

TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM IN ENSURING MINORITY STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC WELL-BEING DURING THE LEARNING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

In light of recent changes in Latvian education policy mandating the provision of pre-school and school education in the official language, this study explores the necessity for teachers to develop new competences for working in ethnically and linguistically diverse groups.

The aim of this study is to identify the real professional needs of teachers to help minority students to achieve well-being, both when learning Latvian language and when using it in other school subjects.

The methods applied in this study draw on research examining how student well-being influences learning outcomes and inclusion in education (Nimante, 2021; Marsh et al., 2020; Svence, 2020; Elksne & Rubene, 2018) as well as on lingvodidactic theories (Martena, 2021; Nanquil, 2021; Fanany, 2018; Anspoka, 2016).

Empirical data were collected through a survey of 162 pre-school and primary school teachers and six focus group discussions involving 109 participants. This approach offered a deeper insight into teachers' understanding of the issue under investigation and their professional needs.

The results of the study indicate that teachers do understand the concept of linguistic well-being and recognise its importance in the educational process. However, to foster it, teachers need greater engagement from parents and society, as well as access to teaching and methodological tools and learning environments that support the differentiation and individualisation of teaching methods and work organisation. Furthermore, assessment methods for learning achievements should encourage students to learn the language of instruction and to use it regardless of their current level of proficiency.

The results are significant because they provide insights into the specific needs of teachers working with pre-school and primary school students from minority language backgrounds and promoting their linguistic well-being. Teachers need to support students in accessing educational content in the official language, Latvian, while also helping them improve their proficiency in it.

Keywords: *educational content, language anxiety, language teaching/learning, linguistic well-being, multimodal text*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of ongoing change and both social and individual stress, well-being is grounded in the psycho-emotional state of the individual – characterized by self-acceptance, satisfaction with one's environment and current circumstances, and positive relationships with others (Marsh et al., 2020; Svence, 2020; Fanany, 2018; Elksne & Rubene, 2018). Well-being is an important area of focus both in society at large and within specific contexts, including the educational process. Depending on how good or poor the sense of well-being is in a given situation, it can influence various aspects in the quality of life, higher level of well-being opening up opportunities to achieve goals more effectively and experience greater emotional satisfaction (Eksne & Rubene, 2018; Nanquil, 2021; Fanany, 2018).

Since the language an individual uses in a particular social environment is closely linked to how effectively they can think, perceive, concentrate, and communicate with others who speak the same language, linguistic well-being, as a part of overall well-being, is an important concern. In the context of education, ensuring linguistic well-being has become particularly relevant in Latvia following the transition to a unified school system, where, regardless of the stage of education, teaching is conducted exclusively in the official language, in Latvian. For approximately 37.7% of students, however, Latvian is not the language spoken at home (Population by ethnicity and age group; 2011–2024 (at the beginning of the 2024)).

In accordance with Latvian education policy various factors determine the need to help teachers teach Latvian language as a school subject and to use Latvian as a tool of instruction for other subjects. This highlights the importance of providing conditions in which students can feel comfortable, experience positive emotions, and avoid stress or fear of speaking and making mistakes. It is essential that they feel supported rather than punished for what they have not yet mastered but are still attempting to do.

Although proficiency in Latvian as the official language has increased significantly in recent years, various trends suggest that its use among ethnic minorities does not correspond to the number of its speakers. In Latvia, the self-sufficiency of Russian, as the largest minority language, remains particularly evident in the public space, especially in cities with a high proportion of Russian-speaking residents (Druviete, 2024). This implies that the social environment, including the family, does not always provide sufficient support for the student's language learning process.

The first and most essential condition for fostering linguistic feeling and promoting linguistic well-being in the educational process is the psychosocial safety of the student. This is particularly important for students who lack a supportive environment outside the educational setting or who, for various reasons, experience discrimination, exclusion, or uncertainty about how to behave and communicate appropriately across different linguistic and cultural environments.

