

## STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LITERACY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### Abstract

*The issue of linguistic literacy is relevant to modern society both in Lithuania and in other countries. Literacy is perceived not only as the ability to write and read; it is also understood in a much wider context, i.e. as a competence of every person determining human development. Linguistic literacy is the ability to express thoughts clearly, correctly, and logically, both orally and in writing. It is an essential skill in academic, professional, and social contexts. However, today's students increasingly face linguistic literacy issues caused by technological advancements, social media, and reduced reading habits (Lillis 2020). Another issue is the impact of information overload. The internet and social media provide quick access to a vast amount of information, often leading to superficial reading and a lack of critical evaluation. Students frequently struggle to identify reliable sources, negatively affecting academic writing and overall linguistic comprehension (Street 2009). However, the basis includes grammar, the knowledge of which determines the further development of linguistic literacy. This article analyzes the concept, importance, and challenges of students' linguistic literacy in today's society. It discusses key issues related to students' academic and everyday language use and suggests methods for improving linguistic literacy. Based on scientific studies, the development of linguistic literacy and its significance for professional and personal life are examined. The objective of this article is to reveal the level of linguistic literacy of first-year students studying in Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education. The sample of the research is 120 respondents who were filling the provided questionnaires anonymously. The research was carried out in 2024. In order to carry out and analyze the research a descriptive method was used which is applied for the discussion of scientific basis of analyzed topic presenting the theoretic assessment of the situation; a method of questionnaire survey which allows to collect information about the linguistic literacy of respondents; analytical method which helps to analyze and discuss the collected information. The survey for students studying Oral Hygiene as well as Dental Technology and Dental Care in the Faculty of Medicine of Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education has revealed that their linguistic literacy is not good and they make considerable amount of spelling and linguistic errors.*

**Keywords:** linguistic literacy, higher education, students, spelling errors, linguistic errors

### INTRODUCTION

Linguistic literacy is a relevant modern issue both in Lithuania (Vaišnienė 2014) and in other countries. One of the biggest problems is the lack of academic literacy. Students often struggle with writing academic papers due to a lack of critical thinking, clear argumentation, and knowledge of grammar rules. It has also been observed that spoken language often transfers into written communication, leading to informal expressions, incorrect sentence structures, and other stylistic errors in texts. Linguistic literacy should not be confused with basic literacy; in this article linguistic literacy is perceived as the ability to write, pronounce and express thoughts both in written and oral manner correctly; however, it is not analyzed as a general education (Dobržinskienė 2014). It is essential not only as a part of education and culture, but also as the retention of ethnic identity. After all, linguistic literacy demonstrates language as a live and respectable thing, and language is a basis of ethnic identity; when language dies, nation dies too (Crystal 2005). "It is necessary to understand that reading and writing is more than only the ability or capability. Literacy is associated with human self-respect, his/her activity and possibility to develop a particular personality, to become active citizen, employee or, finally, a good parent" (Dėl prasto raštingumo – signalas apie rimtesnes problemas 2015). It shows that this issue is relevant to everybody from the youngest to the eldest country citizen because according to R. Miliūnaitė

(2014), “language, all the diversity in the world, is a unique creation of humankind which allows us to transfer culture, experiences and values of different nations and countries from one generation to another. Therefore, we have to treat it carefully and deliberately because inordinately drastic leaps and revolutions create a possibility of miscommunication between different generations and gaps in society development“ (Dėl prasto raštingumo – signalas apie rimtesnes problemas 2015). Language is the survival of the nation. Linguistic literacy includes many fields of the language, however, its organization and understanding of the language begins with the knowledge of spelling, punctuation and language rules. It demonstrates “how much a person perceives the system of the language, how much he/she automates spelling skills and how flexible he/she is in language usage for the expression of thoughts.” (Dobržinskienė 2013).

