

Respecting Learner's Cognitive Interests in the Process of Choosing a Theme for the Latvian Language Learning in Primary School

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Abstract: The potential of a learner for acquiring significant themes in Latvian literature is never fully utilized. Latvian language learning in primary school is related to sociocultural contexts. Skillfully chosen themes connected to linguacultural expression are the initiators of the communication process and the development of a learner's personality. Theme-related text broadens a learner's experience of the world, helps to comprehend regularities in language and promotes the use of them in different types of communication situations, stimulates use of language according to linguistics and speech-related cultural norms, and encourages understanding of language significance in personality development. The study provides theoretical and empirical research on the value of choosing a theme in Latvian language learning in primary school according to a learner's cognitive interests, primarily from perspective of a lingua communicative approach and a learner's active participation in the process of learning. The study was based on the qualitative design. Interview with school students of Grade 2-6 (in total 304) was organized over the period from March to April 2016. 15 classes were chosen randomly in institutions of basic education in the regions of Latvia, including three 2nd years, three 3rd years, three 4th years, three 5th years and three 6th years. Fifteen 3rd year students of the Pre-school and Primary School Teacher Professional Bachelor's Degree Programme of Riga Pedagogy and Education Management were involved in the collection of the data, who conducted a survey among pupils during their pedagogical practice. In total 162 girls and 142 boys participated in research. First year pupils were not included in the survey because the data were to be provided in writing. The pupils who participated in the survey were invited to express their opinion regarding two questions. The collected data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results from this study show that respecting a learner's cognitive interests, particularly ensuring participation in choosing a theme for a Latvian language lesson, is carried out episodically.

Keywords: language learning in primary school, cognitive interest, lingual-culture-oriented theme.

Introduction

The Guideline issued by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia for years 2014 – 2020 highlights the idea of education “as an organic component of our daily life – a deliberate choice and a hobby and not a burden or disappointment” (Education Guideline 2014 – 2020, 2013, 13). The highlights include the necessity to from teaching to learning, from authoritarianism to democracy, from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach, from passive participation to active involvement. “To be able to assure that people are ready to live and work in such dynamic time, education must be able to provide a maximum individualised environment for studying. Particularly, individualised approach is one of the biggest challenges in education” (Education Guideline 2014 – 2020, 2013, 96-97).

Similar ideas can be found in the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia for year 2030, which emphasises the idea of human ecology, the meaning of their aims, values, freedom, independence and responsibility in education (Latvijas ilgtspējīgas attīstības stratēģija, 2010).

The lingual-communicative approach is becoming more popular in language studies in the primary school in Latvia. According to this approach, improvement of communication, language, socio-cultural competence is moved to the foreground in the process of language studies. Key value in the process of language studies is assigned to the social and personal aspects of communication. A lingual-culture-oriented topic in language lessons is used as a trigger of speech activity and as a means for the acquisition of the cultural values implied in a language (Vulāne, Gavriļina, 2008; Anspoka, Tūbele, 2015).

As known, a language is not only a means for an individual's thinking, self-expression and communication in the process of learning the world, a language is “a symbolic form of existence of an individual which links the individual with the epoch, nation and tradition” (Humbolts, 1985, 9).

Personally significant learning is widely discussed idea in pedagogical and psychological researches (McWilliam, Taylor, 2012; McNeil, Reeder, 2012; Freiberga, 2013; Yeager, Henderson, 2014). The activity, action and behaviour of a school student are triggered and regulated by motives underlain by the individual's willingness to learn about and understand themselves and the world around them.

Action theory points to activity and meaningful participation as an important aspect of student learning. The relationships between the need to learn, motive for getting involved in an activity and achievement of the target make the sense of activity. The motive regulates the behaviour of the individual, shapes the attitude towards the subject of the activity, satisfies the need for attainment of the target (Wells, 2001; Леонтев, 2005; McNail, 2012).