In the Latvian context, this issue has become especially topical following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Ukrainian children have been forced to live in a new country and adapt to an unfamiliar education system, often without prior exposure to the Latvian

language. The situation is also relevant for those Latvian students with a minority language background who were not emotionally and cognitively prepared for the gradual shift to instruction in the official language.

Another key aspect of supporting linguistic well-being is the use of purposefully planned pedagogical resources that meet learners' linguistic and developmental needs. It is equally important that teachers are prepared to manage overlapping responsibilities – not only supporting the acquisition of subject content, but also integrating appropriate language tools into the learning process.

At the same time, attention must be paid to psycho-emotional state, ensuring that students feel secure and motivated to use the language of instruction. Language should not become an obstacle to learning content; instead, it must be understood and used – through speaking, reading, and writing.

The well-being of students in learning is a complex issue. It has already been addressed in several studies (Nimante, 2021; Marsh et al., 2020; Svence 2020; Elksne & Rubene, 2018). However, they are more concerned with the psychological or social aspect.

The aim of this study is to focus on the pedagogical aspect and to identify the real professional needs of teachers to help minority students to achieve well-being, both when learning Latvian language and when using it in other subjects.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained by utilising semi-structured questionnaires administered via Google Forms for 162 pre-school and primary school teachers of and six focus group discussions involving a total of 109 participants. The survey questions were open-ended, except for the most general questions about teachers' education and work experience. This provided a deeper insight into teachers' understanding of the issue under investigation and their professional needs.

Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers participating in a professional development programme, involving 57 pre-school teachers and 52 primary school teachers. The participants worked either in pre-school groups or primary education classes with an average of 82% of students with a minority language background, or with 2–10% of such students. This variation in the proportion of minority students reflects whether the teachers worked in former minority education institutions or in schools where Latvian has consistently been the language of instruction.

Code of Ethics

Teachers were informed that they would be participants of the research and would be asked to provide their observations, opinion on the importance of minority student's well-being in the learning process and what teachers' real needs are to ensure it.

The General Data Protection Regulation and ethical considerations were respected and the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Latvia (January 11, 2023; Nr. 71-46/12).

A mixed-methods research design was used, as quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted using theories related to the research subject. This enabled more detailed answers to the research questions (Nimante, 2021; Marsh et al., 2020; Svence 2020; Elksne & Rubene, 2018; Martena, 2021; Nanquil, 2021; Fanany, 2018; Anspoka, 2016).

Data Collection and Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods have been used in the analysis of the data obtained in the study. The results were ranked and expressed as percentages, depending on the number of responses, and interpreted in relation to the purpose of the study.

The importance of this research lies in the need to strengthen the professional competence of pre-school and primary school teachers in practice – specifically, how to promote student learning achievements and their proficiency in Latvian as the official language by supporting the linguistic well-being of students from minority language backgrounds.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do teachers understand what linguistic well-being is and what role it plays in the educational process?
2. What real help teachers need for support the linguistic well-being of students with a minority language background?

Results

An essential first step towards supporting teachers in strengthening the linguistic well-being of their students in an evidence-based way was to explore their understanding of the concept. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed electronically, with responses received from 162 pre-school and primary school teachers. The question on linguistic well-being was open-ended, allowing teachers to respond freely. Content analysis of the responses focused on the part that revealed how teachers interpret the concept.

According to the findings, 97.5% of both pre-school and primary school teachers described linguistic well-being as a positive internal state – a sense of satisfaction or comfort in situations where the individual perceives information, feels they understand it, or can speak, read, or write freely as needed. This suggests that most respondents are familiar with the term and understand its meaning. However, more than half also noted that the term is rarely used in educational practice and that relevant theoretical literature is lacking.

