

Latvian language acquisition – a fight with myths, stereotypes and prejudices

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Abstract

When Latvia regained its independence in 1991 the status of the Latvian language was one of the main problems facing the country. In spite of well-meant State policies in 1992-1993 the situation changed hardly. This was the reason why the Latvian Government in 1995 decided to develop and implement a ten-year National Programme for Latvian Language Training (NPLLT). As a result of the first six years there has been a real change of attitudes to language learning and use, the language acquisition environment has changed completely owing to effective teacher training and completely new and attractive teaching materials. But the most important change is that people have understood that language acquisition is a normal pedagogical process, not a mysterious monster embedded in myths, stereotypes and prejudices.

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Introduction

What is so special about Latvian language acquisition that it is worth serious debates in Latvia and that even the international community is interested in the issue? People conducting interviews on the language issue in Latvia are confused, because the statements about the language situation in Latvia will be almost as many as the persons interviewed. What is really happening, whom can you believe and who is right?

The language situation in Latvia in the year 2002, 11 years after regained independence, is still not treated in neutral terms, but is tackled emotionally and used as a weapon. Where the Latvian language society is divided between two extremes or two poles. Some want to implement the Latvian Language Act, which recognises the Latvian language as the only State language of Latvia, as fast possible - others want to continue the former Soviet policy and its consequences, and accept two State languages, Latvian and Russian. Between these two poles everyday life is taking place.

1. State policy to change the language hierarchy in Latvia

In 1994 approximately 700,000 of Latvia's approximately 2.5 million residents had little or no knowledge of the Latvian language, as a consequence of the 50 year-long Russianisation policy during the Soviet occupation. Of these 700,000 persons approximately 200,000 were Latvian citizens. The Law on languages, which in 1989 gave the Latvian language the same status as Russian, was changed by amendments in 1992 and the Latvian language became the only official language of the Republic of Latvia. In the same year, a State Language Centre was set up, responsible for the juridical status and the strengthening and use of the Latvian language. Different language levels for different professions were worked out, the so called proficiency tests and attestation

commissions responsible for the language exams established, and a language inspection introduced.

It is obvious that the Latvian state sought to introduce a responsible language policy aimed at reestablish Latvian as the only State language. In 1992-93 virtually a people's movement was mobilised to teach Latvian. Practically everyone who knew Latvian was teaching the language to someone who did not know it. 153,000 persons passed the language proficiency tests during this time but the language situation changed very little. The result was deep disappointment on both sides. What happened? Why did this action fail? The reasons and answers are very complex.

3. Why did the well-intentioned State policy fail?

In the following I will try to analyse and determine some of the reasons the failure of this well-intentioned. The main reason, in fact, was unrealistic ideas about language learning and language teaching, based on different myths, stereotypes and prejudices developed and practiced during Soviet times and intensified by the mental isolation of Latvia over the period. Here a list of frequently voiced statements :

Table 1

Latvians about Russians and the Latvian language	Russians about Latvians and the Latvian language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Russians are stupid, ignoramus, imperialists, and rude; • Russians cannot learn a foreign language; • The Russians should go home; • Russians are not able to learn Latvian; • Russians will never learn Latvian; • They have been living here for 40 years and still do not know Latvian; • In Siberia we learnt perfect Russian within three months; • They have to be forced to learn Latvian as we had to learn Russian; • The Latvian language is a special language; • The Latvian language is a very old language; • The Latvian language is very difficult and complicated, even the Latvians have difficulties; • The Russians are ignoring our language and culture; • I cannot listen to the Russians speaking Latvian, their terrible accent and grammar mistakes are not tolerable; • What will we do, if all Russians speak Latvian? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Latvians are damned nationalists= fascists; • You cannot trust the Latvian institutions; • The Latvians do not like us; • The Latvians want to get rid of us; • The Latvians say, go home, but where should we go, Latvia is our home; • You cannot trust the State Language Centre, the commissions are corrupt, incompetent, they do not want us to pass the language tests; • The Latvian language is very difficult and complicated, even the Latvians have difficulties in speaking correct Latvian; • You cannot speak about higher cultural, philosophical and global issues and values in Latvian, the language is too poor; • The Latvian language is a kitchen language, a dog language; • The Latvian language teachers are bad; • There are no good teaching materials available; • Why should we learn Latvian, we will speak Russian anyway;

This list could be prolonged with tens of additional statements. What can be achieved through such attitudes? Certainly the acquisition of the Latvian language. Both sides are in principle rejecting Latvian language acquisition. For the Latvians the language is a "holy cow" and an insider secret code; for the Russians it is useless and worthless. In actual fact, this discussion is not promoting but blocking the distribution and the use of the Latvian language.