The personality development theories highlight the idea that, in the early school age, the cognitive interests of the pupil are associated with the sociocultural environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). "Cognition, as a certain status of mental tension, involves effort, risk and uncertainty. In cognition, the individual assumes responsibility because they are the unique being in the world which strives for knowledge in line with their will" (Kūlis, Kūle, 1998, 538). Cognitive activity emerging from the pupil's own initiative, includes activity – studying, analysis, explanation of an object. The personal relevance of the acquired knowledge is increased by the emotional experience, thus identifying it as a subjective value (Dewie, 1979). Via personal sense, publicly relevant norms and cultural values concretise in the pupil's consciousness and become motives for their action and behaviour (Freiberga, 2013).

Pupil's cognitive interests and personally meaningful involvement into learning is a valuable learning tool for teachers. Carefully chosen theme and active participation involves providing opportunities for pupils to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject (Meyer, Jones, 1993). Found out, understood in a personally significant context, the content of language studies facilitates formation of sustained knowledge and skills.

The aim of the article – to investigate the cognitive interests of the younger school age children theoretically and empirically and to promote the discussion regarding respecting them in opting for the lesson topic in the process of Latvian language studies in primary school.

Methodology

The study was based on the qualitative design. Interview with school students of Grade 2-6 (in total 304) was organized over the period from March to April 2016. 15 classes were chosen randomly in institutions of basic education in the regions of Latvia, including three 2nd years, three 3rd years, three 4th years, three 5th years and three 6th years. Fifteen 3rd year students of the Pre-school and Primary School Teacher Professional Bachelor's Degree Programme of Riga Pedagogy and Education Management were involved in the collection of the data, who conducted a survey among pupils during their pedagogical practice. In total 162 girls and 142 boys participated in research. Year 1 pupils were not included in the survey because the data were to be provided in writing.

The pupils who participated in the survey were invited to express their opinion regarding two questions:

- 1) How often does your teacher involve the pupils in choosing the topic for the Latvian language lesson?
- 2) What would you like to think, read and write about in your Latvian language lessons?

Three alternative responses were proposed to the pupils as replies to the first question: often, rarely, almost never. In their response to the second question, the pupils were to describe their cognitive interests in a free form, defining the issues they are interested in. The collected data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results and discussions

Several problems were identified during the analysis of the pupils' experience with regard to their involvement in the selection of the Latvian language lesson topics. What caught attention primarily was the fact that after asking Question 1, the pupils in seven classes involved in the study, one school student from 3rd year, one from 4th, two from 5th, three from 6th, were surprised about the possibility to be involved in choosing the lesson topic (Figure 1). The quantitative evaluation of the data and analysis thereof according to the personality development theories, which highlight the conclusion that the need

for personally significant cognitive activity and activity in the process of studies prevail in the younger school age (Vigotskis, 2002; Rogoff, 2003; Cummins, Brown, 2007; McWilliam, Taylor, 2012), revealed that pupils are hardly ever or never involved in the choice of their Latvian language lesson topics.