Only 154 respondents answered the follow-up question on whether linguistic well-being is important in the learning process. Among them, 67.8% acknowledged its importance, but admitted that, due to high workloads and competing priorities, they do not address it explicitly in their work. This is already a serious problem and suggests that more attention should be paid to it in teacher training and in-service training programmes.

To gain deeper insight into teachers' understanding of linguistic well-being and its role in the educational process, it was important to explore whether they actively seek information on the topic and what aspects remain unclear to them.

Table 1 Linguistic well-being in the learning process

Awareness and interest in linguistic well-being	Share and count of teacher responses	
	%	<i>n</i>
Fully understand the concept	97.5	158
Recognise importance of the linguistic well-being	67.8	110
Interested in topic and open to learning more	44.7	72
Not interested in the topic	55.3	90

The following patterns emerged from the responses:

- 44.7% of teachers expressed a strong interest in the issue and reported regularly seeking information on how to ensure that language does not become a barrier to learning or daily communication within the educational process. These respondents believe that linguistic well-being can be enhanced when students receive targeted support in the learning process, tailored to their actual needs.
- The remaining 55.3% did not consider these questions relevant or in need of attention. It is assumed that these respondents have limited interest in the topic. This may be explained by the fact that linguistic well-being has only recently begun to receive attention within the Latvian education system and that research on the issue remains limited.

An overview of the collected data is given in Table 1.

To explore teachers' professional needs related to working in ethnically and linguistically diverse classes and promoting the linguistic well-being of students in practice, a panel discussion was organised. It involved 57 pre-school and 52 primary school teachers (109 participants in total), who were invited to freely express their most pressing professional needs. The responses were analysed by frequency, and only those reflecting a new or distinct aspect were isolated and ranked.

Among all the professional needs identified by teachers, greater family support emerged as the leading concern (reported in 72.4% of responses). Teachers believe that families play a crucial role in building a language-rich environment. This can happen in several ways – by providing opportunities to use the language at home and other immediate surroundings, by actively engaging in the learning process, by encouraging their children to learn the language, and, where possible, by arranging additional support such as private tutoring. Additionally, teachers noted that many parents place sole responsibility for language acquisition on pre-schools and schools, without recognising that effective language learning requires more than formal education – particularly given the large number of children in each class or group, where individual support for every child is difficult to provide. At the same time, teachers also believe that targeted activities with the family are important. There is a lack of ideas for this work. Often they are only episodic. According to teacher surveys, on average, 80% of students with a minority language background primarily use Latvian only during lessons, while during breaks and in their free time outside school communication typically takes place in the language of

their minority group. Moreover, Latvian-speaking peers often do not support the use of Latvian in these peer interactions, and since they generally do not speak Russian or other minority languages, English is often used as a common means of communication. To support students from minority language backgrounds in acquiring educational content across different subjects in Latvian, the professionalism of teachers is crucial. This entails understanding needs of students and planning for both language acquisition and its integration into the educational process, especially in contexts where language proficiency, speech development, emotional experiences, and social backgrounds vary.

In addition to learning-related challenges, teachers also face social, psychological, and emotional issues that require attention. Respondents indicated that they themselves often need support to maintain their own psychological and emotional well-being. Without such support, teachers may experience burnout, reducing their capacity to ensure both overall and linguistic well-being for their students.

The second most frequently mentioned professional need (reported by 62.1% of respondents) was the availability of teaching and methodological tools for pre-school and primary school levels. Teachers highlighted the need for materials that integrate subject content with vocabulary and grammatical forms across disciplines. Such integration supports more sustainable learning, increases student confidence in their knowledge and skills, and encourages safer, more fluent language use.

The need for a wider variety of games, as well as descriptions of research and project-based tasks that can be used across subject areas was also expressed. These activities would allow students to experience more positive emotions and moments of spontaneous engagement – including humour – while working in pairs or groups and using language to learn content.

