

## SOME ASPECTS OF TEACHING LATVIAN GRAMMAR AT SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

The Latvian language as a subject has been a taught language since the 1<sup>st</sup> grade till 12<sup>th</sup> grade in both minority schools and schools, where the Latvian language is the language of instruction. In recent years the country has also been implementing the education reform within the framework of which the content and its acquisition methodology has been improved, but the students' level of the Latvian language as state language skills is declining in various aspects.

*The topicality of the problem to be researched* stems from the results obtained by analyzing the scientific research implemented in the country (2007–2021) and other research on language competence of basic and secondary education students.

*The aim of the research* is to analyze the content and methodology of grammar teaching in basic school and in secondary school for students' language competence.

*The methodology of the study* is based on linguistics, linguistic didactics, cognitivism and sociocultural theories. The empirical data have been obtained by analyzing the Latvian language learning process and the quality of the essays (content analysis of 409 essays of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade secondary school students in School Year 2018/2019 according to the previously developed criteria based on theories).

*The results* of the research show that students learn the grammar rules mainly formally, without linking them to a specific communicative purpose. More attention should be paid to students' work with authentic texts, pupils' own texts as well as study texts used for the acquisition of the content of other subjects. In the didactics of the Latvian language more attention should be paid to the students' sense of language as the ability to perceive, emotionally recognize and evaluate the use of language.

*The significance of the results* lies in the aspect that they reveal the real situation and enable us to develop recommendations for the improvement of the Latvian language learning process.

**Keywords:** *grammar content, language competence, linguistic attitude, sense of language, text-forming process*

## Introduction

The language, in which the thought is materialized, is one of the means by which we can judge the person's level of thinking, their level of knowledge, the social environment in which they live, their attitude towards themselves and society as a whole, and their language culture.

Even though the today's processes of globalization and internationalization require a good knowledge of English or other European and world languages, no less important is the issue of the competence of the particular state language. In Latvia, it is the Latvian language that, in compliance with the Official Language Law, has to be known and used by employees of state and municipal institutions, employees belonging to the courts and judicial system, employees of state and municipal companies, as well as employees of companies in which the largest share of the capital belongs to the state or municipality to the extent necessary for the performance of professional and official duties (Section 6 of the Official Language Law).

Even though the country is undergoing an extensive education reform, within the framework of which the content and its acquisition methodology are being improved, the level of students' Latvian language skills in various aspects is declining every year. There are both objective and subjective reasons for this, but it does not discharge them from liability to learn Latvian at school at least at an optimum level, so that regardless of the students' ethnicity and place of residence, they could perceive the language as a sign system, make reasoned judgments with the help of the Latvian language.

*The topicality of the problem to be researched* stems from the results obtained by analyzing the scientific research implemented in the country (2007–2021) and other research on language competence of basic and secondary education.

*The aim of the research* is to analyze the content and methodology of grammar teaching in basic school and secondary school for students' language competence.

## Methodology

*The research methodology* is based on the linguistics, linguistic didactics (Martena, Laiveniece, Šalme 2020; Laiveniece, 2003; Daszkiewicz, Wenzel, Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019), cognitivism and sociocultural theories (Ralph, Stevs, 2019; Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000).

The empirical data have been obtained by analyzing the Latvian language learning process during 2018–2021 (70 full-time and distance learning lessons) and the quality of students' essays (content analysis of 409 essays of

12<sup>th</sup> grade secondary school students in School Year 2018/2019 according to the previously developed criteria based on theories). The balanced corpus of modern Latvian texts has been used for this purpose, in which the above-mentioned texts of secondary school students' essays have been digitized.

In order to ensure higher reliability of data, regional dispersion, differences in terms of educational programs and social status of secondary education institutions have been taken into account (essays of students at secondary schools and gymnasiums of Latvian language of instruction and minority languages in Riga, Kurzeme and Latgale Regions have been selected). The original texts include analyses of the content in a broader context if the units found in the corpus of the language text do not reflect accurately the relationship of the statements to the research problem.

Descriptive statistical methods have been used in the analysis of the data obtained in the study. The obtained data are ranked and expressed as a percentage depending on the number of obtained data and interpreted in relation to the purpose of the study.

## Results

### Grammar competence as part of language competence

The Latvian language is not only a school subject but also a means of expressing one's thoughts, communication and the exploration of the world, the accumulation and transfer of cultural experience, the expression of emotions as well as a means of every person's self-actualization. The language is a means of different subject acquisition, too. This means that it is important to learn the language system, grammar rules for oral and written speech at school. Without grammar there is no language, it is as simple as that. It is not possible to use the language at all without the acquisition of language competence – the words in sentences and sentences in the text are arranged based on the grammar of the Latvian language, and children do so from the moment they start speaking (Laiveniece, Lauze 2021).