Let us analyse some of the issues to get a clearer picture of what is going on and what is needed to solve the problems.

4. Analysis of the myths

Firstly, the Russians were never obliged to learn Latvian when they came to Latvia. The environment was prepared and adapted to the language needs of the Russians, not to those of Latvia and the Latvians. For example Russian classes were established in Latvian schools, when this was requested. When the need was expressed, the schools were transformed into two-stream schools, with Russian and Latvian classes. When more Russians came to Latvia and the need was there, Russian schools were established. In the beginning, this was defended by the argument, that these people would stay in the country only for a limited time, and would move somewhere else after a few years. The fact is that the people stayed but the tradition, not to learn the language, remained. In fact, this behaviour was extended to other fields. When non-Latvian speakers were not able to manage their everyday duties in Latvian, the language of instruction was changed to Russian. By the nineteen eighties the official language in Latvia had been transformed, "naturally" into Russian. Latvian had become *de facto* a minority language in Latvia. What is more, the teaching of Russian in Latvian schools was very well prepared and of a high standard. The status of Russian as the "lingua franca" in Latvia was established from two different directions.

Secondly, there existed and still exist unrealistic ideas about language acquisition. Language acquisition was not regarded as a human learning process but as a technical issue, something which could be installed at a certain date and under certain circumstances. No human factor was taken into account. No estimates were made how many hours and how long a time is necessary to learn a language. No psychological or sociological analysis was made to understand the trainees. Learning foreign languages was not very popular during the Soviet period, because there was no use for foreign languages. In the accessible foreign countries you could speak Russian, the other countries were not accessible. Foreign languages were taught theoretically or with topics (certain themes with limited questions and answers which were learnt by heart). Additionally most Russians had no language learning experience at all. All this made the Latvian language even more worthless and unattractive.

Thirdly, there is no motivation to develop language teaching pedagogy if the language learning is only formal. So no attention was paid to improving the teaching of Latvian, to develop new, attractive and interesting teaching materials that would motivate the learners.

Fourthly, being a Latvian language teacher in Russian schools was regarded as a low prestige job. The mental isolation associated with Latvian Philology influenced also the Latvian language teachers, who were constantly repeating how difficult and complex the Latvian language is. This did not promote the language acquisition. Additionally many teachers regarded the students as stupid and lazy and not able to learn Latvian, which did not make the situation any better.

Fifthly, there was no tolerance of people who spoke Latvian with a foreign accent or wrong grammar. As soon as someone began speaking Latvian with an accent or was making mistakes, Latvians switched to Russian. This phenomena is still active. How can a student learn a language if he or she is not allowed to use the language in the learning process and is not allowed to make mistakes?

Last yet not least, the already mentioned introduction of a Russian school system in Latvia was the beginning of segregation in the society, a creation of two different information spaces. The Soviet Russian schools in Latvia had nothing in common with Latvia and the Latvians. The follow-up of this policy is still affecting Latvian life in Latvia. It is obvious that a common education system is needed to achieve a consolidated and integrated society in Latvia.

On the Latvian side it is expected that the Russians learn Latvian fluently but no means are provided to make the language accessible for learning. Instead, the Latvians are keeping their language as a secret code in a golden cage.

5. The National Programme for Latvian Language Training (NPLLT)

In 1994, Latvia was fortunate in having a Government rational enough to understand that the language situation is more than a linguistic problem. The Government realized that something had to be undertaken immediately and that Latvia was not able to solve the problem alone. In this situation, the Latvian Government approached the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Latvia and asked for assistance in elaborating and implementing a National Programme for Latvian Language Training in Latvia.

