

Language situation in Latvia



Latviešu valodas aģentūra



Study by Latvian Language Agency «Language Situation in Latvia: 2004– 2010»

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“Latvian language is the language of the Republic of Latvia and integration, it is the basis of national identity and a part of the world’s varied cultural heritage. Therefore the state of Latvia is responsible for preserving and developing the Latvian language, for the Latvian society, and current and future generations of the world. It is the Latvian state’s competency and duty, because Latvia is the only country in the world, which can take responsibility for preserving the Latvian language.”

*Basic guidelines of State language policy
for 2005-2014*

Topicality of the study

The study of state language is the basis for evaluating the results of state policy and setting tasks, because the goal of state language policy, on one hand, is to determine the direction of language situation development, and, on the other hand, it has to be strictly based on the actual language situation.

Basic principles of Latvian language policy

- Latvian language is the state language in Latvia;
- The state guarantees possibilities to preserve, to develop and, for some functions, to use minority languages of Latvia

These basic principles include the idea of language co-existence and **juridical hierarchy of languages with state language priority.**

Basic directives of implementing language policy

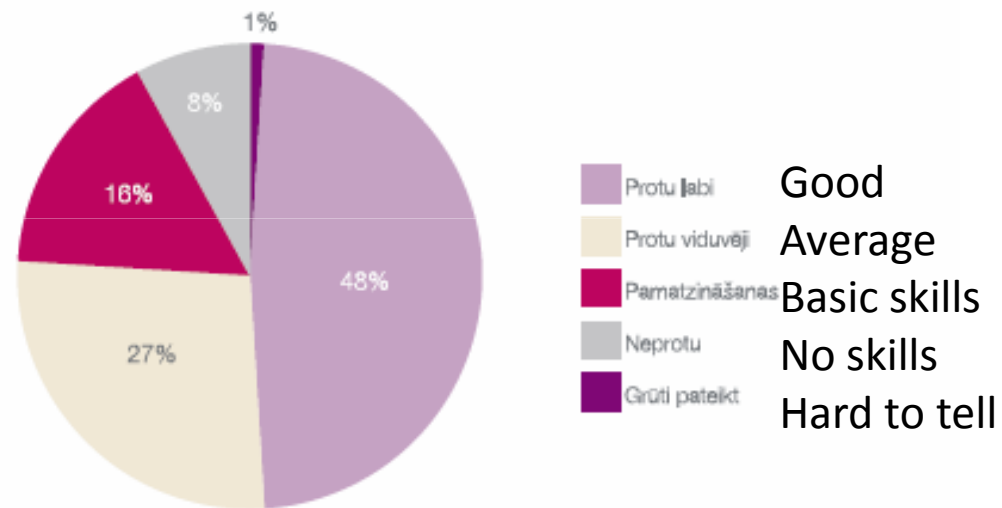
- **Juridical** (a juridical securing of state language status in legislation and other regulations).
- **Pedagogical** (teaching the Latvian language to Latvians and minorities living in Latvia).
- **Linguistic** (scientific research, standardization of Latvian language, publishing of standard sources and literature).

