

LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN THE WORK WITH THE NEW LANGUAGE USERS

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Abstract

The first step in the work with the new language users is understanding, the second – mastering the basics of the language, acquiring the ability to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or to use short phrases; the third step – formation of the speech when a learner starts answering in short sentences. However, it is most important to develop a positive attitude of all learners taking into account everyone’s individual abilities, life experience and skills as well as to observe/ to consider their age peculiarities. It is important to create a friendly, exciting atmosphere in language teaching, which is based on the previous experience of the learners (for example, songs, food, dances, people’s names etc.)

Key words: new language learners, illiterate persons, learning to learn, host country

With every year the language situation in Latvia becomes more diverse due to the increasing number of immigrants. Latvia certainly has experience in teaching Latvian as a second language because to ensure it the State Agency for Acquisition of the Latvian Language (at present the Latvian Language Agency) was set up in 1995. The Latvian Language Agency is a direct administration institution supervised by the Minister of Education and Science. The aim of the Agency is to enhance the status and promote the sustainable development of the Latvian language – the official state language of the Republic of Latvia and the official language of the European Union. The Latvian Language Agency has the following responsibilities:

1. To analyse the situation of the Latvian language – official state language and dynamics of the sociolinguistic processes;
2. To provide support for the acquisition of the Latvian language in Latvia and abroad;
3. To increase the competitiveness of the Latvian language in Latvia and worldwide.

The Latvian Language Agency performs sociolinguistic studies, provides consulting related to language issues, organizes training courses for teachers, publishes study and methodical materials for acquisition of Latvian as a native and second language. The Agency also provides support for diaspora and immigrants as well as for the teachers of these target groups.

Today Latvia is becoming more attractive for aliens: both volunteer and forced immigrants. As the masses of refugees are flocking into the European countries including Latvia, we are facing new pedagogical challenges. Among language learners there are people with good education, some illiterate persons (illiterate person – one who neither reads nor writes) as well as those who have not learned at all or have attended school only for a couple of years and have minimal writing and reading skills. Teaching of the Latvian language to such people requires special approach and most often this is a new experience to our teachers as according to the Latvian legislation nine year basic education is compulsory so the proportion of illiterate persons in the local population is only 0.2%. But in the countries of the refugees who have arrived in Latvia this proportion reaches even 66% (for example, in Afghanistan). Communication with such learners is possible not only in the language courses, but also at schools, vocational education institutions and even in labour market.

For these reasons the article focuses mainly on two important aspects concerning acquisition of languages: the needs and possibilities of learners as well as the connection between acquisition of the language and orientation in the host country.

This article will focus on the language teaching methodology, which is used at the very beginning starting to work with people who have no learning experience or who have never had any contact with the Latin alphabet...

Starting to work with people who have limited or no learning skills as well as with those who have never come across the Latin alphabet it is important to remember that they are adults. They are often active, trying themselves to look for and find those methods that might help them to learn. When thinking about teaching adults (starting from the age of 12 – 13) we must remember that it is a very complicated task. A lot of those illiterate people speak two or three languages, but cannot write or read in any of them. Also reasons why they are not able to write or read are very different and can be learned about in many global studies (Condelli, 2001; Wrigley, 2002). For these reasons this article mainly focuses on the question How? Not Why? Emphasizing practical activity and the experience acquired through it.

SOME MOTIVATING OR DE-MOTIVATING FACTORS CONCERNING THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE TO ADULTS

Working with the new language learners as well as participating in the lessons of other teachers the authors of this article have observed that people often possess particular anxiety or agitation when learning a foreign language. Some people experience such agitation when learning or using the second language. Foreign language anxiety is similar to some other well-known concerns like the anxiety when making a public speech or completing tests. Anxiety is often caused by discomfort some people with limited language skill feel when they are using a foreign language. It can be compared to putting on a new dress, which is perceived as unusual or extravagant. In a similar way some people find themselves in awkward situation if they are not able to show their intellect, express their feelings and emotions in the new language, in other words – to express their personality, which mainly refers to new language learners with good education. Language anxiety has become one of the problems when learning a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz un Cope, 1986). Thus, when teaching the Latvian language great attention is paid to the methods, which promote emancipation and relaxation, ensure the change of social roles and status during the classes. When teaching language from the beginning, individual work and diverse approach in individual consultations or simple conversation play an important role to overcome anxiety. Individual work with learners provides a possibility to understand where the mistakes are, what kind of assistance is necessary and where the difficulties lie. During consultations it should be defined which skills, knowledge and experience learners have already acquired before the arrival in a foreign country and which ones while learning the language and building a new life. With the help of individual work it is also possible to find out language learners' previous learning experience which is very essential for reaching a result.

In its turn the desire to integrate into a home country and to enter labour market and business environment successfully can become an important motivator to learn the language. Alongside formal language learning it is also necessary to practice informal language learning where integration activities play an important role.

START WITH TEACHING TO LEARN

Language learning process includes a number of different factors interacting with each other. One of the most important facilitators of the Latvian language learning process is learning skills: the development of thinking operations, creative and critical reasoning; cooperation skills, abilities to plan, realize and make self-assessment of language learning achievements as well as ability to apply different learning strategies. We cannot allege that immigrants lack learning skills, but our experiences are too different. Therefore we often have to start not with teaching language, but with teaching to learn (which in other situations when working with adult audience is not necessary).