In 1995, UNDP organized a national-international working group to design a National Programme for Latvian Language Training (NPLLT). The group drew up a ten-year National Programme addressing both the national education system and the adults. For the implementation of the NPLLT, a five-person institution was created, the Latvian Language Programme Unit (LLPU). The implementation of the Programme started in late 1996 and covers 5 main fields:

1. Teacher training;
2. Development of new teaching materials;
3. LSL (Latvian as a second language) courses for adults;
4. Integration activities;
5. Development of the programme management.

How did the Programme tackle this very complex problem? What was the Programme philosophy? What has the Programme achieved during these six years?

6. The Philosophy and Strategy of the National Programme for Latvian Language Training

The first step was and still is to eliminate all the myths, stereotypes and prejudices among the trainers as well as among the trainees. For this purpose a campaign was started to introduce a completely new subject – Latvian as a second language (LSL).

The first task of the Programme was to introduce LSL and to train the Latvian language teacher corps in new methodologies and teaching approaches as soon as possible. For this purpose the NPLLT used the so -called multiplier effect. A core group of teachers is trained to train their colleagues. This approach has shown that it is possible to implement far-reaching reforms within a short time. The NPLLT has trained three such multiplier groups over these six years. These trainer groups are addressing their colleagues from different angles and at different levels. The NPLLT multipliers, meanwhile, are addressing all minority school teachers. Demand of their training is today also being requested by Latvian school teachers. The following table shows the multiplier effect in work:

Table 2. Table showing the multiplier effect of the NPLLT

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	Total
Training of LSL methodology multipliers	40	-	-	-	-	-	40
LSL multiplier training of their colleagues	-	220	300	468	151	219	1358
Training of LSL primary school multipliers	-	-	-	40 (30 active)	-	-	40
LSL primary school multiplier training of	-	-	-	247	293	335	875

their colleagues							
Training of multipliers of bilingual teaching methodologies	-	-	-	-	60 (40 new 20 from the start LSL meth. Trainer group))	-	60
Bilingual teaching methodology multiplier training of their colleagues	-	-	-	-	986	727	1713
Number of teachers who have finalized a NPLLT teacher training course since 1996	40	220	300	755	1490	1281	4086

Which are the results of this teacher training? What has changed? The third table shows a list of criteria which today are used as everyday teaching instruments, but which the trainers were not even aware of just a few years ago.

Table 3

The trainers understand that different target groups and different language learning needs exist; e.g.

- Different ages need different content and approaches;
- Students have different gifts and skills for learning languages;
- Special content and approach is needed for mentally handicapped students;
- Students want interesting and exciting classes which can compete with the media;
- Adults have very different needs compared to children;
- The needs of individual adults are very different;
- The previous experience of adult may be very different but important in the language learning process;
- Even adults can learn a language;
- An adult is not a fool because he/she does not know Latvian;
- Also adults need a progressive language learning approach;
- Adults are also making mistakes when they learn a language;

The fact is that the LSL and other trained teacher groups have become more self-confident, open and smiling, creative and keen to learn new methods. That such teachers are much better pedagogues hardly needs to be explained. The beneficiaries of the NPLLT teacher training are meanwhile not only the teachers themselves but all primary school children from grade 1 to 9 and a large number of adults.

What has happened to the teaching materials? The fact is that the multiplier effect is even more far reaching. The trainers and trainees are also involved in the development and implementation of new materials. Here, too, the philosophy of the Programme has been to address different target groups and to find out their needs. The LLPU was the first organisation in Latvia to present teaching material packages (textbook, work book,

audio materials and teacher guide). Now this method is seen and used everyday, other publishing houses have decided to follow suite.

