

## TOWARDS THE LANGUAGE AWARENESS ACTIVITIES IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM OF EASTERN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** *The present study discusses if the teachers who live and work in multicultural environment of Eastern Latvia and who are plurilingual themselves, are ready to use and integrate the new language awareness activities in the school curriculum. The paper reports on a survey carried out on over 30 teachers of the secondary school which is located in the rural territory called Malta, near the border with Russia. There are drawn the following conclusions: the teachers theoretically agree to the fact that the language awareness activities should be a part of the school curriculum. The activities should be integrated not only in the lessons of the foreign languages, but also in other subjects. However, the majority of the teachers are not ready to use the activities in their own lessons. In grades 5-12, the usage of the innovative activities could be prevented and often stopped by the necessity to prepare the students for passing the state examinations in Grades 9 and 12. The results of the state examinations are closely related to the teachers' professional assessment, so many teachers have no motivation to use the activities, and possible the innovations, in the learning process.*

**Key words:** *language awareness, multicultural environment, plurilingual people, foreign languages*

### Introduction

Global economics, free market and international trading relations promote learning foreign languages. In average, 56 % of citizens in the EU Member States say they are able to hold a conversation in one language apart from their mother tongue and 28 % of the respondents state that they speak two foreign languages well enough to have a conversation (Europeans and Their Languages, 2006). Languages help people acquire new information: additional knowledge, skills and research in politics, economics and social field. Languages provide the keys to the cultures they represent. Ability to acquire foreign languages increases the person's thinking, mind and intellect.

The Europeans find that in the EU the most useful and popular foreign languages are English (68%), French (25%), German (22%) and Spanish (16%) (Europeans and Their Languages, 2006). However, the popularity of some languages leads to the situation that they have become privileged over other languages not only in daily life but also in school curriculum.

Many people even are not aware of the possibilities provided by other European languages. Europeans speak more than 20 official languages (even not mentioning the regional languages and dialects) therefore, the ability to understand and communicate in other languages is increasingly important in the local society and in the environment of globalized economy. Every new

language is a possibility to explore the new world and culture. Knowledge of the languages develops tolerance and gives competitive advantage in prospective markets and in exploring new business opportunities. Foreign languages provide people with better career possibilities and increase the employment chances in different countries.

Improvement of language skills is one of the EU priorities caused by global economics, free market and international trading relations. Although the importance of foreign language skills is not novel it is becoming increasingly important in the EU not only to compete successfully in the labor market but also in everyday life. A large proportion of European SME's (11 %) admit that they are losing contracts with 945.000 foreign companies every year as a direct result of linguistic and intercultural weaknesses. Almost 40 % of SME's do not even work with multilingual web sites (Education and Culture DG, 2008).

A large majority of Europeans (65%) consider the school to be the only place where they ever learn foreign languages (Europeans and Their Languages, 2006). The learners' proficiency in foreign languages largely depends on the teaching quality and educators' ability to adapt to the needs of the information society and globalization. The modern pedagogues teach not only the subject but awaken the learners' interest in languages, geography, history, politics and culture.

The aim of the article is to analyse if the teachers who live and work in multicultural environment of Eastern Latvia and who are plurilingual themselves, are ready to use and integrate the new language awareness activities in the school curriculum, if they recognize themselves as modern European teachers who are open to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and if they understand the possibilities provided by the language awareness activities.

In the research there was analysed the case of Latvia. In February 2014, there was conducted the survey in the rural school (Malta secondary school No. 1) of Eastern Latvia located near the border with Russia. The population of Eastern Latvia lives in a multilingual environment: there are not only Latvians or Russians, but also Belarusians, Jewish, Polish, Ukrainians, etc. The respondents were the teachers who teach different subjects in the primary, basic and secondary level. The greatest part of teachers are plurilingual themselves.

The research was conducted in the framework of the project No. NPHZ-2013/10022 "Developing the Language Awareness Approach in the Nordic and Baltic countries" financed by NordPlus Horizontal programme. The project will establish partnerships between universities and primary/secondary schools in seven Nordic and Baltic countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. The project aims to look at linguistic diversity and language awareness in these countries by drawing attention to all sorts of linguistic varieties; e.g. the language(s) of schooling, foreign languages, regional languages and dialects, minority languages and migrant languages.

## Literature Review

This section provides the description of factors (historical and political) which contributed to the development of the teachers' professionalism in Europe and Latvia and influenced also the teachers' attitude to the innovative approaches necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are presented also the previous studies concerning the role of the multilingual and multicultural environment in developing the plurilingual individuals who can successfully compete in the global labour market.