It is assumed that this is affected by information technologies: people using them are writing texts without using the traditional spelling and punctuation rules, they do not preserve coherent contexture of the text, and the concept of the sentence is disappearing because thoughts are written disconnectedly and they are not being connected to one single text. Such version is often presented by school teachers (Miliūnaitė 2013); however, it is necessary to understand that our task is not to ignore new information technologies, but to learn ourselves and to teach others how to use it correctly. Even the general director of UNESCO I. Bokova (2015) highlights that “literacy is much more than an educational priority – it is the ultimate investment in the future and the first step towards all the new forms of literacy required in the twenty-first century.” It should be borne in mind that the usage of information technologies is closely related to social environment and communication peculiarities (direct communication is upstaged by interactive communication; it is also more entertaining to spend time playing computer games, listening to music and watching videos uploaded in various websites which usually are of a very low value, etc.); a significant role should also be imposed to educational system, especially programs of primary and basic education, which should also include aspects of literacy formation implemented in schools considering the changes in modern society. After all, rules of Lithuanian grammar have not changed, and now the diversity of learning forms is notably richer and more interesting, we have modern means, furthermore, internet provides different dictionaries, books, etc. (Dobržinskienė 2015). Considering the increasingly common issue of literacy in Lithuania, this article will include the analysis of knowledge in spelling and language culture gained before the specialty course of language in Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education of first-year students studying Oral Hygiene as well as Dental Technology and Dental Care in the Faculty of Medicine of Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education.

Therefore, the **objective** of this article is to reveal the level of linguistic literacy of first-year students studying in the Faculty of Medicine of Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education.

In order to reach the objective, the following **tasks** were set:

1. to discuss the relevance of linguistic literacy in modern society.
2. to analyze the results of spelling and language rule knowledge of first-year students studying in the Faculty of Medicine of Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education.

The **subject** of the research is the linguistic literacy of students studying Oral Hygiene as well as Dental Technology and Dental Care in Faculty of Medicine of Kauno Kolegija / Institution of Higher Education.

The sample of the research is 120 respondents who were filling the provided questionnaires anonymously. The research was carried out in 2024, i.e., this year students had left schools.

In order to carry out and analyze the research a descriptive method was used which is applied for the discussion of scientific basis of analyzed topic presenting the theoretic assessment of the situation; a method of questionnaire survey which allows to collect information about the linguistic literacy of respondents and its certain determining factors; analytical method which helps to analyze and discuss the collected information.

Received results presented in the article are relevant for the discussion about linguistic literacy because they show the knowledge of the part of Lithuanian students and gained basics of spelling and language rules essential for the future development of general literacy.

### AMOUNT OF SPELLING ERRORS INDICATES THE LEVEL OF LITERACY

Language literacy refers to the ability to use language correctly and meaningfully in various contexts, including every day, academic, and professional environments. This competence is increasingly important in a global knowledge society, where the ability to express thoughts clearly and with reasoning is considered one of the key indicators of education. Students' language literacy directly affects the quality of their studies and their ability to engage with the academic community.

Questionnaire for students included certain sentences and students were required to fill in the missing letters and to write certain words together or separately (a total of 83 position). However, not all of the students managed to accomplish this task completely. Another thing which should be mentioned before the discussion of this task results is the fact that frequently enough students do not even read the sentence carefully, they write letters mechanically and do not pay attention to the context of the sentence or its semantic expression. This phenomenon itself shows that people experience problems of focusing, they lack attention and do not want to think. Lack of focusing is especially common to the young generation which is only able to accept short Facebook-like information. Undeveloped attention may become a serious lifelong problem and cause negative consequences especially when having a job which requires attention, thoroughness and analytical thinking.

Presented task included two clear fields of Lithuanian language word spelling: spelling of nasal letters and writing of words together or separately. There were also words representing a few trickier long and short vowels.

After the analysis of the task accomplished by respondents it was noticed that they were making mistakes when writing nasal letters or long and short vowels, and when writing words together or separately. The biggest number of errors was 43 while the lowest number of errors was 13 (in 83 position).

Analyzing respondent errors, it was noticed that the most difficult words were *sūkūrys*, *gėstančia*, *kurgi*, which were written incorrectly respectively 82, 76 and 84 times. 58–40 times respondents made errors when writing letters in words *įgis*, *gesina*, *sudraskė*, *mašlus*, *įgrįsę* and when writing the following words together or separately: *ne laiku*, *kurgi*, *ne pakeliui*, *ne mažiau*, *vis dėlto*, *kaipmat*, *ne veltui*, *ne visada*, *netoli*.

