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STATE LANGUAGE AGENCY



**ACQUISITION OF LATVIAN
AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT
EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Riga 2008



This study, consistent with State Language Agency order, was performed by Contrastive Linguistics and Translation Department of Latvian University Foreign Language Department

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

- 4** INTRODUCTION

- 7** 1. SITUATION OF ACQUIRING LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION ABROAD AND IN LATVIA

- 8** 2. CONTENT, GOALS AND TASKS OF ACQUIRING LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- 10** 3. STUDENT INTERESTS AND MOTIVATION TO ACQUIRE LATVIAN LANGUAGE

- 12** 4. ADDRESSES OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDING OPTION TO ACQUIRE LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE (2009)

INTRODUCTION

Up to the 1990s it was rather hard to understand the wish of foreigners to learn the Latvian language that was difficult and not widespread, and was not highly prestigious even among Latvians. Only few specialists knew about possibilities to learn and research the Latvian language outside Latvia.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when Latvia joined in the political, economic and cultural life of the democratic world, the situation changed radically. During that period study programmes of the Latvian language and culture were created at several universities in Europe nearly simultaneously. Since then the Latvian language can be acquired at more than twenty universities. Some universities have academically comprehensive study programmes of Baltistics, some other universities have the Latvian language as an interdisciplinary subject, some others as an additional subject or optional course.

In the beginning of the 21st century, educational programmes of the European Union (EU) have promoted growth of number of foreign students in Latvia and thus necessity to create Latvian language courses with new content. Every year more than 300 exchange programme students learn the Latvian language within the frame of the EU educational programmes. The demand to master Latvian at summer schools and informal courses as well as at long-distance studies and self-instruction grows. A new branch of educational science – the **Latvian language as a foreign language** – has been created along with the existing methods of teaching Latvian as native language, and as the second language in minority educational programmes.

A lot has been done in this field during the last ten years, but the information about the possibilities to learn the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia and abroad has not been summed up. Little is known about the work of pedagogues who have promoted acquisition and popularization of the Latvian language abroad. The growing interest in the Latvian language has refuted the opinion of the Latvian language as obsolete, difficult to master and not highly respected language in the international communication.

The above-mentioned circumstances stimulated researchers to investigate the issue more closely and to find out who, where and how teaches and learns the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia and abroad. The research work *Acquiring the Latvian language as a foreign language at European institutions of higher education: situation awareness* was carried out at the Department of Contrastive Linguistics, Translation and Interpreting of the Faculty of Modern Languages of the University of Latvia from May till December 2007. The State Language Agency commissioned the research carried out under the guidance of Arvils Šalme, Dr. philol. (with the following work group: Veneta Žigure, MA, Lāsma Vaivode, MA, and Ingūna Helviga, assistant).

This research work is intended as a part of a long-term project, aimed to assess the state of distribution, pedagogical development and study of the Latvian language in the world. The main objective of this research is to estimate the situation of acquiring the Latvian language as a foreign language in Latvia and at universities of other European countries. It has always had an important role in strengthening the image of Latvia in the world. Other educational establishments have made a significant contribution to popularization of the Latvian language, but their activities will be investigated in some future study.

The data and conclusions gained in the research have allowed to estimate the significance of the Latvian language in the European multilingual situation and promoted foundation of a new and important branch of research and education - the Latvian language as a foreign language – in Latvia.

Several important tasks were put forward in the research work:

1. To gain information about universities in Latvia and other European countries where Latvian is taught as a foreign language; to gain information about the history of acquiring the Latvian language, courses of instruction, pedagogues and learners of academic courses at these institutions of higher learning.
2. To ascertain the grounds for establishing courses of the Latvian language as a foreign language; the tasks, aims, the achievable and gained results of academic programmes, motivation of learning as well as other problems related to the study process.

3. To realize the teaching aids used in programmes of the Latvian language as a foreign language at universities; to clarify the necessity to develop new teaching aids.
4. To sum up the most important publications on acquisition of the Latvian language as a foreign language at universities in Latvia and abroad.
5. To obtain information about the teachers of the academic course of the Latvian language as a foreign language, their pedagogical and research work, their input in the development and popularization of this study subject and research branch; to find out the specialists' opinion on the choice of teaching methods, peculiarities of the organization of the courses, choice of teaching aids and participation in different extra-curricular activities.
6. To begin to work out unified recommendations for study programmes, their content and system of tests for the Latvian language as a foreign language at universities in Latvia and abroad.
7. To work out recommendations for unified research and methodological informational exchange network for mastering the Latvian language.
8. To realize possibilities of Latvian and European universities to train the Latvian language researchers and specialists of the subject – the Latvian language as a foreign language.