### *1. Language environment in Latvia*

According to the data of the Population and Housing Census 2011 conducted by the Central Statistical Bureau, at home the most popular language is Latvian which is used by 62.1% of population. The second most popular at home language spoken at home is Russian (spoken by 37.2% of population). Other languages, for example, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, etc. are spoken at home by 0.7% of population. Subtype of the Latvian language or regional language called Latgalian, is daily used by 8.8% of population (Population and Housing Census, 2011). More than 98 % of the population can speak Russian though since the collapse of the Soviet sphere the influence of the English language has become very high (Valodu prasmes ietekme uz ekonomiski aktīvo iedzīvotāju dzīves kvalitāti: sociolingvistiskā pētījuma kopsavilkums, 2006).

Because of political and historical changes, from 1992, the Latvian language is protected by laws which demand usage of Latvian in public institutions, schools and limit the use of other languages. A part of the population also speaks Latgalian which has the recognition mentioned in the Latvian Constitution. However, Latgalian “suffers from being traditionally perceived as a dialect of Latvian rather than a language in its own right” (Lazdiņa & Marten, 2012). According to Durandin (2012), in Latvia there is a multilingual society which lives in a mono-linguistic or bilingual environment.

“The government is interested in increasing the influence of Latvian against Russian without having interest in other languages... Language learning is officially declared as a priority in higher education system because it helps students' mobility (foreigners coming to Latvia and Latvian going study abroad) and, then, quality rising, but officially, only Latvian can be used in non linguistic courses. It is difficult for foreign teachers to come and work in Latvian higher education institutions without proving their knowledge of Latvian. Only one foreign language is dominant and very much in demand: English. Other languages can rarely be chosen by students (Durandin, 2012, p.61)”.

In mono-linguistic environment the educators are experiencing highly challenging time: on the one hand there are government regulations, on the other hand, among the population there is a growing necessity to learn the

communication in different languages as fast as possible. Learners have to use foreign languages if they want to be competitive not only in Europe but also in the global world. Šņitņikovs (2003) also stresses that the labour market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands communication skills, quick and adequate reaction in different situations.

## *2. Evolution of the teachers' professionalism*

In Latvia, the population faces not only the internationalization of the labour market but also the issues of migration and immigration. Every new language also means better working and living possibilities not only in Latvia but also abroad. It means that the teachers have to teach not only the subject but also the skills which help the learners to live and work in the global and multicultural environment and inclusive and tolerant society (Council of Europe, 2009).

The society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs the teachers not only of, for example, European languages but also the European teachers (Byram 2003) who are aware not only of their subject (art, economics, history etc.) but also of different languages and cultures and who are able to integrate them into the school curricula.

The modern European teachers demonstrate not only academic ability but also cultural and social competence. They need skills (presentation, decision-making and teamwork) and values (honesty, responsibility, self-control and self-esteem) because they have to work not only in the local but also global environment. Bluma (2000) adds that the society needs the teachers who have the creativity, critical thinking, communicative and cooperative skills, human values, and tolerance towards the diversities and differences. It is important that those who teach have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge effectively to students.

The education process continues also after the official lessons. The teachers learn together with the students and participate in lifelong learning which leads not only to the changes in the subject content and classroom practice, but also to increased interest in the learning processes of the pupil (Council of Europe, 2009).

## *3. Historical insight into the changes of the teachers' professionalism*

In Latvia, the possibility to learn the modern knowledge, skills and values appeared comparatively recently: 20 years ago. As Latvia has been a part of the Soviet Union, transfer to the vision of the European teacher has been a long process, full of difficulties and obstacles. Teachers in the former Soviet Latvia learnt about the evolution of teaching methods and approaches only theoretically. The Soviet education system did not allow the teachers to see and follow the education processes in the West. The available information was only in Russian and Latvian so the teachers had limited possibility to read about the discoveries or innovations abroad. In the teacher training institutions and universities, the foreign languages were taught and learnt only formally. The

learning process was passive, according to a teacher's tasks and instructions. The students did not need a real communication in foreign environment therefore the teachers were recommended not to use the foreign languages in the teaching process. In the lessons of foreign languages there were taught the artificial texts which did not promote the development of the communication skills. The learners studied about the language not the language. They had limited possibilities to use the language in the authentic environment, to develop listening, speaking and writing skills (Rimšāne, 2008).

In the West, the evolution of the new education theories and approaches in the education system developed gradually. The educators' knowledge and understanding was influenced by widening of the European Union, the European Common Market and globalization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

90-s brought the rapid changes in the politics, economics and education also to the former Soviet bloc countries. In a short time, it was necessary to learn, process and adopt to the new Western experience not only in education but also in agriculture, business etc. As a result, during the last 20 years, Latvia has made rapid progress in its effort to leave behind its Soviet past and join modern democratic market economy. The communication, mobility and working possibilities suddenly were opened also for the people of Latvia. They had to be not only bilingual (knowing Latvian and Russian); by travelling abroad and getting new working possibilities many people had to become plurilingual and learn the ability to live in a multilingual society not only in Europe, but also in China, Japan, USA etc. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the population entered the age of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2007) so the demand for communication in different languages is continuously growing.

#### *4. Increasing awareness about the languages*

The aim of language education has changed. The people are not demanded to achieve 'mastery' of one, two or three languages, each taken in isolation, till the level of the 'ideal native speaker'. Instead, they are encouraged to develop all the possible linguistic abilities and learn at least a single phrase, word or a sentence in another language to be able to compete in a global market. The interacting languages in one's head interrelate and promote growing of the communication skills (Council of Europe, 2001). Knowing Latvian, the people can easily learn the communication in Lithuanian; knowing Russian, it is easier to learn the communication also, f.ex., in Polish or Slovenian without being perfectly fluent. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the people of Latvia have to be not only bilingual but also plurilingual freely switching from one language to another, from the regional language to the foreign language in the same conversation. The teachers can help students to become plurilingual and pluricultural because every language opens the new world and helps the learners to understand different cultures and support political and democratic values. In order to help the students become plurilingual, the teachers can use different language awareness activities which encourage students to learn more about other languages as well as their own.

The activities look at many language aspects such as similarities and differences between languages, links between language and culture, spoken and written language, verbal and nonverbal communication and language learning. The language awareness activities can be used also in so called "non-linguistic subjects" such as history, geography, natural, human and exact sciences etc. (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009).

## **Methodology**

### *1. Objectives of the Study*

The current study aims to assess if the teachers who live and work in the multicultural environment and are plurilingual themselves are ready to use and integrate the new language awareness activities in the school curriculum.

### *2. Participants*

The respondents were 30 teachers of the secondary school (Grades 1-12). The respondents teach different subjects at school: art, culture, economics, history, languages, sciences etc. The survey involved 6 primary school teachers (Grades 1-6), 15 secondary school teachers (Grades 7-12) and 9 teachers who teach the pupils in all the levels: primary, basic and secondary levels (Grades 1-12). The teachers have different teaching experience: 17 teachers have been in the profession for more than 20 years, 9 teachers have 11-20 years of teaching experience, 4 of the respondents have less than 10 years of teaching experience. The school is located in the rural territory called Malta and located in the Eastern Latvia, near the border with Russia. The population of the region lives in a multilingual environment: there are not only Latvians or Russians, but also Belarusians, Jewish, Polish, Ukrainians, etc. The population of Eastern Latvia can be considered plurilingual and pluricultural.

### *3. Instruments*

The questionnaire contained 17 questions. The teachers were asked to answer the questions about the teaching experience, knowledge of different languages and estimate their attitudes and beliefs about the necessity of the language awareness activities at school: if the language awareness activities can make a positive contribution to changing student attitudes towards other communities and cultures, can help integrate students from minority ethnic backgrounds into the whole class, can demonstrate that all languages are of equal importance, can promote positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages, can stimulate curiosity and interest in language learning, can help students to understand how language works, can help students in learning other languages, can help students to improve their skills in the main language of the school, can help students to improve their skills in their first language/mother tongue (if different from the main language of the school) and if the activities should be a part of language teaching and integrated into other areas of the curriculum.

#### 4. Data Collection

The survey took place in February 2014. It was distributed to the teachers during the staff meeting. The authors administered the survey. Before the survey the participants were informed about the project, about the factors of the teachers' professionalism, changes and demands of the 21st century, paying a particular attention to the role of the language awareness activities. Some activities were demonstrated to the teachers. The participants got the information about the survey procedure: the first part of the survey required the participants to complete their personal information; the second part asked them to answer the questions about the language awareness activities. The participants were also informed that the survey results would be kept confidentially, and the results of the survey would be beneficial only for the research study.

#### 5. Data Analysis

After the survey administration, the data obtained were coded and divided into groups for statistical analysis. All data were analyzed by the SPSS program, showing descriptive statistics. After editing and coding the data files were exported to SPSS 20 data entry program.

### Results

The teachers have knowledge of the various languages (See figure 1).

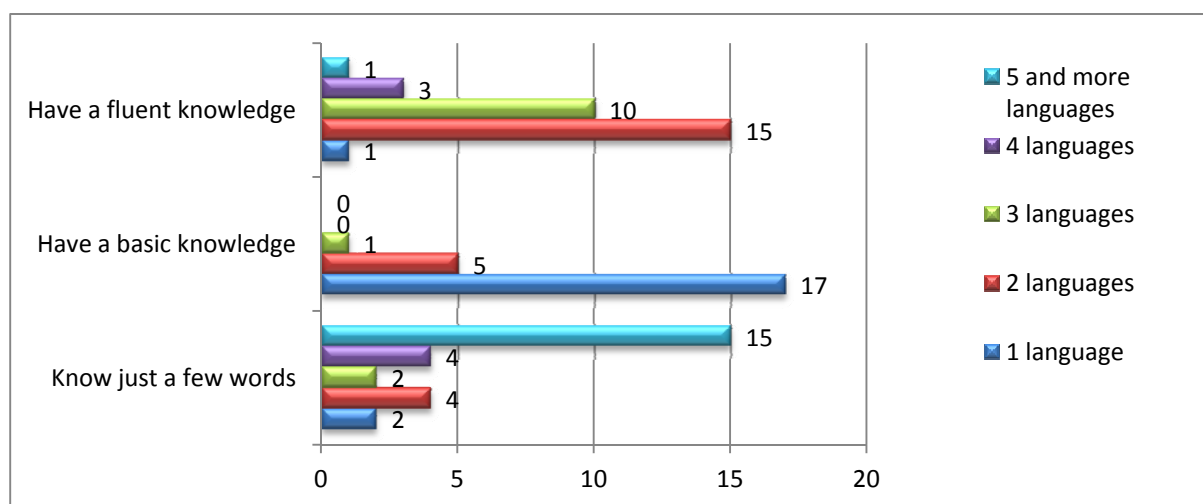


Figure 1. The respondents' knowledge of languages

The half of the respondents (in 15 cases) has fluent knowledge of 2 languages. Many of the teachers (in 10 cases) have fluent knowledge of 3 languages. The most frequent combinations: Latvian - Russian - English or Latvian – Russian – Latgalian. The respondents indicate Latgalian as the second language in spite of the debates whether Latgalian is a separate (regional) language or a dialect of Latvian. All of the respondents have fluent knowledge of the Latvian language. The Russian language (in 28 cases), the Latgalian language (in 12 cases) and the English language (in 5 cases) are often mentioned as the languages where the

respondents are fluent. The respondents often mentioned that they have a basic knowledge of the German language (in 20 cases). The respondents know a few words in Lithuanian (in 23 cases), Polish (in 20 cases), French (in 16 cases), Italian (in 15 cases), Estonian (in 14 cases) and Spanish (in 10 cases). It means that the greatest part of the teachers are plurilingual themselves.

The teachers' interest towards various languages influences the attitude towards the language awareness activities in the school curriculum. The majority of the teachers (in 17 cases) are positive about using the activities in the study process; they support promoting the pupils' interest in the language learning and informing about the opportunities opened by the languages.

The approach focuses on motivating students to be aware of the linguistic diversity. The results of Kendall's rank correlation prove existence of the correlation between the choice of the Language Awareness approach and the belief that the awareness of linguistic diversity can stimulate curiosity and interest in language learning ( $r=0,530$ ,  $p=0,004$ ). This indicates a tendency: the bigger is the teacher's interest towards the linguistic diversity, the more he/she will try to increase students' interest in and motivate to explore linguistic diversity.

The respondents agree that the language awareness activities can make a positive contribution to changing the students' attitudes towards other communities and cultures, demonstrate that all languages are of equal importance in the global context, promote curiosity and learning other languages, help to understand how the language works. The teachers mostly agree that the approach promotes an integration of the students from minority ethnic backgrounds into the whole class (in 29 cases) and fosters a tolerant attitude towards speakers of other languages (in 29 cases) as well as helps the students to improve their skills in their mother tongue (in 22 cases). Kruskal-Wallis Test reveals the significant differences ( $p= 0,018$ ) between the respondents' working experience and the assumption that the language awareness activities help the pupils to learn other languages. The teachers with the working experience of more than 20 years more often (Mean Rank 18, 85) admit the advantages of the language awareness activities. The teachers with the working experience of less than 10 years reflect the lower assessment (Mean Rank 6, 50) of such activities. The result is confirmed by the Kendall's rank correlation ( $r=0,549$ ,  $p=0,002$ ).

A part of teachers work in all the levels (primary, basic and secondary), a part works in one of the levels. The teachers' answers reflected the following differences according to the level they teach:

- significant differences ( $p=0,040$ ) in the usage of Language Awareness activities in their own work. The primary school teachers use the activities more often (Mean Rank 22, 00) than the teachers who work in Grades 7-12 (Mean Rank 15, 00) or in basic and secondary school (Mean Rank 12,00). The teachers of the basic and secondary levels spend more school time



preparing students to pass the state tests. The results of the state tests are closely related to the teachers' professional assessment so the teachers have limited time for the new approaches in the learning process;

- significant differences ( $p=0,027$ ) in the assumption that the Language Awareness activities develop the tolerance towards the speakers of other languages. The teachers who teach the learners in all three levels (Grades 1-12) have higher average value rank (Mean Rank 21, 28). The result is logical because the formation of the tolerance is a long process. The teachers who work in all the levels can follow the pupils' development and progress for 12 years. This is also confirmed by Kendall's correlation ( $r=0,495$ ,  $p=0,014$ );
- significant differences ( $p=0,012$ ) in the assumption that the Language Awareness activities help students to improve their skills in the mother tongue (if different from the language of schooling). The teachers who work in all the levels have higher average value rank (Mean Rank 20, 39). The majority of the respondents (in 27 cases) consider that language awareness activities should be a part of the school curriculum. The activities should be integrated not only in the lessons of the foreign languages, but also in other subjects. The teachers' opinion supports the assumption that all languages are of equal importance ( $r=0,475$ ,  $p=0,002$ ), stimulate the development of tolerance ( $r=0,523$ ,  $p=0,011$ ), promote learning of other languages ( $r=0,417$ ,  $p=0,020$ ) and improving the skills in the language of schooling ( $r=0,518$ ,  $p=0,003$ ).

## Discussion

The results show that the teachers who live and work in multicultural environment of Eastern Latvia are mostly plurilingual themselves. Knowledge of different languages and cultures help them better understand other cultures and languages and prepare the pupils for the needs of the global world and better career possibilities in the future.

The teachers with the working experience of more than 20 year admit the advantages of the language awareness activities more often. The teachers with the working experience of less than 10 years reflect the lower assessment of such activities. Only the teachers who teach the subject in all three levels (primary, basic and secondary) consider that the language awareness activities can develop the tolerance towards the speakers of other languages. The same group of teachers agree that the activities help students to improve their skills in the mother tongue (if different from the language of schooling). It can be explained by the fact that they can follow the pupils' development for 12 years. Other teachers who teach the subject only in the primary or basic level do not agree to these assumptions.

The majority of the respondents (in 27 cases) consider that language awareness activities should be a part of the school curriculum. The activities should be

integrated not only in the lessons of the foreign languages, but also in other subjects.

All primary school teachers (Grades 1-4) are ready to use the activities in the curriculum. The teachers of Grades 5-12 are not so enthusiastic about the usage of the new language awareness activities in their own subjects. In basic and secondary school the usage of the language awareness activities can be prevented and often stopped by the necessity to prepare the students for passing the state examinations in Grades 9 and 12. The results of the state examinations are closely related to the teachers' professional assessment so many teachers have no motivation to use the new activities in the education process.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored if the teachers who live and work in the multicultural environment and are plurilingual themselves are ready to use and integrate the new language awareness activities in the school curriculum. The results revealed that the teachers theoretically agree to the fact that the language awareness activities should be a part of the school curriculum. The activities should be integrated not only in the lessons of the foreign languages, but also in other subjects. However, the majority of the teachers are not ready to use the activities in their own lessons.

### **Limitations and Further investigations**

The results of this study should be interpreted carefully for several reasons. There was a small group size of respondents so the findings of this study remain inconclusive. It is necessary to continue the subsequent studies by analyzing a larger group of participants. Moreover, further investigation should investigate the following questions: 1) Does the system of the state examinations promote the usage of innovative approaches at schools of Latvia? 2) Is it necessary to review the school curriculum and include the language awareness approach in the standards to avoid the situation that the language awareness activities remain the initiative of one school?

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