Less difficult but not easy enough were the words *nutįsta*, *tįso*, *lęšių*, *stumdymąsi*, *žastikaulį*, *pasiskūsti*, *gražtai*, *sąžinė*, *surūdię*, *idėjas*, *surūgs*, *dygs*, *apžabalęs*, *negrasink*, *pasekmė*; *visgi*, *kitąkart*, *neverta*, *vis tiek*, *neetiška*, *tašyk* (30–20 incorrect cases). Respondents were best familiar with the spelling of words *įberk*, *aplinkkeliau*, *rungtynes*, *užtat*, *pasisavintas*, *tuoj pat*, *turbūt*, *sulysęs*, *įgrįsę*, *neima*, *maštė*, *ką nors*, *megztą suknelę*. These words were written incorrectly 20–5 times. Therefore, as it was mentioned before, it is not wise to associate the understanding of the spelling of different words with individual rules because errors were made in spelling of different words, i.e. errors were made when writing nasal letters, long and short vowels, and when writing certain words together or separately. The distribution of errors is very different and unpredictable. It can be concluded that middle link of education does not maintain the entity of Lithuanian grammar teaching, and it seems that teachers do not provide learners with enough time for repetition of spelling topics and explanation of errors even in cases when errors are made while teaching topics not associated with spelling. Consequently, it is necessary to find solutions and apply certain methods for this problem instead of leaving it by saying that it is necessary to change the rules and to facilitate the spelling of Lithuanian grammar.

## LINGUISTIC ERRORS – A GAP IN LITERACY

Student questionnaire also included 20 sentences where students had to find and correct linguistic errors. This task was more difficult and in order to accomplish it student needed to have a good knowledge of linguistic literacy. Sometimes teachers do not provide enough attention and time to language culture. However, if pupils do not know what they are learning it is also a problem because language culture knowledge is really specific and it could be distinguished from spelling, punctuation or other fields of Lithuanian language. If pupils do not understand it, it will be difficult for them to study in higher education institution because many of them understand language course of specialty as a continuous learning of Lithuanian spelling and punctuation; therefore, conception of language rules and distribution of linguistic errors have to be explained starting with elementary conceptions (Dobržinskienė 2015).

Considering this situation, it was difficult for respondents to find and correct linguistic errors. Least number of errors (5 errors) was made by 20 respondents. Actually, it is not a good result because the same result was mentioned when discussing spelling errors; however, in that case the task included 83 incorrect positions while this task included only 20 positions. Even the best respondents managed to accomplish only two thirds of the task. The most errors were done by the same respondents who made most errors in the first task. Some of them did not even accomplish or did not try to accomplish the task including language rules because they thought it is too difficult for them. The biggest number of errors was missed by the same respondent who had difficulties in spelling task: he made 18 errors or corrected irregular words and phrases incorrectly. Almost no respondents understand that phrase *didelis ačiū* is used incorrectly: from all respondents this phrase was corrected properly only by 5 students. This phrase which is usually heard and used in a spoken language is substandard and should not be used. After all, when we are expressing gratefulness or courtesy, we do not measure the word *ačiū* and we do not say that it is big or small; therefore, we can just say *nuoširdžiai dėkojame, labai ačiū*, etc. Most of the respondents thought that a phrase *pilnai suprantu* which is also heard in a spoken language is correct; however, it does not call for anything because it is a semantism, i.e., a phrase used in an incorrect manner because it was meant to say that I completely understand (*aš visiškai, visai suprantu*). It seems that people think that if you hear others saying it, it means that this word is used correctly.

Another interesting fact was noticed: even though it is known that phrases like *kas link, kas liečia* should not be used, it was difficult for students to correct them properly. Students were suggesting various similar, close substitutions and constructions. Incorrect loan-translation of the phrase *kas link* (in a sentence *Kas link mokslų, tai apie juos nenoriu nė girdėti*) was usually changed by phrases *kas apie mokslus, kalbant apie mokslus* and even by the same irregular phrase *kas dėl mokslų* instead of *apie mokslus nenoriu nieko girdėti*. Phrase *kas liečia* (in the sentence *kas liečia mano sąžinę, ji rami*) was understood similarly. Instead of the similar phrase *mano sąžinė yra rami* it was corrected by phrases of the same construction like *kas susiję su mano sąžine, kalbant apie sąžinę, kas dėl mano sąžinės*. However, these constructions should have been well learnt in schools because they are included in knowledge of general language, and they are necessary and essential when going deeper into the terminology of specialty language.

Excluding usual linguistic errors and errors that should be known and avoided by everybody, the questionnaire also checked more delicate knowledge of respondent linguistic literacy. There were some words which are used more rarely and are not very common. One of such words is *grupės sąstatas*. The research showed that truly only a small number of students know (95 respondents made this error) that this word should not be used and almost nobody knew that the right Lithuanian equivalent to this word is *grupės sudėtis*.

