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## **Students' awareness of cultural identity and receptivity to other cultures: multilingual education in Latvian schools**

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In contemporary Latvia the development of students' cultural identity and receptivity is an issue in the implementation of a policy of multilingualism, which is closely connected to the fundamental economic and social changes in Latvia's active transition towards membership of the European Union and the single European market. Employees' requirements for academic qualifications and foreign language skills have changed considerably, and new standards have been set for learning foreign languages in Latvian schools. The need for individuals to acquire at least three European languages has been emphasised as a major task of education in an EU White Paper (1995). This reflects fundamental processes, such as the internationalisation of professions and work, the globalisation of technologies, and the rapid spread of information. Practical command of a foreign language as an instrument for exchanging information, is no longer sufficient: students need also to acquire cross-cultural communication skills. This paper analyses the acquisition of several languages as the interaction between cultural identity and cultural openness.

### **The development of cultural identity and cultural openness in Latvia**

Historically, Latvian society has never been mono-cultural. Having experienced various social and political changes in the previous century, with resulting waves of migration, Latvia and its educational system have entered the twenty-first century as culturally and educationally polarised. Latvia has the highest percentage of ethnic minorities - about 50% - of any European country.

#### *Knowledge of languages*

The knowledge of two or more languages will become the norm in Latvia in the near future, and a considerable part of the population is already multilingual. This individual multilingualism has been determined by historical factors. Several minority languages, as well as German, are spoken mainly by the older generation, and a large percentage of the older generation in the Polish, Lithuanian, and Byelorussian minority groups speak other languages. English is spoken by the younger generation in all ethnic groups.

#### *The concepts of cultural identity and cultural openness*

Socio-cultural and ethnic processes have brought the issue of individual cultural identity to public attention in Latvia. Four strategies of approach have been adopted: assimilation, separation, marginalisation, and integration (Berry *et al.*, 1992, 71). The main cultural paradigm is one of dialogue: it is intended that a strategy of integration will solve social and ethnic issues in a multicultural Latvian society. This implies that a balance will be found between a positive ethno-cultural identity and ethno-cultural tolerance.

The formation of cultural identity is based on cultural transmission at two levels. The first is constituted by the family and the ethnic environment. The second includes the increasing level of education, including the role of the mass media, in the formation of the cultural identity of various groups. A leading role in the formation of cultural identity

is played by education. 'Culture is a unity of knowledge, senses, communication, and creative activity' (Shiyanov, 1991: 81), and modern pedagogy uses several approaches for the development of cultural identity. One of these is the formation of a multicultural learning environment: the development of students' cultural identities in the multilingual learning process stimulates the development of their personalities. Individuals who are aware of the values of their own culture are ready and able to be involved in cross-cultural dialogues.

*The acquisition of cultural values is the common unifying element for all the ethnic communities of Latvia*

The development of a student's cultural openness takes place alongside the formation of cultural identity. The polyphonic contemporary culture stimulates the individual to find a basic integrative element uniting style, tradition, behavioural models, and the unity of academic and literary discourse. Dialogue, with its elements of equality and partnership, becomes the balancing element that determines the perception of the unity of the world. In such a dialogue, each person and each separate culture can be heard and understood (Taylor, 1994: 66). To a certain extent, this statement reflects the double-sided task of education: to reveal the unique features of personality, and to develop the skills and abilities necessary for communicating in a multicultural world.

In the transition towards EU membership, it is important to develop individual features and skills such as ideologically free constructive thinking, recognition of the existence of many truths, respect for those with different opinions, and tolerance towards the unknown. The socio-cultural tendencies of the educational process in Latvia correlate with the current educational problem of developing students' cultural openness, which will allow them to integrate into European multicultural processes.