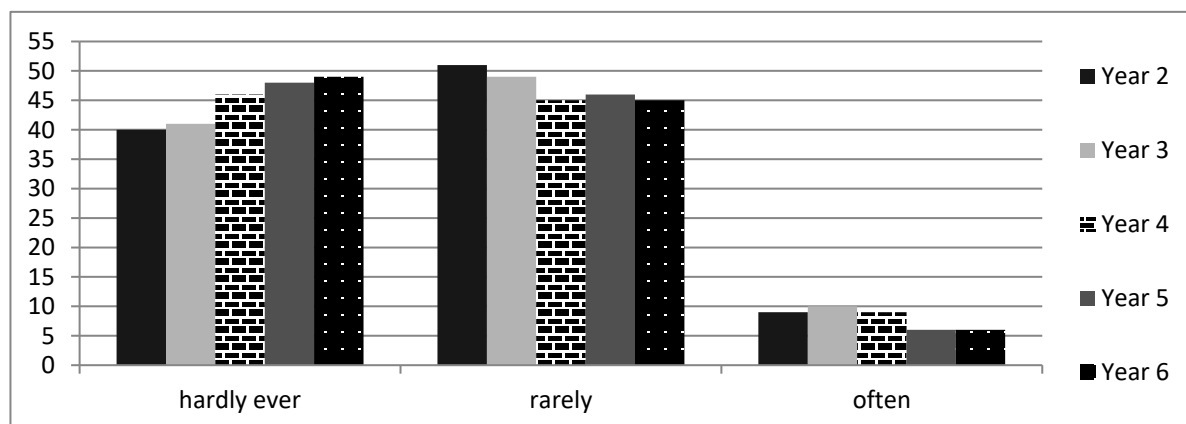


Figure 1. The answers of the respondents to the question “How often does your teacher involve the school students in choosing the topic for the Latvian language lesson?”

It is possible that seeing the school student’s initiative as a significant resource in learning/teaching is challenged in Latvia by the strongly established lingual-didactic traditions, such as use of the content of studies and the corresponding methodology developed within the framework of the structural approach in language teaching/learning in elementary school.

In the structural approach, the central element is the teacher who always knows best what the pupil wants to know and also in what sequence the pupil should acquire the content of their studies. The approach is mainly oriented at regulated learning about language. Uncritical “completion” of the course-books available at the school can often be seen in the pedagogical practice.

Teachers spend a lot of energy on planning measures to facilitate motivation in order to make their pupils interested in topics which are not topical or personally relevant for them. Consequently, the pupil learns about the language instead of widening their experience about the world within a topic which is significant for them and, in association with it, meaningfully discovering the regularities existing in the language subsystems – phonetics, vocabulary, word-building, morphology, syntax and stylistics. According to the linguocommunicative approach, a Latvian language lesson topic which corresponds to the cognitive interests of the pupils offers a natural, and not an artificially created context for language studies. The cognitive interest of the pupil becomes a natural motivator for learning activity. As known, grammar is not an isolated language phenomenon, it exists in association with the use of the language in a particular situation. The individual deals with their significant topics by learning to use the literary pronunciation and spelling standards meaningfully. The acquisition of language regularities within a topic which is significant for the pupil alleviates the degree of cognitive complexity of the content of studies and provides the studies with a wider, life-related context (Vigotskis, 2002; Cummins, Brown, Sayers, 2007; Anspoka, Tūbele, 2015). The lexical and grammatical role of sounds, letters, words, sentences and texts can be meaningfully understood in a concrete situation in which they are used.

To investigate the cognitive interests of the younger school age children, the pupils were asked to answer the 2nd question of the survey. The pupils were to state topics to be explored which are significant for them and which they would willingly think, read, write about or discuss during their Latvian language lessons. According to the theories regarding the development of an individual in interaction with nature, society, culture (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Rogoff, 2003; Humbolts, 1985), there are 3 significant thematic blocks in study curricula: human – nature; human – society; human-human. “Within a topic, the pupil learns to use language as a means of thinking, the systemic acquisition of the grammar of the language and understandings of the use of the language in various communication situations are easier within a topic” (Anspoka, Tūbele, 2015, 73).

The obtained data were analysed quantitatively, by structuring (according to percentage) the proposals of the pupils into 3 thematic blocks: human - nature, human - society, human - human (Figure 2).

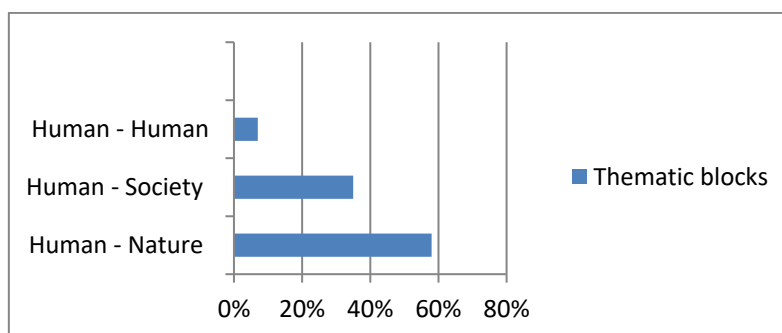


Figure 2. School students' cognitive interests by thematic blocks, percentages.

Then generalization was undertaken by grouping codes with similar meaning into one category (Mayring, 2007; Saldana, 2012). The Table 1 and Table 2 summarises the generalisations (categories) characteristic to the thematic block and the topics offered for exploration which reflect the interests of the pupils.

Table 1

The themes, which the school students prefer according to block *human-nature*

Categories	Examples of school students' responses
Outer space	<i>I would like to learn more about the outer space.</i> <i>What is the black hole?</i> <i>If there is a black hole, is there a white one?</i> <i>If there was nothing in the beginning, how did the Big Bang occur?</i> <i>How did the world appear?</i> <i>How did people appear?</i> <i>How many worlds are there?</i> <i>How did sky appear?</i> <i>What is the Universe, the Sun and the Moon?</i> <i>How hot is the Sun?</i> <i>How did the Earth appear?</i> <i>I want to know about all planets, their names!</i> <i>What is the black hole?</i> <i>Are there people on other planets?</i> <i>How did the Moon appear?</i> <i>Is there life in the outer space, on what planet?</i>
Categories	Examples of school students' responses
The beginnings / origination of the World	<i>I want to learn about the ocean and the animals living there!</i> <i>How do bees fly?</i> <i>How did Lake Vilकुmūižas appear? How did lakes, bogs, water and many people appear?</i> <i>How did the first animal appear? I want to know more about exotic animals living in other countries.</i> <i>How is milk made?</i> <i>How do precious stones and volcanos form?</i> <i>Why do cats purr?</i> <i>Are there any cave men in 2016?</i>
Experiments	<i>I want to know what happens if sugar, salt and petrol are mixed together. Will there be an explosion?</i> <i>I want to know what will happen if we go out and water flowers? How to grow flowers?</i> <i>How to make kvass, colour pencils and sulphuric acid</i> <i>How to make various items? How to make soap so that it floats? How are pasta, jelly cake with berries made?</i> <i>How long does it take to get tree sap?</i> <i>How are vitamins and medicines made?</i>

Categories	Examples of school students' responses
	<i>How is milk made?</i> <i>How does one invent a complex thing?</i> <i>How to swing? How is electricity made? How to make paint? How to purify dirty water?</i>
Human constitution	<i>How does my body look from inside?</i> <i>Why do humans have hair?</i> <i>Why do people not have wings?</i> <i>What are the parts of the body?</i>
Future	<i>What will I look like in 20 years?</i> <i>Who will be my wife?</i> <i>What will the world be like in the future?</i> <i>When the Sun explodes in the future, will the world go into the black hole? Will it be possible to live on other planets? Will the Sun destroy our planet?</i>
Healthy lifestyle	<i>What do E-substances mean in food?</i> <i>Why do teeth ache?</i> <i>How to live long?</i>
Science and technologies	<i>How to learn to multiply?</i> <i>I want to know everything about chemistry. I like making experiments. I even made an experiment at home! Regardless of some trouble, it was great fun!</i> <i>How to design a car?</i> <i>How to program?</i> <i>How does water get to the tap from a well?</i> <i>I want to find out about chemistry sooner!</i> <i>How to make a laser sword?</i> <i>I want to learn how to use multiplication and division.</i> <i>How do such heavy-weight aeroplanes hold up in the air?</i>
God	<i>I want to know about God!</i> <i>Does God exist?</i> <i>How did God appear?</i> <i>Where does God get strength from?</i> <i>If one does not believe God, will they go to hell?</i> <i>Is God real?</i> <i>What did God appear from?</i>

The school students involved in the survey are very good at stating the topics they are interested in. Only 4 % find it difficult, mainly due to spelling/orthography difficulties. A more in-depth investigation revealed that they are mainly school students of the second year. 64 % of the school students demonstrate versatile interests by offering various sets of topics to be explored. As can be seen in the Table 1 and Table 2, the percentage for the cognitive interests of pupils is for the thematic block "Human – Nature" (Table 1) and "Human- Society" (Table 2). The younger school age pupils are least interested in topics related to relationships (Table 3). It should, of course, be taken into account that, according to the conclusions drawn by psychologists, there are two types of cognitive interests – situational and sustainable interest. By purposefully selected techniques, situational, spontaneous and unconscious cognitive interest of the pupil may be turned into sustainable. Situational interest is spontaneous, transient and associated with external impulses and their soon satisfaction. Sustainable interest implies the individual's ability to set cognisable topics which are significant for them and motivation to satisfy the cognitive need (Schraw, Flowerday, 2001). Examples of sustainable interests of the school students can be seen in 42 % of the responses provided by the respondents. Most of the responses have been received from school students of years 4, 5 and 6. School students state their essential questions in greater detail by asking additional questions, such as "*Will I be a millionaire? What should be done to earn well? How can money be washed? How is money produced?*"; "*I would like to know more about chemistry. I like making experiments. I even made an experiment at home! Regardless of some trouble, it was great fun!*"; "*I would like to learn more about the outer space. What is the black hole? If there is a black hole, is there a white one? Can a human breathe in the outer space without a space-suit?*" The sets of questions offered by the school students associated with one topic allow to assume that the

topic has not attracted the pupil's interest incidentally, they have been thinking about it, and the question they have asked attracts them from various aspects.

Table 2

The theme, which school students prefer according to block *human - society*

Categories	Examples of school students' responses
History	<i>I am interested in ancient things and events. I want to learn about history because one can learn many new things from the ancient times.</i> <i>If someone was punished in the ancient times, was the punishment always fair?</i> <i>In what year did the first television appear?</i> <i>What ancient items have been found in our town?</i> <i>How much time has passed since the appearance of Czech Republic?</i> <i>How was it in Latvia in 1932?</i> <i>Why did dinosaurs die out?</i> <i>How did the USSR appear?</i> <i>History of music because that is what I know much about already.</i>
Language learning	<i>I want to learn other languages to be able to understand foreign languages better.</i> <i>I want to learn how to understand animal language</i> <i>Why do nouns and adjectives differ? Why have parts of speech been invented at all if they are the same words anyway?</i> <i>What is the longest word in Latvian?</i> <i>How to understand a difficult text? How did people learn to speak?</i>
Countries/cultures	<i>I would like country lessons, I am interested in what people do in other countries?</i> <i>How many countries are there in the world? How did national flags appear? I am interested in world events. How many people are there in the world?</i>
Traditions/literature	<i>I want to know who invented these fantasies about Santa Claus and Tooth Fairy.</i> <i>What is Nikņiķis, is he and invented character, where does he live? Why do I need to know about him?</i> <i>How can rabbit dye eggs if my Mom dyes but kind of does not hide?</i> <i>Why do people dye eggs and swing on Easter?</i> <i>Why does Santa Clause not exist? Why are gifts given on Christmas?</i>
Culture/art	<i>I would like to learn more about the art of acting.</i> <i>I am interested in art, design of clothing!</i> <i>How to make cartoons?</i> <i>How to make decorations? I want to learn how to do filming!</i>
Economics	<i>Will I be a millionaire?</i> <i>How to earn well? How can money be washed? How is money produced?</i>
Sports	<i>I want to know about various types of sport. I am interested in hip-hop.</i> <i>Who is the best football player in the world?</i>
Professions	<i>How to become a logger?</i> <i>How to become a good basketball player?</i> <i>What do I need to do to become an artist?</i> <i>I would like to learn about lawyers!</i>

Table 3

The theme, which school students prefer according to block *human relationship with others*

Categories	Examples of school students' responses
Relationship with family members	<i>How can you comfort a crying brother?</i>
Relationship with other people	<i>Why are some people bad?</i> <i>Why are there wars?</i> <i>Am I the only Tereze in the world?</i>

Categories	Examples of school students' responses
Relationship with teachers	<i>Why do teachers put marks?</i> <i>Why are you my teacher?</i> <i>What are the names of all the teachers in our school?</i> <i>Why does one need to do the homework given by the teacher?</i> <i>Why does one need to learn?</i>

Involvement of school students in choosing the topics for their Latvian language lessons is essential for various reasons. Primarily, it is an opportunity for the pupil to get experience in cooperating with the teacher and other pupils by getting assurance that their thoughts, ideas and proposed topics are a valuable and relevant resource for meaningful learning activities during lessons. The topic allows to create meaningful and purposeful interaction through language by offering versatile, communicative tasks in order to achieve a cognition target which is relevant for the pupil. Pupils should, of course, be involved in choosing the topics regularly. Systematic involvement of the pupil in planning the content and process of their studies creates a supportive, encouraging space that helps student feel comfortable to ask question that interested and important for him, to understand that learning is living.

Secondly, the identification of the pupils' ideas makes it easier for the teacher to develop the thematic plan based not only on the acquisition of the content of language studies, but provides opportunity for cross curricular learning. In such studies, the content of language studies and studies of other subjects becomes a means of dealing with issues which are relevant for the pupils and have socio-cultural significance (Moore, 2012). As it was mentioned, research shows that the cognitive interests of younger school age children are mainly associated with various topics related to natural sciences. According to the linguocommunicative approach, a real-life topic serves as a stimulus for language studies. Within a topic which is relevant for them, a pupil can learn to see and state problem-oriented questions, learn to use various sources of information and types of gathering information, acquire types of reading, various reading strategies, learn about the principles for analysis of texts of various genres and styles, improve their experience in summarising and structuring information for their needs as well as to present it to others and evaluate the accomplished within the context of a target which is significant for them. In accordance with the topic, lingua-culture oriented text broadens a learner's experience of the world, helps to comprehend regularities in language and promotes the use of them in different types of communication situations, stimulates use of language according to linguistics and speech-related cultural norms, and encourages understanding of language significance in personality development. On the level of a word, the pupil can meaningfully widen their vocabulary by learning concepts and terms which are essential in understanding the topic, can learn to use sources of reference to find out details about the meanings of words, perceive and understand the meanings of words in various contexts, and include them in their spoken and written language in communication situations adequately.

A topic which is significant for the pupil helps to see and understand why it is necessary to learn, and, thus, the willingness to learn arises out of an activity initiated by themselves. The pupil does not learn to acquire knowledge and skills, but acquires knowledge and skills in order to live to the utmost. Being aware of their cognitive interests influences the self-regulation of the actions and behaviour of the pupil and facilitates the formation of in-depth learning experience.

Conclusions

Respecting the pupil's individuality and their cognitive interests is a significant resource in the acquisition of the content of Latvian language studies in primary school. The study provides theoretical and empirical research on the value of choosing a theme in Latvian language learning in primary school according to a learner's cognitive interests, primarily from perspective of a lingua communicative approach and a learner's active participation in the process of learning. The results from this study show that respecting a learner's cognitive interests, particularly ensuring participation in choosing a theme for a Latvian language lesson, is carried out episodically. The potential of a learner for acquiring significant themes in Latvian literature is never fully utilized.

The conclusions drawn in the study suggest further theoretical and empirical research studies. One of the questions is cooperation and the initiative of a pupil in an open process of studies are to assure

formation of a systemic idea regarding the structure of a language? It would be useful to study the experience of teachers and analyse the content of study aids offered by various publishers from the point of view of pupils' cognitive interests. Thinking about the topical issues associated with the reforms in education (development of competence-based study content), the issues associated with the preparation of study aids are to be dealt with urgently. It would be particularly important to develop study aids which view the acquisition of the content of the studies of the Latvian language and other subjects in mutual connections, by assuring the development of the competences in a meaningful context which is associated with the life, cognitive interests and the socio-cultural environment of the pupil.

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