In order to assess the state of the Latvian language at universities and to find out the professional activities in this field, university lecturers, study programme co-ordinators and managers responded to questionnaires. A special questionnaire was worked out: one section of it had questions about the situation of mastering the Latvian language, study courses, programmes and organizational issues, the other section had questions about work of pedagogues when teaching Latvian as a foreign language.

Interviews with experienced pedagogues were organized to get more detailed information on different issues and problems of teaching (e.g., choice of methods, student motivation, providing of studies, perspectives of the branch development, etc.).

Investigation of university documentation, different reference sources and publications was carried out during the research. The work group visited several universities where they got information not only about the situation of mastering the Latvian language, but also got acquainted with the study process, circumstances and views of the staff on different issues of teaching methods, planning of courses and organization of study process.

Fifty-one university specialists provided information on studies at institutions of higher education, and their professional work in the period from June to December 2007, but more detailed interviews on different issues of mastering the Latvian language were organized for 23 respondents. In the autumn of 2007, Everita Andronova and Gunta Nešpore, researchers of the University of Latvia, interviewed foreign specialists of Letonica. These data as well as information obtained at informal interviews from different educational and administrative institutions in Latvia and abroad were used in this research.

1. SITUATION OF ACQUIRING LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION ABROAD AND IN LATVIA

According to aggregated research data of December of 2007, during the recent five years, constant or interrupted Latvian language study courses have been organized in twenty-nine institutions of higher education in nine European countries (Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Poland, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary), while at Oslo University where good practice of Baltistics studies, and mastering of the Latvian language had established, these studies were suspended (at Oslo University in 1999). In some universities there the mastering of the Latvian language started in the 60-ies and 70-ies (at Bonn University, Stockholm University, Westfal Wilhelm University in Minster, several universities in Lithuania), at some universities this experience dates back even longer (at Vilnius, Šiauliai, St. Petersburg, Prague, and some other universities). At the other universities permanent study programmes were developed in the nineties of the previous century, due to increasing public interest in the on-going processes in the Baltic states. At separate European univer-

sities courses of the Latvian language existed only for a short time period. There is also a number of universities where the Latvian language is mentioned in relation to various courses of linguistic studies, however Latvian is not taught there (Open Berlin University, Friedrich Alexander Erlangen-Nirnberg University, Johan Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt-on-the-Main, etc.). Several universities have also offered intensive courses of the Latvian language, e.g. Westfalen Wilhelm University in Minster (1989–2005) and Braunschweig Technical University (2003–2007). In such courses the students in short period of time (1 – 2 months) acquired basics of the Latvian language, first in Germany, after that in Latvian universities.

There is and eight level course of the Latvian language course for interpreters and translators of EU institutions in Luxemburg since 2002, however this training may not be regarded as programme of academic studies.

In this study experience of teaching the Latvian language as a foreign language of nine Latvian institutions of higher education was also summed up, At nearly all universities the teaching of the Latvian language for foreign students was introduced in the recent years in relation with the EU educational programmes (*Socrates, Erasmus, Campus Europae, etc.*), and the interest of the local foreign citizens to acquire the Latvian language. Several institution of higher education have offered the Latvian language-learning also within summer schools and informal language training programmes (e.g. at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Latvia, Faculty of Modern Languages and Language Centre, Riga Technical University, Liepaja University (Liepaja Academy of Pedagogy until July 2008), Vidzeme University College, etc.).

2. CONTENT, GOALS AND TASKS OF ACQUIRING LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Analysis of the study programmes revealed that goals and tasks for acquiring the Latvian language at various institutions of higher learning are different. The results to be attained in language-learning are defined by the scale of the Latvian language study programme, intensity, as well as the number of courses taught in Latvian, and

application opportunities. At a number of universities acquisition of the applied Latvian language is organized in the framework of more comprehensive Baltistic studies, at some institutions of higher education it is included in the module of interdisciplinary studies, while at some others the Latvian language course is alternative or optional.