Table 4

<p>A. LSL within the school system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• LLPU has developed and published teaching material packages for grade 1 to 9:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ text book;▪ exercise book;▪ audio materials;▪ teachers guide;▪ work books on communicative grammar for grades 1 to 9; <p>B. visual teaching aids for bilingual education programmes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• poster pads (20 pads for each subject) are developed for the subjects biology, geography, history for grades 5 and 6;• overhead transparencies (100 transparencies for each subject) are developed for the subjects biology, geography, history for grades 7 and 8; <p>C. teaching materials for specific adult groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• LSL teaching materials targeted to the following professions:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ New recruits;▪ Ministry of Interior employees (police, border guards, prison and court personel);▪ Firemen;▪ Minority school subject teachers;▪ Kindergarten teachers;▪ Latvian railway employees;▪ Medical staff (doctors and nurses); <p>D. Latvian for everyone:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Language learning film (a soap opera broadcast on TV and video);▪ Text books and exercise books;▪ Audio materials (available on radio and cassettes);▪ CD and Internet programmes; <p>E. Methodological aids for teachers;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Methodology handbooks;• handbooks on video use;• handbooks on audio use;• handbooks on how to use press reports, museums etc. in language acquisition;

Also the teaching materials show that the LLPU philosophy is to direct attention and to motivate the individual and not the masses. According to the decision of the NPLLT Steering committee, the funding available for LSL courses is divided as follows. 70% of the money is earmarked for teachers who need to teach their subjects in Latvian and 30% for professions where a certain language level is necessary to hold down the job. A certain amount of every funding is also used for language courses for handicapped persons and young unemployed.

The number of individuals who have participated in NPLLT LSL courses (autumn 1996 until end 2001) by profession:

Table 5. Participants by profession

Preschool educators	4,832
School and university educators	10,252
New recruits	1,059
Young unemployed	439
Medical personnel	1,952
Municipality personnel	926
Journalists	232
Handicapped	210
Courses for young adults	766
Youth clubs	895
Summer camps for school students	1,730
Latvian railway employees	151
Ministry of Interior employees	3,347
Factory workers	157
People from different ethnic organizations	1,178
Young prisoners	151
School cooperation projects	237
Total	28,514

The NPLLT working group has calculated that an average non-Latvian speaker in Latvia needs 360 h (6 x 60 h courses) to become fluent in Latvian. The table below shows how many courses have been taken by different individuals.

Table 6

Number of courses received	Individual persons	Number of registered course trainees (1, 2 or more courses)
60 h	16,522	16,522
2 x 60 h	8,099	16,198
3 x 60 h	1,896	5,688
4 x 60 h	1,059	4,236
5 x 60 h	439	2,195
6 x 60 h	246	1,476
Total	28,514	48,382

The success of the NPLLT is based on certain basic principles. The participation in Programme activities is voluntary and based on open competitions, the target groups are stimulated by positive motivation, LLPU is not testing or examining the learners, LLPU seeks to focus on individuals and find out their needs, LLPU seeks to keep a constant dialogue with the target groups and makes efforts to involve them instead of to exclude.

Most non-Latvians have meanwhile accepted that it is necessary to know Latvian in Latvia. At least on a theoretical level. Even if they do not know Latvian themselves, many of them are sending their children to Latvian schools to promote the language learning process. But still there is a core of resistance which is supported and upheld by the above-mentioned myths and prejudices. The national-international working group as well as the directives of the MES stress, according to worldwide praxis, that a second language cannot be learnt by means of language lessons alone. It has to be supported by some subjects taught in the language.

7. Changes in the Education System – a political or pedagogical problem

The Latvian Education Act offers the minority schools different bilingual education models. This is a very good opportunity to learn the second language and the mothertongue in minority primary schools (grade 1 to 9). The Education Act stipulates that starting with grade 10 in the year 2004, the language of instruction in minority secondary schools should provide a gradual change to Latvian as the language of instruction. This issue has been politicised from the very beginning. The arguments used are the old prejudices, that the Latvian language cannot be used to express global and higher values, that the Russian language is superior to the Latvian language, that the students being instructed in Latvian will be stupid and "half products" whatever that means. The opponents of the education reform want to keep the status quo and even the most illogical arguments against the reform are good enough to be used in this dispute.