Grammar is a branch of linguistics that studies the grammatical system of a language (structure of words and sentences, word forms, their functions and composition, grammatical categories, types and techniques of word formation, structure and types of word collocations, sentences and texts) (Explanatory Dictionary of Basic Linguistic Terms, 2007).

Grammar competence is an ability to recognise and produce grammatical structures of the language and use them effectively in communication (Chomsky, 1965).

We understand the acquisition of grammar competence as a linguistically, psychologically and methodically organized system, in which there

is a unity of speech and language as a means. It is one of the individual's intellectual abilities, characterized by a conscious or intuitive knowledge of the language system, in order to form grammatically and semantically correct expressions and implement a specific language function in a meaningful text.

Language competence is not an innate ability. It is formed when a person interacts with the social environment and acquires specific knowledge about the world and the language system in their mutual relationship. Language competence is also closely related to sociocultural competence, as the grammar used in the text is a means of expressing a specific context characteristic to a particular societal culture (Ralph, Steve, 2019; Daszkiewicz, Wenzel, Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019; Mynbayeva, Shahanova, Zhanaikhan, 2015; Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000; Martena, Laiveniece, Šalme, 2021).

### **Who is a competent language user?**

People mainly think, speak and write not in separate sentences, but in full purposefully created sequential series of sentences that form a narrower or wider wholeness – the text.

The individual's language competence can be judged on the basis of their knowledge and skills to adapt the text to the topic, to comply with the conditions of text composition, to ensure a coherent whole of sentences, their sets or contextual connections, to apply the language style to the topic presentation and communicative task, to respect the principle of completeness of the text, as well as to observe in practice the norms of orthoepy or orthography and punctuation (Martena, Laiveniece, Šalme, 2021).

One of the most important issues is the syntax of the text, which includes in itself the structure of sentences and texts, the use of punctuation or certain graphic signs – punctuation marks to separate grammatical or conceptual units of expression in writings. It helps the writer to express and the listener or reader to perceive the content of the text, the writer's beliefs and attitudes towards the facts, events or problem they are writing about.

However, it should be noted, that the above mentioned can be seen by studying the punctuation used in the text as a whole, because we no longer use individual sentences in the text, but related succession of statements. Each statement is used in a specific context or situation (Lokmane, 2013).

Looking at the punctuation both at the end of the sentence and in the middle of the sentence, it is possible to judge the author's knowledge of the chosen problem, their opinion, the ability to convince how they can control their thinking during the writing process, to structure the text, not to deviate from the topic and other issues.

A proficient user of the Latvian language is considered to be an individual with a good, reasoned judgment, a wide, diverse and accurately used vocabulary, orthography as in the particular language accepted level of spelling system acquisition (Martena, 2021).

Latvian orthography skills are characterized by: spelling of short and long vowels, diphthongs in words and word forms, correct use of consonants in the word root, endings and word forms, use of prefixes, suffixes in words and word forms, spelling of compound words, spelling of words together and separately, spelling of proper nouns and compound nouns, spelling of foreign words, word division for transfer to a new line, abbreviation of words.

The writer's spelling skills can only be judged more objectively if the spelling of words and word forms is studied in the text, because a word or word form, similar to punctuation, is used depending on the situation. Whether, for example, words are written together or separately, or whether a word is perceived as a generic name, proper name, or compound, how the word can best be abbreviated so that the reader could perceive the author's idea, what consonant or vowel should be written at the root or end of the word etc., can only be determined in a broader context.

### **Level of students' grammatical competence**

Based on theories (Martena, Laiveniece, Šalme 2020; Laiveniece, 2003; Daszkiewicz, Wenzel, Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019), the most important criteria that is used in the study to determine students' grammar competence is as follows:

- relevance of the text to the topic,
- text composition (the proportion between text parts),
- sentence interconnection,
- appropriate language style to the topic,
- completeness of the text,
- the norms of orthography and punctuation.