Substandard term of modern *realia organaizeris* can also be included to this category. Majority of the students know that this word should not be used; however, not all of them know what equivalent should be used. There were various closer and further substitutions: *dienotvarkė, dienos planas, darbo knyga, darbo kalendorius, atmintinė*, etc., even though official Lithuanian terms are *užrašinė* or *dėklė*. Analogically students do not know how to change the incorrect loan-translation *gerbūvis*, which is so popular among older generation and which has different meanings. In the task sentence (*Šeimos gerbūvis priklauso ne tik nuo didelių pajamų, bet ir nuo tarpusavio sutarimo*) it had to be changed by

equivalent gerovė. 84 respondents did not recognize these substandard words as errors. The same number of students thought that a phrase kaip taisyklė is correct and did not change it by paprastai, dažniausiai, kaip įprasta, etc.

The phrase kas liečia so often used by young people did not seem incorrect to respondents, the same as a word markeris (58 of the respondents did not recognise them as incorrect ones). Loanword laptopas was recognized as a word which should not be used; however, its Lithuanian equivalent is rarely used correctly, i.e., using pronominal form of the equivalent nešiojamasis kompiuteris. Knowledge of English language did not help respondents to understand and correct the word skryningas (= med. patikrinimas); however, declining Russian language did not prevent the understanding that phrases and words to pasekoje (= dėl to, todėl), lygsvara (= pusiausvyra), kažkoks tai (= kažkoks) are loanwords. Surprisingly the latter phrase was corrected by different word nepažįstamas; not only that, it was written incorrectly.

Considerably less students were making mistakes when correcting semantisms senai (= seniai), budintysis (= budėtojas), pergyventi (= jaudintis) and barbarism skryningą (= med. patikrinimą); however, 48 respondents did not know that in Lithuanian language these words are used incorrectly.

The group of the clearest substandard Lithuanian words involves such words and phrases as matomai, ant tiek, savistoviai, pas save. The latter was not corrected or corrected incorrectly by only 13 respondents. 22 respondents did not know the adverb savistoviai (= savarankiškai) and prepositional construction ant tiek (= tiek, taip), and 10 respondents did not know semantism matomai (= matyt). That shows that linguistic literacy and the sense of language are not good, only small number of linguistic errors was recognised and not always students were able to correct them by the proper usage of Lithuanian equivalents.

Therefore, received results show that not all respondents have a satisfactory amount of Lithuanian language knowledge. These results prove that many students do not recognise linguistic errors and lack spelling skills. Lack of language basis may prevent students from the development of general literacy and personality. "Literacy is an essential competence of life which allows individual citizens to improve abilities of consideration, oral expression, critical thinking and empathy; it promotes personality development, increases self-confidence and identity perception, and motivates the versatile participation in digital and knowledge-based economy and society." (Ne)raštingumas – ne tik mokyklos rūpestis (2015). To improve students' linguistic literacy, several strategies should be implemented. At first, academic writing courses should be emphasized, where students learn argumentation, text structure, and language norms. Additionally, critical reading should be encouraged to develop analytical thinking and information evaluation skills. On the other hand, students should be encouraged to use printed sources, books, and scientific literature more often to enhance their ability to analyze complex texts. Third, universities should offer consultations where students receive feedback on their writing skills and areas for improvement (Lillis 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary of the research and general tendencies of linguistic literacy, it can be assumed that the issue of literacy is really relevant and essential to our present society. Linguistic literacy is declining and it shows not only worse knowledge of Lithuanian grammar, but also the tendency of societal literacy itself because when linguistic literacy becomes worse, general literacy and abilities to develop competency, to develop personality and to preserve ethnic identity successfully are also becoming worse. It is complex to write some certain words together or separately and it is more complex to find and correct linguistic errors. Students' linguistic literacy is an essential competence that determines not only academic success but also future career opportunities. The growing flow of information, technological influence, and changing communication patterns present new challenges that can be addressed through targeted linguistic literacy development strategies. Students' linguistic literacy has a long-term impact not only on academic success but also on professional careers. The individuals who communicate clearly and persuasively have better employment opportunities and career advancement prospects. Moreover, literacy is a crucial factor in developing critical thinking, which helps in making well-

informed decisions both at work and in everyday life. Modern job market requirements increasingly emphasize communication skills. Therefore, institutions of higher education should not only formally teach academic writing but also promote practical activities that help students acquire real communication skills. Language literacy is a fundamental condition for students' academic success. To foster it, it is necessary to pay attention to language education at all levels of study, to develop specialized academic writing courses, to encourage lecturers to provide high-quality feedback, to establish writing consultation services at universities and other institutions of higher education.

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