About 50% of the minority schools are already ready to put into practice the bilingual education models and the change of the language of instruction in secondary schools. They have realized that this is a tremendous pedagogic challenge. About 30% of the minority schools need strong support to be able to meet the Act's requirements. But about 20% of the minority schools are not ready. Why? This is a good question. By December 1998, all minority school teachers should have reached the highest level of proficiency in Latvian. The transition to bilingual education was begun in 1996. The Education Act did gradually come into force starting with the year 1998. Still a group of minority school representatives want to postpone or dehalt the process -- which raises the question, that is, whether these persons have been aware of the changes in Latvia and if these persons are loyal State employees?.

8. Language acquisition the way to integration or vice versa?

Every year LLPU has also implemented different informal so-called integration activities, such as camps, clubs, cooperation projects, etc. This has been extremely successful. This shows clearly that not only does language knowledge promote integration but also vice versa, integration is promoting language learning. In society the understanding of the ways and needs of integration activities has changed. The following example shows this clearly. In 1997 all cooperation activities between Latvians and Non-latvians were rejected by the Latvians. By 2001, however, different cooperation project models had come to be a part of everyday life.

Also the LLPU newsletter "Tagad", a quarterly bulletin published in three languages (Latvian, Russian and English), is a welcome contribution to the education reforms and integration issues in Latvia. Every number addresses some methodological problem, integration ideas and presents an interview on language acquisition with the widest range of different people living in Latvia.

In March 2002, the NPLLT was evaluated by an independent international-national team. It was recommended to continue all activities as before and to enhance the target groups on minority school parents. Actually the NPLLT had already in early 2002 started an information campaign addressed to the parents. Together with the Ministry of Education and Science, the LLPU has developed three different booklets with answers on the most frequent questions about bilingual education asked by parents, students and teachers. The LLPU is now organizing seminars to inform all the involved auditories about the benefits of bilingual education. The next step will be to offer the parent groups LSL courses and to tie the course content to the content of their children's school work. Via this activity the NPLLT is reaching the whole of society in Latvia.

9. The current situation

Meanwhile the LLPU is running a medium-size college and a medium size publishing house. The LLPU has expanded to a 20-person team (content, administration, finances, sale, etc.) with more than 2,000 individual contracts per year (trainers, teachers, authors and others). The budget is approximately 2 million US\$ annually. The finances for the first four years were funded from a broad donor community via the UNDP. Starting with the year 2001 the Latvian Government has taken over a considerable amount of the funding, which together with the PHARE money makes up 60% of the total funding.

Every year LLPU is inviting all Programme participants to an evaluation conference to discuss and analyze the previous year and come up with ideas on how to improve the Programme work. These conferences have not only become a nice tradition but are also giving a constructive feed-back and future ideas.

The NPLLT has meanwhile crossed the borders of Latvia and is known also outside Latvia. The know how and expertise of the Programme has been requested by Estonia, Georgia and Moldova. In November 2002, the LLPU has been asked to host the yearly conference of the Nordic Network of Intercultural Communication. The NPLLT has also opened a webpage www.lvavp.lv in three languages where you can receive information about the past, present and future plans of the Programme.

Furthermore you can also consult the listing (1) of those sociolinguistic studies carried out in Latvia since its independence in 1991.

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(1) Appendix

Sociolinguistic studies on Latvian (1991 – 2002)

- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1996 September
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1997 February/March
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1997 August/September
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1998 February/March
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1998 August/September
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 1999 March/April
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 2000 April/ May
- NPLLT and BDH "Valoda" ("Language") 2001 November/2002 January
- NPLLT and BDH "Latviešu valodas apguve skolas ar krievu apmacibas valodu" ("Latvian language learning in Minority schools") 1999 July
- The Language Situation in Latvia: Sociolinguistic Survey. Part 1. Language Use and Attitudes among Minorities in Latvia. Riga: Latvian Language Institute, 1995.
- Valodas situacija Latvija. Sociolingvistisks petijums. 2. daļa. Latviešu lingvistiska kompetence un valodas procesu vertejums. ("The Language Situation in Latvia: Sociolinguistic Survey. Part 2. Latvian linguistic competence and evaluation of language processes"): Latvian Language Institute, 1996.
- Baltaiskalna D., Druvieta I., Ernstsone V., Porina V. Latvijas valodas politikas analize: ekonomiskie aspekti. ("Latvian language policy analysis: economic aspects"): Latvian Language Institute, 2001.