Basic elements of state language status

- **Language skills**
- **Use of language**
- **Attitude towards language**

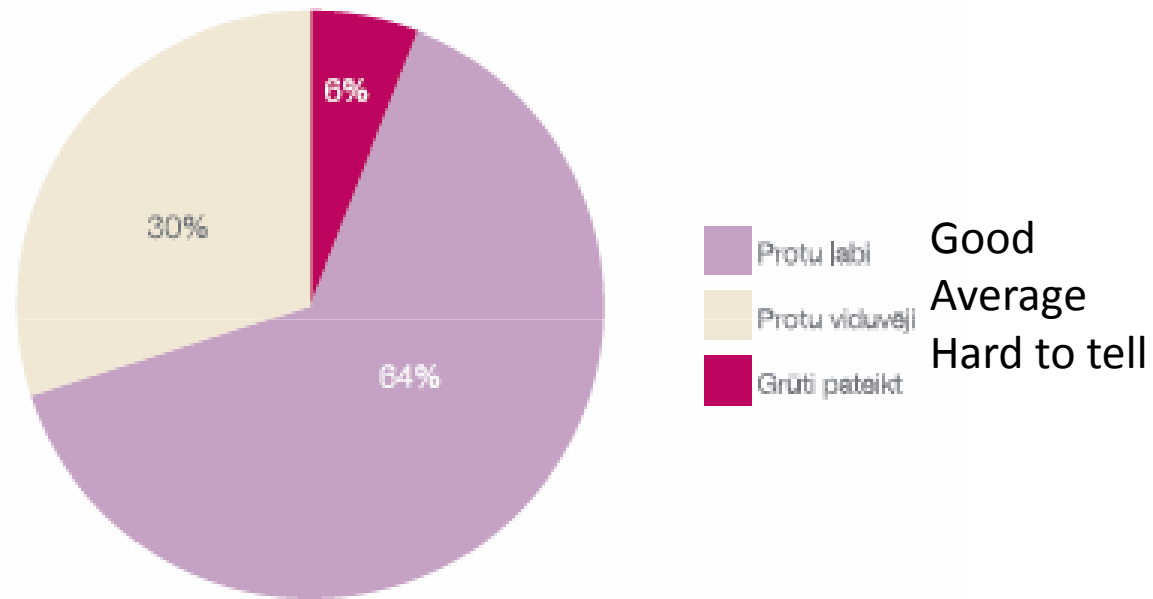
For ensuring the full state language status in Latvia, the tendency of understanding, but not using the state language has to be averted.

Language skills, usage, environment



Latvian language skills of respondents, whose native language is Russian (LVA poll, 2009)

Language skills, usage, environment



Latvian language skills of minority youths (17-25) (LVA poll, 2009)