The research of students' grammatical competence according to the criteria described above shows that 57% observe the proportions between the parts of the text, the link of sentences to form the text as a whole, observe the principle of completeness of the text, use paragraphs appropriately in the text. In its turn, the most characteristic deficiencies of 43% of the respondents from the point of view of the composition of the text are the following: the proportions between the parts of the text have not been observed; the boundaries of the introduction to the text are most often clearly visible, but the main paragraph only paraphrases the same idea as the introduction; there is no clear direction of thought in the main part or it is highly chaotic, there are no transitions between parts of the text; indentations are not observed precisely in the text (14% of respondents

either do not use indentations at all or the indentation has no connection with the opinion expressed); the conclusion often does not stem from the previous text, it is a repetition of an idea already expressed in the introduction or the main part, or as a new thought that does not stem from the previous one, and therefore indicates the incompleteness of the text. There are no proportions in the text between the introduction and the conclusion. The conclusion is usually unreasonably short (Anspoka, Martena, 2021).

In order to find out how students learn text-forming and what are the causes of text-forming errors, an observation of Latvian language lessons was carried out. During the observation, attention was paid to the methodology of learning grammar questions, as well as to how students act while writing (how they chose the topic, plan the content, edit and improve the text).

Observing the pedagogical process, it has been discovered that students learn the language formally. Students learn the theory and find in texts or invent themselves appropriate sentences and word formation techniques. This kind of teaching approach does not promote an in-depth understanding of language as a system.

Out of the 409 respondents' essays, only 5% have lexical complexity, i. e., a diverse, extensive vocabulary and precise use of specific concepts or terms. About 17% of students, while writing or speaking and thinking at the same time, are unable to synchronize their internal speech with its external expression. This is evidenced by texts in which the individual sentences are not separated from each other. Even though essays are dominated by sentences with their full structure and understandable out of context, there are quite a few statements with an incomplete sentence structure as well.

80% of all sentences are compound sentences, and most often they are complex sentences with one or two subordinate clauses.

This means that in the process of text-forming more attention is paid to the acquisition of text editing skills, so that the student learns to revise his written text and look for opportunities to improve it.

Student texts have an average of 9 to 10 punctuation errors, separating not only parts of sentences, but also detachments, coordinated parts of sentence, and so on. There are some texts in which the writer mostly uses simple extended sentences. This makes the content of the texts very simple; the thought moves slowly, it does not evolve and shows either a poor language or a reluctance to make mistakes (Anspoka, Martena, 2021).

If previous studies are dominated by errors in compound sentences with collateral subordinate clauses without a linking words (Analysis of Students' Achievements... in Text-Formation in the Centralized Latvian Language and Literature Examination: Situational Analysis and Recommendations, 2007; Gavriļina, Špūle, 2018), then the 2018-2021 study is dominated by errors in complex sentences with one or two subordinate clauses introduced

by conjunctions or linking words, in sentences with a participial phrase and parenthetic words or word groups. If in the above-mentioned study it has been revealed that 12% of writers have not made any mistakes in punctuation, then this study shows that there are only 5-6% of respondents like that (Anspoka, Martena, 2021).

There are 9% fewer punctuation errors in the texts of minority secondary school students compared to secondary school students of Latvian-language of instruction educational institutions and state gymnasiums. This can be explained by the fact that the texts have simpler syntactic constructions of sentences, as well as the students have acquired the ability to transfer the experience gained in the syntax of the mother tongue to the state language. In teaching grammar, teachers do not have enough understanding of the functionality of grammatical forms, especially the significance of grammatical categories of the verb (grammatical semantics), application differences and purpose in informative and literary texts.

If, from the point of view of the content, composition and style of the text, there are no statistically significant differences between the students of Latvian language of instruction secondary schools and secondary school students of state gymnasiums and minority schools, then in terms of the spelling of words and word forms there are both common and different errors, as well as their causes. The number of errors also varies.

Spelling norms are fully observed by 2% of respondents, 1–2 spelling mistakes are present in 3% of respondents' texts. They are mostly students of Latvian-language of instruction secondary schools and state gymnasiums.

The highest number of orthographic errors (average 10 – 12 errors) is in the work of secondary school students of minority educational institutions. About 15% of all essays are texts with 20 or more errors.

In terms of the frequency the common orthography errors of students of Latvian-language of instruction educational institutions, state gymnasiums and minority educational institutions are as follows: spelling of words forms of verbs, use of short and long vowels in word roots and word forms, spelling of consonants in words and word forms, spelling of words written together or separately, spelling of foreign words, spelling of proper and compound nouns, and inadvertent errors.

It is important to note that in 48% of cases, there are punctuation errors in the essays and oral speech of secondary school students, which according to the Latvian language subject standard must be eliminated by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This means that there are no significant changes in the development of students' language proficiency in three years.