Additionally, teachers emphasised the importance of arranging the physical classroom or group environment in a way that allows to plan and organise their work in diverse ways. This often requires specific equipment, visual aids, and supplementary books or materials. They noted that varying organisational forms and teaching methods significantly affects student motivation to learn. For example, outdoor games and exploratory activities in the surrounding environment can encourage students to use the language of instruction and reduce their fear of making mistakes.

Another important area, mentioned by 54.3% of respondents, was the methodology for assessing and self-assessing learning outcomes. Teachers stressed that the objectivity of assessment plays a critical role in both overall and linguistic well-being of students. They pointed out that traditional evaluation practices – where performance is judged primarily by the number of mistakes – remain a challenge. Frequent correction of misused words or forms can discourage students from speaking or writing, particularly if they are still developing their language proficiency. Yet it is widely recognised that making mistakes is a natural and necessary part of language learning. To encourage students to speak without fear of making mistakes, timely and supportive teacher feedback is essential – it forms the foundation for successful language development.

An overview of teachers' professional needs for successful pedagogical process that supports linguistic well-being of students is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Professional needs of teachers for supporting linguistic well-being of students in the educational process

Professional needs reported by teachers	Share and count of responses	
	%	<i>n</i>
Targeted activities in partnership with the family	72.4	79
Additional teaching materials and methodologies; suitable and diverse learning environment	62.1	68
Improved methods for evaluating and self-assessing learning achievements	54.3	59

The data obtained in the empirical study confirm the complex nature of linguistic well-being, which is rooted in a respectful attitude towards the student, regardless of their health status or level of language proficiency. Since linguistic well-being is also shaped by a student’s character and by both external and internal motivation to participate in the educational process including speaking, responding, asking questions, and seeking clarification. Teachers must be able to identify ways to support each student’s engagement in learning. This includes selecting appropriate methods to promote both subject-specific learning and language development in a mutually reinforcing way.

Discussion

Linguistic well-being is a psycho-emotional state in which an individual:

- feels comfortable in general and with themselves when using language – is confident in their ability to communicate, express thoughts and beliefs, and achieve other communicative purposes;
- is able to perceive the cultural context embedded in a particular language;
- can use appropriate speech behaviour that aligns with verbal and non-verbal norms, cultural expectations, and established patterns of interaction, including speech etiquette – the social rules of language use that guide communication and help affirm one’s identity within a specific social environment;
- can acquire knowledge in a particular field through language, and understand, formulate, and demonstrate it as needed (Nanquil, 2021; Martena, 2021; Anspoka, 2016; Fanany, 2018).

This means that linguistic well-being is not only a linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical construct, but also a socio-emotional and cultural one. It cannot be achieved by focusing solely on a language proficiency or the use of appropriate language tools in the educational process. Linguistic well-being must be considered in relation to a broader set of components.

First, linguistic well-being is influenced by overall physical and mental harmony, emotional state, and cognitive abilities. Second, it is shaped by the motivation to learn and attitude towards the language of instruction. Linguistic well-being is more likely

to develop in a stable and sustained way when a student has stable physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being, maintains a positive attitude toward their environment – including the language of instruction – and has opportunities for recognition and affirmation (Svence, 2020; Nanquil, 2021; Seligman, 2011).

One of the most significant obstacles to linguistic well-being is language anxiety, which is characterised by feelings of unease, vague fear, and agitation (Nanquil, 2021; Martena, 2021). Anxiety of this kind hinders the ability to engage fully in learning activities, especially when oral performance is required in front of others.

Anxiety may be triggered by several factors. These include interpersonal dynamics within the group or class that make the student feel physically or emotionally excluded, or a mismatch between the content or methodology of instruction and the level of language proficiency. In particular, anxiety can be intensified by educational materials that exceed the linguistic level appropriate for the learner, by disproportionate expectations from the family regarding learning outcomes, as well as by psychological conditions and physiological responses to stressful situations.