FIRST STEPS IN THE TRAINING OF LEARNERS

Next I would like to focus on the methods and aids used when working with immigrants and making the first steps in the acquisition of language.

- Interconnection of pictures and words, pictures and letters. If a certain topic seems to be especially interesting to learners it is mastered extensively (in my situation it was a discussion about pork, chicken and mutton);
- Inventing rhymes with the words that can be used in everyday life. They can also be composed by a teacher. For example,

I am going, I am going, I am going very fast.

I am running, I am running, I am running very fast.

We are going and running, and going and running.

- Visualization and involving movements work very well in the process of language learning.
- All separately taught words should be used in short sentences or self-made poems or rhymes.
- Modified English language teaching materials for children can be successfully used for teaching the Latvian language:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtoyesonAJc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJb1ozI7TpU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVx6SFRfsLg>

The easy language of these materials help learners to memorise sentences and verbs used in everyday life which later can be practised in other situations, for example, when teaching the verb *know/don't know* etc.

- Creation of visual material (100 – 250 ‘word pictures’ (picture + word), which will be used during the whole training course almost every day in different situations;
- Application of all methods used at pre-school (different digital study aids: passive digital aids: presentations, e-books, e-dictionaries, pictures, study films, etc. as well as active digital aids: online tests, digital games).

PRIMARY ATTENTION SHOULD BE PAID TO ORAL SPEECH

Certainly, many of these activities may seem funny and ‘childish’. However, this is an effective way to prepare learners for training and to start teaching language step by step. Each step should be linked to speaking. It is advisable not to teach writing skills from the very beginning as it would overload the learners. It has been proved by studies carried out in the world, for example, in the framework of the study about refugees from Sudan in Australia (*Burgoyne and Hull 2007*) 30 teachers working with this target group have been interviewed and they have admitted that the content of training should be very flexible and at first all attention should be paid only to oral speech. These teachers also admit that information about the country a particular person has come from is very helpful for the training.

FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF NEW LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Trying to assist these people, a set of questions, which could help teachers working with persons who have low level of education or have never attended school, or have never had any contact with Latin alphabet has been compiled. The questions that can be asked to a language learner as well as to oneself:

- How did I study my native language?
- How do I study other languages?
- How do I feel trying to learn a new language?
- How do I feel about the language in a country where I cannot understand anything (for example, in Georgia where the alphabet is totally different)?
- What can help me to learn a new language?
- Where and when should I use the new language and where would I like to do it?
- What are the conditions to let me speak in this language without the help of other people and in what situations can it be necessary?
- Is there any official support available in case I need to contact a representative of public authority?
- Where can I get support to continue language learning?

THE MOST APPROPRIATE METHOD OF WORK

Looking for the most appropriate methods we always take into consideration a particular target audience:

- If this concrete method is appropriate to reach the stated goal;
- Perhaps this method demands more knowledge and skills from my students than they already have;
- How much time and resources I need to prepare myself and use them (for example, to prepare for my first four classes I needed more than six hours);
- If they are appropriate for adult learners (here more consideration is given to how they are perceived, if the reaction is feeling of shyness etc.);
- What study materials I might need working with the particular target audience;
- If any special skills are needed to work with the chosen method and if I have them.

We must always remember if a person has no learning experience in their native language the process of learning will be much slower and more difficult.

TASKS FOR TEACHER'S ASSISTANT

In ideal version, those who work with language learners need an assistant whose tasks would be:

- To help the persons who start learning when all other have already been studying for some time;
- When the group is too large;
- To help those who need some special assistance;
- To pay attention to those who are different.

TEACHER'S COOPERATION

At present the processes of migration in Europe (and worldwide) are dynamic, diverse and also unpredictable. Quite often teachers 'force the door' that someone has already opened. Therefore websites as well as social networks should be used for exchanging experience and discussions. The website named 'Teach and learn the Latvian language' is available also at the Latvian Language

Agency. Certainly, the study materials there are in Latvian, but the website contains a lot of pictures and other visual aids that can be used for language learning.

I can also recommend a tool that can help teachers who work with learners from different countries. It is an Internet resource with downloadable files, which are free of charge and meant for the initial stage of language learning (<http://www.goethe-verlag.com/book2/LV/LVPA/LVPA004.HTM>). It is possible to combine any two of the 50 languages represented on this website. For example, if Punjabi is learners' native language, but they have to learn Latvian, this website is easy to use. Even without any prior knowledge by pressing on the name of the offered language it is possible to learn speaking in short sentences in real situations. Video instruction is also available. This tool allows choosing only the listening part or both: reading and listening. All 100 lessons in 50 languages are identical concerning the content, i.e. the topics and phrases to be taught. It is not ideal, but quite universal. For example, below Punjabi (or Arabic) text there is a transcription in Latin letters.

RESULTS CAN BE SMALL, BUT THEY ARE ESSENTIAL FOR LEARNERS

Experience of working with these learners in different countries is quite similar, but concerning the number of lessons we can say that about 500 lessons are needed for a person who has none or very low learning skills just to be able to start using the new language (Bensman 2012). The authors of this article would also like to mention quite a typical fact, which appears in many studies concerning teaching language to persons from other countries. For example, a refugee from Afghanistan had attended language course in Vienna for eight months, but his reading and writing skills were still unclear (Plutzar and Ritter 2007, 3). By teaching language and achieving good results, giving an impulse to use the host country language, linking language skills with social and personal skills and needs, overcoming anxiety we achieve valuable although often small results that help these people to survive in the host country.

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