If the Latvian language learning takes place within the Baltistics study programme it is aimed at achieving academic goals and includes comprehensive development of all the skills of language use. The students have to acquire basics of the applied language to be able to continue studies in the Latvian language effectively. In case the Latvian language is included in the interdisciplinary study programme, the goal of the language learning is defined by the specifics of the given course, e.g., to provide only basic knowledge about the Latvian language, to learn to comprehend and obtain information in the Latvian language, to extend knowledge about Latvian culture, actual facts, social life, etc. In the programmes where the course of applied Latvian language is the only one at the given university, the language acquisition mostly has a practical goal – to develop particular skills of language use (speaking, writing), communication competence, as well as comprehension about the Latvian language system and socio-cultural aspects.

In language-learning at institutions of higher education most often is used the traditional three-degree division – *basic, medium, and advanced* level of language acquisition. In recent years when the programmes for mastering the Latvian language have been harmonized with EU content specified A, B and C level degrees, the skills and the attainable results for each study level have been set, compliant to specification (see *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2001*, and the Latvian issue of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2006*).

At universities where the Latvian language course is not integrated in the philology speciality programme, the language training corresponds to basic level studies, and provides for acquiring the B1 level (B2 is less common) of language command. The study content of the afore mentioned levels has been disclosed in the manual *The Threshold level for Latvian* (1997). Only at some universities the advanced (C1) and proficiency (C2) level studies are offered, but their content in the Latvian lan-

guage has not been described. The language study content at universities has been specified according to four areas – personal, social, educational, and professional. In most cases, in particular that refers to persons studying in Latvia, the content of the language acquisition is defined by practical reasons, accordingly the topics, as well as lexical and grammar minimum have been adjusted to daily communication needs. For the language learners abroad, it is more harder to consolidate the acquired knowledge in practice. For those who acquire the Latvian language in Latvia, the opportunities to develop their language skills in practice, in particular in communication with other university students or friends, are considerably higher.

In order to insure unified scope of the Latvian language acquisition in all institutions of higher education, a research, in compliance with common EU framework of reference for languages-learning, the guidelines for study content and organization of testing, using for basis the manuals issued in Latvian – *The Threshold level for Latvian* (1997) un *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2006).

3. STUDENT INTERESTS AND MOTIVATION TO ACQUIRE LATVIAN LANGUAGE

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Data acquired during this study reveal three main trends of students' interests – the Latvian language is acquired for purpose of studies and research, professional activity, as well as for personal needs.

1. For studies and research the language is mastered to:

- 1) acquire the compulsory course of the Latvian language in compliance with the requirements of the Baltistics study programme,
- 2) extend one's knowledge and acquire command of a new language during studies of indoeuropeistics, slavonics, history, political science, and other subjects,
- 3) develop research works,

- 4) be able to participate at various study courses of other specialities that are taught in Latvian (at Latvian institutions of higher education),
- 5) continue studies in Latvia,
- 6) obtain credit points.

2. For professional need the language is acquired to::

- 1) work in Latvia or Latvia related institutions or businesses,
- 2) be able to participate in cross-border projects,
- 3) work in translation area,
- 4) work as teacher of the Latvian language.

3. For personal interests the language is mastered to:

- 1) acquire the language basics required for daily needs during one's studies or work in Latvia,
- 2) acquire a new and rather uncommon language,
- 3) extend knowledge about the East-European region,
- 4) travel in Latvia,
- 5) communicate with family or friends in Latvia,
- 6) become naturalized.

According to Poznan University professor Nikole Nau, in the course of mastering the language, one „need not fight for students' motivation. None of the students is compelled to study Latvian; it is their free choice, and their motivation to acquire this language, and acquaint themselves with Latvia and its culture is very high" (Nau, 2007). However, this study has faced opinions, that the motivation to master the language of the students who acquire it for the purpose of studies or professional goals (in some cases for private motives), and those, who attend the course out of curiosity or to obtain credit points. Students from various educational Exchange programmes in Latvia do not necessarily learn the Latvian language with interest and persistence – in particular when other study courses can be acquired in foreign languages (usually in the English language).

4. ADDRESSES OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDING OPTION TO ACQUIRE LATVIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE (2009)

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