).

*Figure 3. Parents’ education.*

As this was only a test trial, it did not include all questions from the survey of parents that would provide more detailed answers, for example, about pre-school employees’ Latvian or other language skills, about the child’s daily regime during working days and weekends, how much time a child spends in the environment of one or another language speaker, when each family member came into contact with the Latvian language for the first time, and what the parents’ motivation is to send a child to a pre-school educational institution with Russian as the language of instruction for the daily language. The main objective of the study was to ascertain whether the problem exists and the necessity for overall testing of children’s language skills in various regions of Latvia on the basis of the testing Russian speaking group of 25 children and data of survey of parents. Thus, it would show the necessity for explanatory work with minority parents about the importance of the language environment and about the change of language policy in pre-school educational establishments in order for children of the minority population to learn successfully in Grade 1.

4 CONCLUSIONS

1 Consequently, in most cases the state language skills of those five to six-year old children who attend a pre-school institution with Russian language instruction, are not adequate in order to continue classes in Latvian, and there would be problems not only in language acquisition, but also in learning other subjects. Considering that students in Grade 1 would also learn a foreign language, which is usually English, we can anticipate that studying in Latvian and English, which are not the children’s native languages will create an additional amount of work and stress.

2 Trial testing of Latvian language skills in a Russian speaking pre-school age children’s group and the results of the survey of parents and guardians demonstrated that poor Latvian language skills by Russian speaking children are due to the lack of an appropriate language environment in the majority of cases.

3 On the basis of trial testing and results of surveys of parents, we consider that the recommended solution for the above-analysed problem is a transition to the Latvian language in the pedagogical process of pre-school institutions and equal use of both languages (Latvian and Russian) in the daily life of institutions; however, it is necessary to conduct overall testing of children’s language skills according to the comprehensive Latvian language test in other regions of Latvia, too.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES


