Acquisition of Latvian as a Foreign Language in Latvia: Development and Trends

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Abstract: Restoration of independence of Latvia in the 1990’s allowed to open a new page in the history of acquisition of the Latvian language. Alongside the field of acquisition of the Latvian language as the mother tongue and the Latvian language as a second language there emerged a need to establish a new field of language didactics – acquisition of the Latvian language as a foreign language. Although every year the number of foreigners who come to Latvia not only for studies but also for professional and personal goals, has been increasing, there is still a lack of summarised researches made on this field and its development. The purpose of the article is to provide an overview of learning Latvian as a foreign language in Latvia, emphasising the development of this field nowadays.

As the main method of this research, contact interviews with teachers who have obtained rich experience in this field have been used in order to receive information on the various organisational and pedagogical issues related to this area. Full-time Bachelor’s or Master’s degree-seeking foreign students who are studying in some of the Latvian universities very often acquire the Latvian language for professional purposes. This means that frequently they are able to use the Latvian language in some professional field well known to them, but cannot communicate in simple everyday situations. This paradoxical situation is largely determined by the number of hours provided for learning the Latvian language in a particular university. Often foreigners have admitted that they lack the motivation to learn the Latvian language due to the lack of language environment. Instead of Latvian you can hear Russian in everyday situations, and Latvians often start speaking English in conversation with foreigners. Another important reason is that foreign students live in their closed community and do not meet any Latvian friends or acquaintances who could help them in the process of learning the Latvian language. These are very important findings which should be taken into considerations.

Keywords: Latvian language, foreign language, adult education.

Introduction

After Latvia regained its independence in the 1990’s, foreigners’ interest in Latvia increased. The first foreign students came to our country to study in some of the full-time study programs. Thus, in some Latvian universities, it was necessary to organise practical Latvian language courses. But after the accession of Latvia to the European Union, the Latvian language became competitive in the European language family, and every year there is a noticeable increase not only in the number of exchange students but also in the number of foreign students who want to get higher education in Latvia, studying in one of the Latvian higher education institutions. From author’s experience over time, foreigners went to Latvia in search of work, for which reason there was an increase in the demand for practical Latvian language learning in various informal courses, summer schools, and self-study courses. In this way, alongside the field of acquisition of the Latvian language as the mother tongue and the Latvian language as a second language there emerged a need to establish a new field of language didactics – acquisition of the Latvian language as a foreign language (Šalme, 2011). Although every year the number of foreigners who come to Latvia not only for studies, but also for professional and personal goals has been increasing, there is still a lack of summarised researches made on this field and its development.

Although learning Latvian as a foreign language in Latvia is now a very topical issue, there is still a lack of summarised theoretical studies made on acquisition of Latvian as a foreign language, organisation of teaching and learning processes in this field in Latvia, traditions of teaching and learning Latvian as a foreign language, modern practices, as well as the development of this field in future.

A composite reference material on the opportunities to learn the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia and other European higher education institutions was created in 2007 under the guidance of A. Salme (Šalme, 2008).

In 2011, the research paper by A. Salme Basic Issues of Acquisition of the Latvian Language as a Foreign Language (Šalme, 2011) was published, which is the first attempt to gather information on the field of acquisition of Latvian as a foreign language.
In recent years, more attention has been paid to the issues of learning Latvian as a foreign language, and these issues have been addressed in conference presentations and scientific publications.

Over the years, a good experience in practical Latvian language teaching has been accumulated while teaching Latvian as a foreign language not only in Latvia but also outside the country. Several educational materials have been issued, including textbooks designed for users of different languages, for example, Latvian language textbooks for Germans, Finns, Estonians, Lithuanians, Japanese. In recent years, the practice to create modern learning materials for different levels of language acquisition (the set of textbooks and workbooks Laipa) has developed also in Latvia (Laipa, 2014).

The purpose of the article is to provide an overview of learning Latvian as a foreign language in Latvia, paying attention to the organisational and pedagogical issues, as well as emphasising the development of this field nowadays and other issues which are frequently faced in the educational process.

Methodology

This article is part of a broader study about development of the Latvian language as a foreign language both outside and within Latvia. In order to obtain as much information as possible and to be able to describe the development of this sector, use was made not only of the abovementioned studies, but also of personal interviews. Since people can learn Latvian as a foreign language not only in Latvia but also abroad, lecturers for the interview were selected from among those who teach Latvian language in higher education institutions both in Latvia and abroad.

In Latvia there are more than 10 institutions of higher education where foreign students are studying both in exchange programs and full-time study programs, therefore from each educational institution at least one teacher or one administrative clerk, who could tell about the organizational and pedagogical issues relating to the practical learning of the Latvian language, was selected.