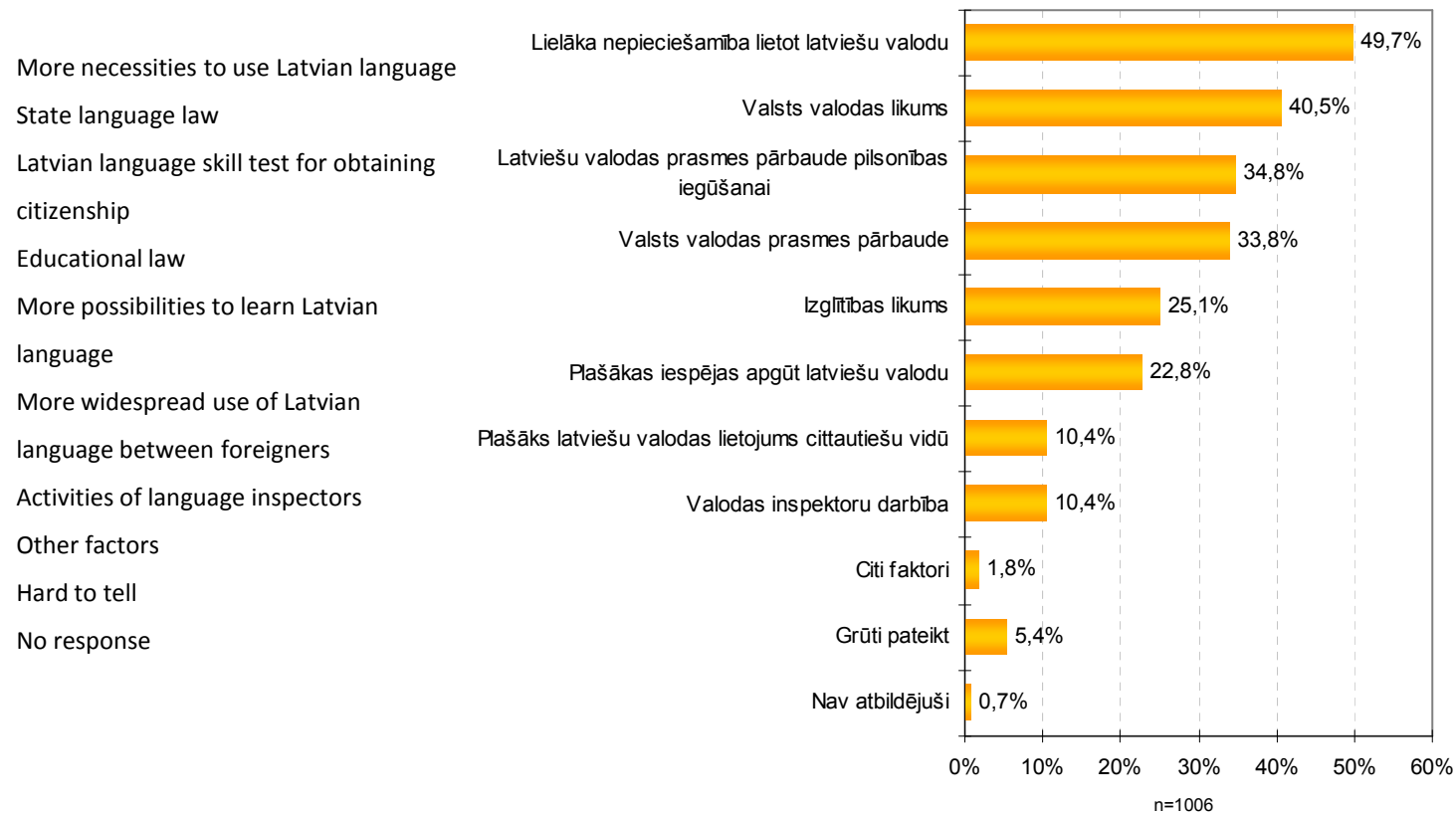
Language skills, usage, environment

„[...] essential is the securing of Latvian language status in education. The transition to when most of the educational content and materials are in Latvian language. [...] **a very positive aspect in this is that segregation according to a lingual principle in the younger generation is disappearing** [LVA emphasis], at least, in my experience, while working with students in higher education institutions, Latvian language skills of non-Latvian students have greatly improved. It is an excellent merit.” (LVA interviews, 2009)

Language skills, usage, environment

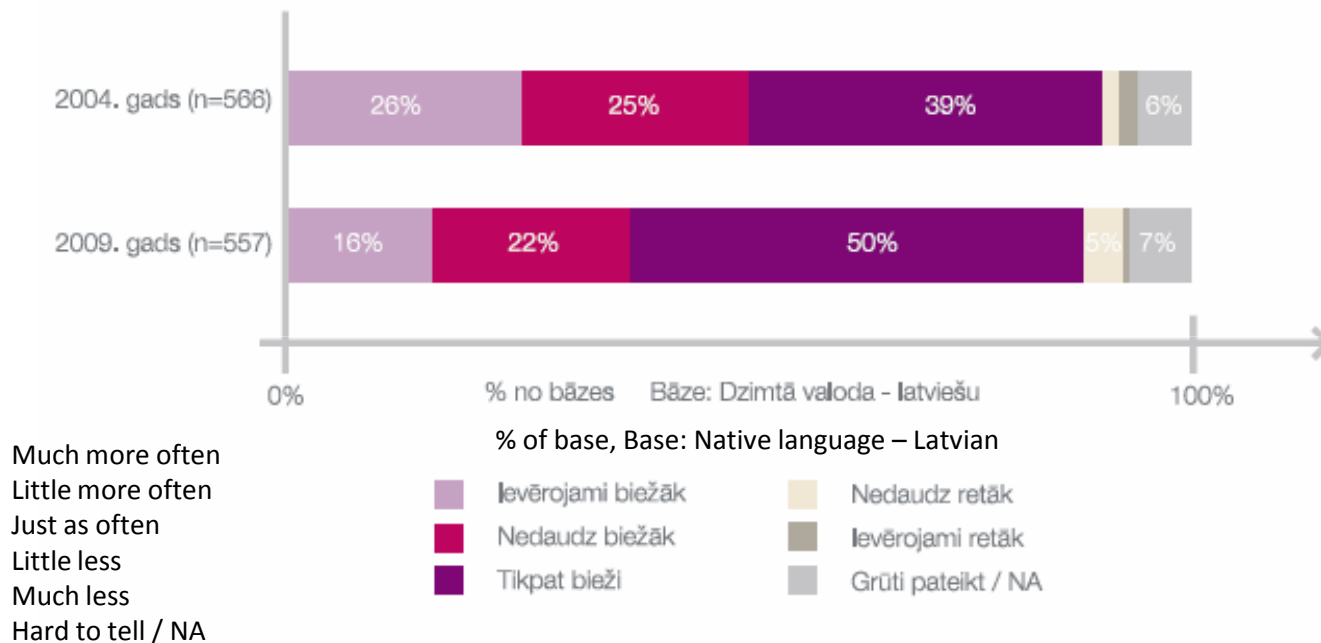
The study confirms that the administrative system has been the main contributor to language learning, i. e., activities of juridical and educational policies, which are closely related to state language policy's measures and which are determined in planning documents of state language policy. However, within the linguistic situation in Latvia the development of language skills, as the only activity of implementing state policy, can't ensure full usage of the Latvian language in the society.