In such a state, learners are often unable to regulate their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions sufficiently to engage purposefully in learning. When self-regulation is well developed, students may find ways to learn and reach their goals independently. However, when self-regulation is limited – as is often the case in pre-school and primary school – support from adults, particularly teachers, becomes essential.

In recent years, the psychological aspects of language learning – alongside other key educational concerns – have received increasing attention. These include the learner's emotional state, motivation to learn or use the language, self-confidence, ability to regulate emotions and manage stress, the emotional climate within the group or class, support from teachers and others, and national and societal attitudes toward language and education (Martena, 2021).

Linguistic well-being is also enhanced by the academic achievements of students and an objective assessment of their performance (Marsh et al., 2020; Seligman, 2011). It is important that students do not feel different from their peers, and that language does not become a barrier to mutual communication.

When a group or class includes both native Latvian speakers – who have used the language at home or in other natural-language environments since birth – and students from minority language backgrounds, linguistic anxiety may arise. A minority language student may know an answer or idea in their mother tongue but choose not to express it in Latvian, either because they are unable to do so or fear making mistakes, thus avoiding a potentially uncomfortable situation.

While native speakers have typically developed so-called *internal grammar*, minority students often need explicit support in learning pronunciation, word formation, grammatical agreement, and correct use of common expressions in Latvian. However, such support must be provided in a way that avoids causing discomfort or embarrassment (Anspoka, et al., 2023).

It is therefore important to strengthen the relationship between content and language, as students with a minority language background benefit most from a consciously planned and integrated approach to language learning and language use (Martena, 2021).

Active, non-compulsory engagement is essential for school students. For this reason, games and playful activities are especially relevant at pre-school and primary school stages. During play, children dialogues tend to be longer and more elaborate, and their interest is sustained by the roles they assume, the storylines they follow, and the materials they use (e.g., toys) (Stangaine, 2014).

In addition to written texts from books or other sources, multimodal texts play an important role. These allow learners to engage with not only verbal content but also images, audio, video, digital tools, interactive features, and animation. As a result, the learning process becomes more varied and more easily adapted to the needs of language learners, while also fostering a sense of security. Working with a combination of texts, images, sound, movement, and digital tools can facilitate comprehension and increase active participation in the learning process.

When giving instructions, asking questions, or providing explanations, teachers' language and speech should be intentional and well-structured. Language anxiety can be reduced when teachers prioritise the development of linguistic flexibility and fluency, rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy or subject content (Martena, 2021).

Teachers, who are familiar with the principles of inclusive education and their practical application are generally more successful in building emotional connections, fostering a positive environment in the class, and identifying or preventing student anxiety (Nīmanīte, 2021). In the educational process, it is essential to build and maintain an environment where students not only acquire knowledge and skills but also develop their intellectual capacities, build confidence in their personal strengths, and form a sense of values (Svence, 2020).

Additionally, support from teachers, effective cooperation with parents and school support staff, and student belief that their mother tongue and cultural background are respected are equally important.

Conclusions

- Pre-primary and primary school teachers involved in the study described linguistic well-being as a positive internal state – a sense of satisfaction or comfort in situations where the individual perceives information, feels they understand it, or can speak, read, or write freely as needed. 97.5% of teachers consider well-being as a vital role for individual's quality of life and for learning/teaching goals.
- At the same time, 67.8% of respondents say that it is very difficult to think about the linguistic well-being of each student in the teaching process, as there are many other tasks to be tackled in lessons. There are also respondents who say that linguistic well-being is under-researched in Latvia and teachers lack the necessary experience.

- Among the most important professional needs of teachers, they stress the importance of targeted activities in partnership with the family, additional teaching materials and methodologies; suitable and diverse learning environment and methods for evaluating and self-assessing learning achievements.
- Overall, the study confirms that promoting linguistic well-being requires a systemic approach. This involves not only improving professional competences of teachers and providing them with appropriate resources (such as teaching materials and methodologies) but also strengthening cooperation with families and ensuring a supportive and emotionally safe school environment.

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