In this paper I use the term 'cultural openness' to refer to those features of the personality that characterising an individual's need and readiness to understand and accept the multicultural: such cultural openness stimulates individual self-expression and diverse self-actualisation (Declaration, 1995). Analysing models of global and multicultural education in the academic literature allow the identification of those components of cultural openness which make possible the development of personality in the context of the policy of multilingualism in Latvia:

- knowledge and understanding of, and the ability to analyse and interpret, the universal features of culture, the concepts and meanings characteristic to each culture, the forms of expressing universal human ideas characteristic to any culture in its historical and global context;
- knowledge and understanding of, and the ability to ability to analyse and interpret, similarities and differences in various customs and cultural traditions;
- awareness of the great variety of views, customs, and habits in the world;
- tolerance of others, irrespective of their ethnic, national, or cultural origin;
- recognition of the values of other cultures, and a readiness and ability to emotionally accept cultural differences;
- the need for and the ability to conduct intercultural dialogue, e.g., to achieve mutual understanding and compromise among different points of view by means of

- explanation and persuasion without applying pressure. (Heffe, 1991: 16-28; Henvi, 1994; Hantington, 1994).

Our hypothesis is that the development of students' cultural identity and cultural tolerance will present many opportunities to development individuality through the implementation of a multilingual policy in Latvian schools

**The development of cultural openness and cultural identity in school practice**

In analysing the formation of cultural identity and cultural openness, it is important to bear in mind that the cross-cultural dialogue depends to large extent on a knowledge of foreign languages. I first analysis the current situation in foreign language learning in Latvian schools.

**Figure 1 The percentage of students learning foreign languages in general secondary schools in Latvia in the academic year 1999/2000**

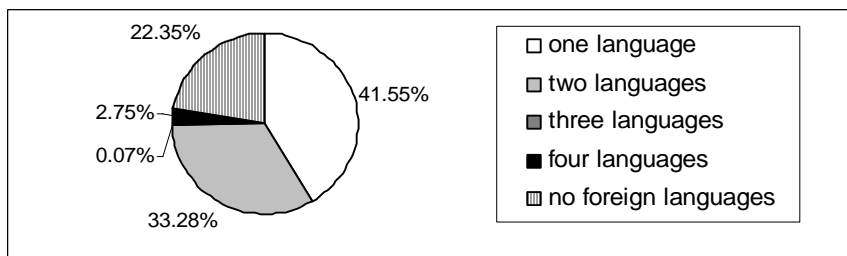


Figure 1 shows that while the majority of Latvian students studied one foreign language (41.6%), a large number did not take any foreign languages (22.4%). The range of languages taught in Latvian schools has changed considerably in recent years. English, German, French and Russian have been traditionally taught in Latvian schools, but now more and more people study Swedish, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, and other languages.

**Figure 2 Number of students learning the most popular foreign languages**

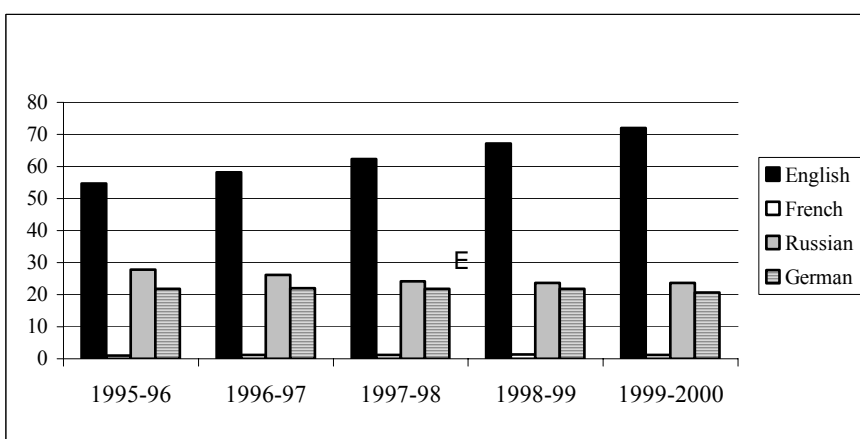


Figure 2 shows that compared to previous years the number of English and French language learners has increased: English from 54.6% to 72.1%; French from 1.1% to 1.2%. In contrast, there has been a decline in the number of the Russian language learners: from 27.8% to 23.6%. The number of German language learners remained at approximately the same level for four academic years (21.8% - 21.7%), but it fell slightly in the last year of the research to 20.6%.