Language skills, usage, environment



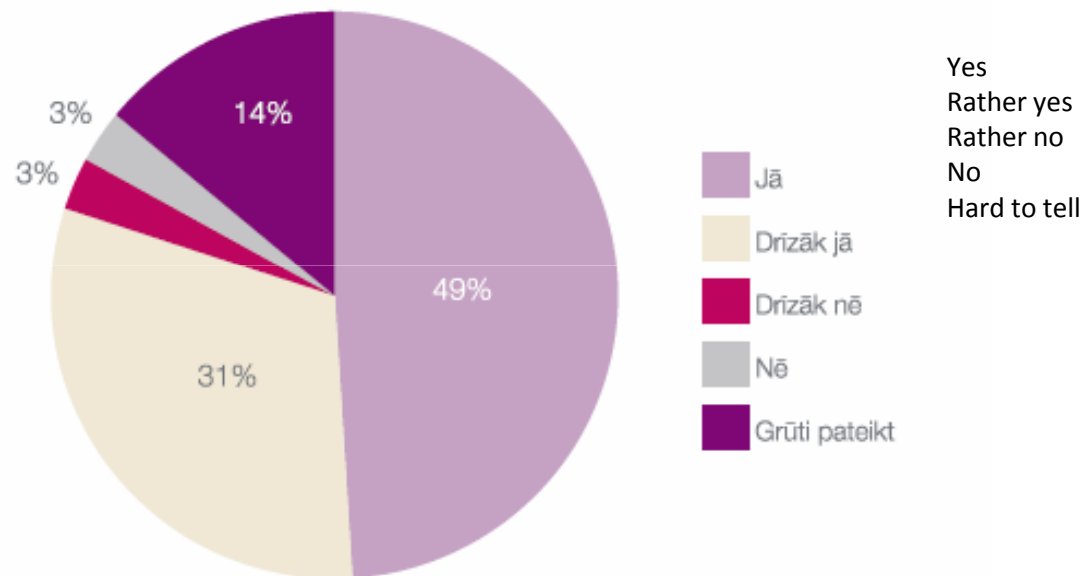
Factors that have promoted usage of the Latvian language, indicated by (VVA poll, 2004).

Language skills, usage, environment



Usage of Latvian language in the respondent's place of residence (village, residential area etc.) compared to situation 5-6 years ago (LVA poll, 2009)

Language skills, usage, environment



Responses of Russian-speaking respondents to the question: „Should Latvia’s permanent residents know the Latvian language?” (LVA poll 2009)

Language in private business: field of services

- The largest problems with using Latvian language are in the field of services and private business.
- The rights to receive services in the official language of the specific state are considered priority in relation to the freedom of using another language.
- The skills of any language are valued positively and, from the point of view of business, employee language skills are a big plus, however, **every enterprise, which offers services within the territory of Latvia and to Latvian population, has to fully ensure services in the state language.**

Language and mass media

- In LVA interviews of 2009, experts have emphasized that currently **the position of the Latvian language is affected by the educational system and mass media**, whose processes can be considered as threats and challenges for the Latvian language.
- **The prestige of the Latvian language and the attitude towards the Latvian language are greatly undermined by Latvian public personalities** (politicians, state institution representatives, officials, cultural representatives etc.) **using Russian language in communication with mass media.** Experts have indicated that currently this is one of the most important unresolved problems.

Latvian language in modern globalization conditions

- Daily usage of language is one of the aspects of language competition, and the competitiveness of the Latvian language can't be considered good. In this aspect, the results of language competition are affected more by its users not external factors.
- **Language competition really exists and appears at any moment, when we choose that or another language for communication.**
- Latvia's joining the European Union (2004) created essential challenges and possibilities for the Latvian language, which ensured widespread recognition and consolidation of the Latvian language status.
- In parallel to effects of globalization processes in the language, prerequisites for **preserving the uniqueness of each language** have to be created. That's why the development of scientific studies has to be ensured, so that every decision made in the field of language is well-considered and reasoned.