Methods: The form of interview was chosen to be a structured interview. During the interview, respondents were asked questions of both organisational and pedagogical nature. Organizational questions were asked in order to discover the mother country of students; whether they are exchange students or full-time students; how the number of students has changed in recent years; since when the particular educational institution teaches Latvian language; what is the number of lessons that is being offered by the particular educational institution for obtaining Latvian language; what motivates the students to learn Latvian language. Questions of pedagogical nature were asked in order to obtain information regarding the teaching aids used in the language acquisition process; difficulties arising from the learning process of Latvian language; tasks, methods and approaches that are used in Latvian language lessons, as well as the role of grammar in learning Latvian language as foreign language.

Participants: During the course of the study, eight interviews with lecturers, who teach Latvian language as a foreign language in one of the higher education institutions in Latvia, were recorded, as well as e-mail correspondence with a number of administrative clerks, who work in one of the higher education institutions in Latvia, in which foreign students learn the Latvian language, was maintained. Both lecturers and administrative clerks are mostly women aged from 25 to 60 years. Teaching staff had both different degree and experience in teaching Latvian language as a foreign language. There are both highly experienced teaching staff, as well as brand new lecturers. Some of them have studied Latvian language as a foreign language not only in Latvia but also abroad.

Interviews were recorded in different places – in cafes, workplaces of the teaching staff, as well as in scientific events. Afterwards all of the interviews were transcribed, taking into account the rules of both orthography and punctuation, but transcription was made very close to the original.

Results and discussion

For more than 20 years it has been possible to acquire the Latvian language as a foreign language in the following higher education institutions of Latvia: University of Latvia, Riga Stradiņš University, Riga Technical University, Liepaja University, Rezekne Higher Education Institution, Daugavpils University, Ventspils University College, Vidzeme University, Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy, Latvian Academy of Culture, National Defence Academy of Latvia, Latvia University of Agriculture, Turiba University, and BA School of Business and Finance.
Universities of Latvia provide study opportunities to both foreign students who have come on exchange and foreign students who are studying in foreign students’ departments of Bachelor’s or Master’s programs in some of the Latvian universities. In a part of the universities, such as the University of Latvia, Riga Stradiņš University, and Riga Technical University, there are separate courses specially organised for Erasmus students and foreign students, while other universities, such as Liepaja University, Ventspils University College, and Turiba University, provide Erasmus students and foreign students with the opportunity to learn together in the same course.

The earliest traditions of organisation of courses for acquisition of the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia belong to the University of Latvia, Riga Technical University and Riga Stradiņš University, which offered Latvian language courses already in the early 1990’s, when the first foreign students from Lebanon, Syria, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Israel and other countries arrived in Latvia. Currently, foreign students both from various European countries and from distant and exotic countries, such as China and Brazil, are studying in higher education institutions of Latvia.

At the turn of the historically important 1990’s, the Contrastive Linguistics Department of the Foreign Languages Faculty of the University of Latvia responded to Norwegian students’ request to organise Latvian language courses in Latvia. In 1991, the University of Latvia established long-term cooperation with the US Professor Paulis Lazda, who brought to Latvia students of University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire so that they could complete Latvian language, ethnographic and cultural courses. Along with the cooperation with the University of Wisconsin, the Foreign Languages Faculty established good contacts with the University of Münster, where from 1988 to 2005 intensive Baltic language courses were organised (Žīgure, 2014, 38-39).

Although the University of Latvia has accumulated rich experience in teaching foreign students, most foreign students are currently studying at Riga Stradiņš University (E-klase, 2016), and most of them are full-time students of several study programs, which means that they will obtain the higher education in Latvia, unlike exchange students who spend in Latvia only a few months.

Section 56, Paragraph 3, Item 1 of the Law On Institutions of Higher Education stipulates that in cases where studies in an institution of higher education are implemented in any of the official EU languages (in Latvian institutions of higher education, it is usually English – I.L.), the mandatory scope of foreign students’ study courses should include acquisition of the national language if the studies in Latvia are expected to last more than 6 months or exceed 20 credit points (Augstskolu likums, 1995).