The list of the other foreign languages taught in Latvian schools has remained unchanged (Table 1) but the number of students acquiring them is very small, e.g. Italian 0.001%, Swedish 0.19%. The analysis shows that one student acquiring many languages marks a new step in Latvian language policy. In preparation for accession to the EU, favourable conditions for the acquisition of foreign languages and for the development of cultural openness and cultural identity have been created. Within the framework of the European language policy the acquisition of many languages has become a reality and topical in Latvian schools.

*The multi-language acquisition process within the implementation of the policy of cultural identity and cultural openness in Latvia*

A socio-cultural model of learning is used to stimulate learning oriented to cultural identity and openness. The model emphasises the unity and variety of languages and cultures, with its theoretical principles as the basis for foreign language teaching curriculum design. The curriculum content provides basic skills for foreign language use and stimulates learners' development of social experience. A socio-cultural approach to language learning involves the development of personality through socialisation and the formation of socio-cultural competence.

Socio-cultural competence - based on knowledge, experience, values and attitudes - is demonstrated by a readiness and ability to function in a complex social world. The modular-based German language curricula used in Latvia are particularly interesting in this respect. They include cyclic components: thematic, textual, grammatical and lexical exercises and activities, intercultural and socio-cultural knowledge, cooperative and individual forms of learning. This model of socio-cultural learning is designed and implemented through the cooperation of teachers and students, and involves several processes, for example obtaining information, integrating the development of language skills, and cooperating and learning individually. The learning process stimulates the development of the learner's personality: its methodology is based on theories, such as that of integrated activities and of the interaction of personality development with cultural environment.

In an information society in which the amount of information is increasing dramatically, it is important to use foreign languages as a means of students' self-development, cooperation, and coexistence in a multicultural world. The development of cultural identity and cultural openness in the process of foreign language learning closely interacts with the development of the student's individuality.

Figure 3 shows the learner's progress from the pedagogical aim to the results of the learning process.

**Table 1 Foreign language learners in Latvian education institutions, academic year 1999/2000**

Foreign language	English	Danish	French	Estonian	Italian	Hebrew	Japanese	Russian	Latin	Norwegian	Polish	Finnish	Spanish	German	Swedish
No of schools	1018	4	62	1	1	2	1	731	5	2	1	3	11	628	19
Total for Form 1-12	<b>246530</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>4410</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>81874</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>71229</b>	<b>638</b>
F1	1918		100	18		23	15	26			39			219	
F2	2752		111	16		30	12	534			55			469	
F3	26770		128	15		35	12	534			55			655	
F4	26653		108	14		29	12	916			50			800	
F5	32899		170	14		34	15	3107			47			3068	
F6	33551		328	14		33	12	17196			37		51	8928	
F7	29642		307	12		44	14	15770			20		44	9451	
F8	23444	15	373				11	13263		9		2	19	8313	
F9	22126	15	260	11		23	11	15595		14		7	45	9181	
F10	17274	16	906			12	16	6262	107	57		12	123	10806	198
F11	16125	42	921		1	30	10	5318	84	46		15	82	10500	278
F12	13313	29	698		1	20	8	2823	68	32		11	78	8839	162

(Report on Teaching Foreign Languages, 2000)

**Figure 3 Learner's progress from the pedagogical aim to the results of learning (acquisition of the second foreign language)**