Latvian language in modern globalization conditions

- Insufficiently qualitative development of terminology creates substantial harm to the development of the Latvian language during conditions of fierce language competition and can strengthen the idea of limited possibilities of expression in our language in some language users and encourage the narrowing of usage spheres or even disappearance.
- One of the courses of Latvian state language policy is **to ensure the spreading of Latvian language and its competitiveness in the market of world languages, and preserving the Latvian language and possibilities of learning it in Latvian diaspora around the world.**

Latvian language in modern globalization conditions

- The formation of the modern information society has created the **necessity to develop language technologies**, because languages are more widely used as means of communication. Language technologies are information technologies, which work with the world's most sophisticated and complex instrument of communication – human language.
- Language cultivation tools, which traditionally are dictionaries, grammars, handbooks etc., have to be adjusted for modern conditions and new demands from a modern person of the information age.
- There are 34 Latvian language resources (31 are developed in Latvia) and 11 tools: dictionaries, language bodies, text databases, study aids, but there lacks a united national language body.

Role of educational system in language policy

On October 29th, 1998, a new **Educational Law** is established, with which the segregation of schools is being cancelled, anticipating the formation of a united educational system. The Education Law is the basis for developing minority educational system. This ensures that the minority educational programmes include the content that is necessary to further pass on the minority cultural heritage, **to reach such goals as integration of society and equal possibilities for work and education for every citizen.**

Role of educational system in language policy

- **In about 10 years** – some period from 1995 until 2004 – **significant changes were achieved in the national educational policy, formation and development of the educational system, multiple educational reforms took place, including minority educational content reform.**
- To ensure the learning of national educational content or subject content, **educational literature, mostly, textbooks, for practically all subjects and all classes was renewed.**

Role of educational system in language policy

In 2008 the minority educational content reform was concluded and, by implementing the minority educational policy, Latvia has **fully implemented bilingual education:**

- studies occur in 2 languages from grade 1 to 12;
- separate (compulsory) subject in minority language and literature with literature, including state examinations (tests and exams) have been preserved;
- starting from school year 2007/2008, grade 12 centralized examinations are only in Latvian, but the student can choose the language to complete the work in;
- centralized state examinations for grades 3, 6, 9 are still prepared and written in 2 languages – Latvian, minority language (mostly Russian, also Polish);
- **Latvia has a unitary educational system and all schools use the same state educational standards in all taught subjects from grade 1 to 12.**

Role of educational system in language policy

To ensure further successful development of minority education, attention should be paid to:

- **preparation of teachers** (in higher educational institutions and in pedagogue professional development);
- **creation and development of text-books, study aids**, using the latest knowledge in world experience; for the development of well-considered study content (new learning subject standards) and demands, considering language situation development tendencies;
- **development of an educational quality inspection system** and regular implementation of it.

Achievements of state policy

- The strengthening of the juridical status of state language occurs slowly, but with a positive tendency.
- Strengthening of state language positions in nationally important spheres.
- Latvian language skills, number of language users has improved.
- Problems to the language usage have been identified.
- Latvian language quality is high.
- Successfully implemented educational content reform.
- Minority tolerance towards the state language and readiness to learn it has improved.

Tasks for the future

- Encouragement of a positive linguistic attitude and behaviour.
- Strengthening the role and status of state language in the educational system.
- Further continuation of bilingual education (also in a broader understanding of the term).
- Encouraging wider usage of language, including in Latvia's mass media.
- Stricter abidance to standards for language usage in business, in accordance with Republic of Latvia legislation and regulations, anticipating amendments.

Tasks for the future

- Solving the problem of integration of society, by taking into account immigration tendencies.
- Development of the Latvian language in the information technology age.
- Encouraging the learning of Latvian language in diaspora and preparation of Latvian educational institutions for inclusive work, which would allow emigrant children to return and continue studies in Latvia's educational system without complications.
- Systematical support for learning Latvian language as a foreign language in other countries and successful inclusion of the Latvian language in the international environment.

„If a spiritually healthy person, well knowing, that he has to leave this world some day, still cares about his health, lives his life as long as possible, why would a nation deliberately go down the pit, a nation, whose life, as the life of many lives, is strong and indestructible, understandably, if this nation shows healthy spirit, if it knows to value its life and doesn't hurry to blindly sell its own real life and change it for the life of an unfamiliar shadow. The heart and core of a nation's life is the language.”

K. Mīlenbahs, 1881