This means that almost every higher education institution in Latvia to which foreign students arrive, should offer a practical Latvian language course. However, each university itself may determine the number of hours and the desired content of the course program. For this reason, a rather paradoxical situation emerged in several Latvian institutions of higher education, for example, in Riga Stradiņš University, the University of Latvia and the Latvian Academy of Culture, where foreign students have to attend a professional Latvian language course instead of a practical Latvian language course. Foreign students study the programs Medicine and Dentistry in Riga Stradiņš University and the University of Latvia, and they need Latvian language skills to be able to talk to patients in the clinic. Unfortunately, within the number of hours allocated it is impossible to acquire the Latvian language both at a practical and professional level, which often results in absurd situations. As the number of hours is limited, the courses are focused on the professional language. This is the reason why foreign students are very often able to communicate with patients in the clinic, that is, to use the Latvian language in a specific sphere well known to them, but have difficulties in using the Latvian language or are unable to use it at all when it comes to everyday situations, such as conversation in a market, store or restaurant, since within the hours allocated these topics have not been studied. Unless a student has learned the language through self-education, he is unable to use the language in situes not related to his profession. Taking into consideration the empirical experience, it is possible to say that a similar situation is at the Latvian Academy of Culture, where foreign students are familiar with the music-related terminology, but often are unable to provide basic background information about themselves.

During the negotiations with lecturers who teach the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia (A. Rubene, personal communication in Riga Stradins University, January 15, 2016; S. Ozolīna, personal communication in Ventspils University College, May 15, 2016; L. Kļaviņa, personal communication in Turiba University, May 19, 2016; I. Tīpāns, personal communication in Riga
Technical University, October 13, 2016), as well as after consideration of the empirical experience, a number of issues has been revealed. One of the main issues is the students’ motivation. Those students who have to undertake an internship in Latvia, for example, in clinics, are motivated to learn the Latvian language. However, students of Riga Technical University or Ventspils University do not have this motivation, because they know they will be able to speak in English on their places of internship, and so learning Latvian only depends on their personal interest. Often students also recognise that in Latvia it is not necessary to use the Latvian language since the people are able to communicate in English and Russian, and very often Latvians switch to the English language in negotiations with foreigners, thus excluding the opportunity to integrate and practise the Latvian language sufficiently.

In a way, the closed environment of students induces the reluctance to integrate. Often they live in a closed community and go to visit each other, so they cannot even practise the Latvian language. This issue is also marked by P. Štolls, who teaches the Latvian language in the Czech Republic, stressing that Czech exchange students come to Latvia to practise the Latvian language, but the language practice depends on themselves. Often Latvian language practice is replaced by English language practice since students live in their closed community (P. Štolls, personal communication in Czech Republik, April 24, 2015). A similar view is also expressed by teachers in Latvia (A. Rubene, personal communication in Riga Stradins University, January 15, 2016).

When undertaking an internship in Latvian hospitals, foreign students have to face another issue related to very poor Latvian language skills of Russian-speaking patients. At times, Russian-speaking patients are not even able to answer the questions concerning their medical background in Latvian. In this case, the student who has mastered the Latvian language at a sufficient level to be able to communicate in a hospital faces the fact that in reality the Latvian language skills are not always sufficient for communication in Latvia. This issue should be elaborated on a larger scale, providing answers on how to improve the situation in the country in the field of national language training so as to make sure that foreign students are not confused about which language is the national language in Latvia.

People learn the Latvian language in Latvia not only for study and research purposes but also for professional and personal use. They are mainly representatives of mixed families who want to learn the Latvian language or foreigners who work in international companies such as Statoil and Evolution Latvia, where the working language is English and the Latvian language is studied to be able to communicate a little with the Latvian colleagues as well as to use Latvian in various everyday situations. Thus, the Latvian language is also learned in informal courses offered in various language schools in Latvia, as well as through self-education.

Conclusions

The valuable experience in teaching Latvian as a foreign language has been accumulated for more than 20 years. The number of higher education institutions where one can learn the Latvian language as a foreign language has also increased. Since the restoration of independence of Latvia, every year more and more foreigners arrive to our country, thus increasing the need for courses of the Latvian language as a foreign language and relevant learning materials, as well as for expanding non-formal education.

In recent years, several higher education institutions have been tending to learn the Latvian language for professional purposes. Unfortunately, not always a university can allocate a number of hours sufficient to achieve this goal, as a result of which foreign students often are able to use the language for business purposes but unable to use it in everyday situations.

Over time, foreigners’ motivation to learn the Latvian language has also changed. Foreigners often make statements that in Latvia it is not necessary to use the Latvian language, which could be due to the fact that many minorities lack the national language skills, which in turn creates a false picture of the country in which the foreigner is living. These are issues that should require serious attention also at the national level.

Since the knowledge of languages largely depends on a language learner’s motivation and a number of hours allocated to the learning process, it is necessary to determine the number of hours provided for acquisition of the Latvian language as a foreign language in individual higher education institutions. Also, our society should endeavour to make foreigners feel that the Latvian language must be known in
Latvia and help them to integrate into the society. It would also encourage the willingness of foreigners to learn the Latvian language.

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