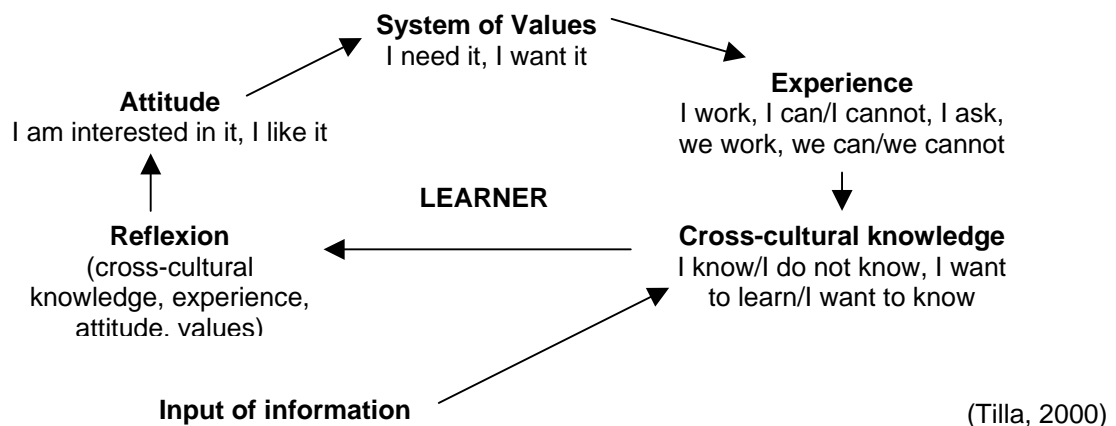


Figure 3 shows how in the process of learning students select items from the curriculum that correspond to their needs and interests. As a result, their motivation in the learning process increases. The curricula offers a choice of topics, texts, cross-cultural and socio-cultural elements: students can decide themselves what topics they want information about. It is not important what lexical material they work with; what is important is the acquisition of cross-cultural values, socio-cultural knowledge and skills, and the development of the system of values in the learning process.

While gathering information about their peers in other countries, and comparing this with their own experience - and thus understanding which are common and which distinctive elements in different cultures and languages - students develop a more tolerant attitude towards the other. Every topic acquires a cross-cultural dimension.

By secondary school, students' interests have become more global, their intellectual abilities developed, and their needs differentiated. Students acquire experience of socio-cultural learning by choosing topics, kinds of texts, using language for obtaining socio-cultural information, as well as for identification, comparison, and evaluation of information. This learning process also includes a specific socio-cultural dimension. Students develop a certain attitude to themselves and their own culture, and towards others and their culture. They acquire language both through cooperative forms of learning and individually, by activating their background knowledge and by seeking, selecting, and choosing the informational materials and means of expressing their thoughts in cooperative activities. In addition students are required to evaluate the success of their learning and their personal development, and must if necessary repeat the learning tasks.

The first tasks in each curriculum unit are those that activate the learner's background knowledge. This process is very important, as each student has learning strategies, skills, and experience acquired when learning both their native language and their first foreign language. Students are also encouraged to use the experience they have acquired while using the internet, communicating by email, watching television, and so on. Tasks in the next phase require students to use language to obtain new information from pictures and photographs and by listening and reading (both simultaneously and sequentially).

Students process the information by structuring the text, marking, recognising international words, etc. This is followed by the tasks of selecting and arranging information (making tables, filling in forms), and by communicating the information to others (speaking, listening, reading, and communicating visual information through charts, collages and comments). In these activities students are encouraged to use issues they have encountered in learning other subjects and in social situations. Second foreign language acquisition starts with cooperative forms of learning and continues individually: in the acquisition of a third foreign language, cooperative learning predominates.

The next step is an evaluation phase: students check whether they have understood the material and can perform all the tasks independently. Choosing a particular topic within a broader thematic area, and planning and completing the tasks independently, students evaluate not only the information obtained but also the process of learning itself. Socio-cultural competence is the goal of learning a second and a third foreign language. It is an ability based on socio-cultural knowledge, experience, attitude, and values, which manifests itself as a readiness for action.

The implementation of this socio-cultural approach to learning foreign languages in Latvian schools has created an opportunity to greatly enrich students' personalities in terms of their cultural identity and cultural openness. This has been achieved by developing students' skills to analyse and interpret the universal elements of culture, by building up tolerance and the ability to conduct a cross-cultural dialogue. Consequently, the development of student's personality is also promoted in the process of foreign language learning.

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