The observation of the pedagogical process shows that 10% of teachers do not feel confident about all grammatical issues, which means that teachers' grammatical competence is also a topical issue in practice.

## Discussion

The relatively low level of grammatical competence found in the study suggests that grammar cannot be a subject in itself, that a student is asked to learn from paragraph to paragraph. The teacher must incorporate the rules included in the paragraphs to the language heard in the classroom, at home, outside and on the street, integrate with the content of literature, paying attention to the affluence of language forms, diversity of meanings of different words and prefixes, synonyms, eliminate Russianism and Germanism, highlighting the Latvian culture of the language. The grammar book is not a goal, it is only a means to achieve the goal: correct, pure Latvian language (Bērziņa-Baltiņa, 1942).

A topical issue in grammar teaching is the balance between theory and practice. According to the guidelines of the education reform, the acquisition of all the most important grammar rules should be preserved in the curriculum, paying attention to the awareness of the purpose. Work on the language can also be continued in literature lessons. The use of language in practice shows that the grammar of the Latvian language cannot be considered as a by-product of learning the mother tongue, which a child acquires without learning in the same way when starting to speak their mother tongue. Acquisition of grammatical norms and regularities is not only a part of the curriculum, it is also an essential part of the development of logical thinking, just as culturally and grammatically accurate language is a part of an educated person's personality (Laiveniece, Lauze 2021; Laiveniece, 2003).

Purposeful work with the text is a topical issue. Texts to be used in the learning process are not directly intended for language acquisition (i. e., they are not adapted – shortened, simplified, supplemented – and they implement their intended functions: give instructions, entertain, warn, influence, etc.) and fit successfully in the thematic and grammatical framework of the learning process. The language cannot be acquired only with examples that have been specially created or adapted from authentic texts and that always represent an ideal language that complies with the language norm (Berra, 2020). Work on the language should be continued also in literature lessons, therefore a close connection between the Latvian language and literature has to be ensured.

At the end of basic school and in secondary school, the students themselves should be more actively involved in the acquisition of language phenomena, offering to study certain word forms, sentence constructions, selection of words, imagery, etc. in a variety of texts, including mass and social media texts frequently used on a daily basis. In this way, students would notice indirectly the value of the Latvian language application,

differences between advanced and elementary level language (Martena, 2021).

Exercising and constant revision of the previously acquired experience is a topical issue (systematic inclusion of both the content to be learned and what has already been covered in order to establish more sustainable skills).

The student's sense of language as the ability to feel, perceive emotionally and assess the application of language means should be promoted. In language teaching, the content should be chosen to help the student learn the issues necessary for their language practice, the methodology for linguistic terminology acquisition should be specified, so that more time is left for the acquisition of written speech and language culture. The work on language and other errors is a topical issue, focusing not only on mistakes, but also on successes, good speech patterns.

The co-operation of teachers of all subjects and the attitude of each teacher towards their own language and speech are important in order to ensure the quality of text-formation teaching.

## Conclusions

Grammar is a branch of linguistics that studies the grammatical system of a language. Grammatical competence can also be reduced to language competence, which is characterized by the ability to present content according to the topic, to observe the conditions of text composition, sentences, their sets or contextual connection, language style suitable for the communicative task, to observe norms of language culture.

In order an individual would be able to use the language in a qualitative way, the application of punctuation or certain graphic signs – punctuation marks to separate grammatical or conceptual units of expression in writings, is an important issue. Looking at the use of punctuation, it is also possible to judge how logically the author's thought is directed and the ability to express it in the written speech.

An individual with good, reasoned judgment, wide, varied and accurately used vocabulary is also considered as proficient user of the Latvian language.

As the level of students' language competence has decreased in recent years, the methodology of teaching grammar needs to be reviewed. Grammar cannot be a subject in itself. Grammar lesson is not a goal, it is only a means to achieve the goal: correct, pure Latvian.

The balance between theory and practice is a topical issue in grammar teaching. Acquisition of all the most important grammar rules has to be preserved in the study content, paying attention to the awareness of its purpose.

Work on the language should be continued also in literature lessons, therefore a close connection between the Latvian language and literature has to be ensured.

Authentic texts should be used in the learning process, as the language cannot be learned only with examples that have been specially created or adapted from authentic texts.

Turn grammar lesson into an interesting but serious “game” in an atmosphere of natural and positive emotions. Both in the basic school stage and in the secondary school, the students themselves should be more actively involved in the acquisition of language phenomena, offering to study certain word forms, sentence constructions, selection of words, imagery, etc. in a variety of texts, including mass and social media texts frequently used on a daily basis.

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