

**“We have just one state language. Why should I study the other?”  
Some observations of the language diversity in Latvia**

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a summary of the author’s observations, experiences, interpretations and some facts regarding the language diversity and specifically the usage of Latvian and Russian obtained while staying in Latvia as an Erasmus Mundus exchange researcher.

**Key words:** Latvia, state language, language minorities, language diversity

**Background.** Initially, when I was just about to apply to participate in the Erasmus Mundus Program I had no intentions to have this would-be mobility in Latvia. I was much more interested in going to the “real Europe” (sorry about that – I will have to ask for pardon several times within this paper) as Latvia, being a former Soviet Republic, did not seem likely to offer new insights (I previously have had long-term scholarships in the USA and India). In addition, I knew that “they do not like Russians there”. However, since my research project focused on the transition from a traditional Russian education model to a European one, it made more sense to explore how they were dealing with this process in the Eastern European countries which used to have educational systems similar to ours. That is how I found myself in Riga in August, 2013.

According to Wikipedia (sorry for using it as a main information source but I do prefer to rely on the widely available facts presented in a more or less neutral way as the topic is quite sensitive)

*Latvia is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. It is bordered by Estonia, Lithuania, Russia, Belarus and by a maritime border to the west with Sweden. Latvia has 2,003,000 inhabitants and a territory of 64,589 km<sup>2</sup>.*

*The sole official language of Latvia is Latvian, which belongs to the Baltic language group of the Indo-European language family. Russian, which was widely spoken during the Soviet period, is still the most widely used minority language by far (about 34% speak it at home, including persons who are not ethnically Russian). While it is now required that all school students learn Latvian, most schools also include English and either German or Russian in their curricula. The English language is widely accepted in Latvia, especially in business and tourism. As of 2014 there are 109 schools for minorities that use Russian as the language of instruction for 40% of subjects (the rest 60% of subjects are taught in Latvian), however the Latvian government is planning to completely abolish Russian as the language of instruction by 2018.*

*On 18 February 2012, Latvia held a constitutional referendum on whether to adopt Russian as a second official language. According to the Central Election Commission, 74.8% voted against, 24.88% voted for and the voter turnout was 71.11%. However, a large part of Latvia's Russian speaking community (290,660 or 14.1% of Latvia's entire population) could not vote in this referendum because they hold non-citizen status and thus have no right to vote.*

Those are just some facts and figures. But how is it really playing out in everyday life? Up to the time of writing this paper I have spent nine months in Latvia. At the moment I am ready to share some of the observations and experiences of mine obtained during this period of time.

**Unplanned research.** First of all, I never planned to explore this particular topic. What is more, I understood that I was doing that when I already got some data to analyze. This unplanned research seemed to start in a couple of days after my arrival and never stopped after that. To explain how it could be that you do research without a clear understanding of what you are doing I am going to describe several “snapshots” of the events, everyday situations or conversations I observed or participated in.

*An old gentleman selling used goods in the local market: “Girl, I am an old Jew though they believe I am Russian; during Soviet times I was a military engineer working for the local industry but lost my job after the independence and you see what I have finally got in this country.”*

*A Russian-speaking young lady recollecting the stories her teacher told her: “When she arrived to Latvia as a young Soviet specialist she was very friendly, open and eager to learn Latvian, but she mispronounced most of the words and made other mistakes in her speech so locals kept on telling her, “Do not spoil our language, speak your Russian.” So she stopped trying”.*

*A middle-aged Latvian companion of mine for a daily trip to Lithuania speaking Russian quite fluently: “I used to have a Russian-speaking friend when I was a kid so I could speak Russian since I was four; then I started watching Russian cartoons and movies and I am still reading books published in Russian”.*

*A Russian-speaking cleaning lady in the dormitory for exchange students: “I can not find any better job as I am not a citizen. If only I could move to Russia...”*

*An elderly professor in the students’ restaurant in the main building of Latvian University where I asked a female food server both in Russian and in English, “What is in the food?” who commented: “Do not torture her, speak normally”.*

*A twenty-something-year-old Russian-speaking female student who burst into tears when I told her that she must speak Latvian as she was born in this country: “I hate being forced to do that”.*

*A high school Latvian-speaking boy who replied in Latvian quite haughtily that he does not speak any Russian when I asked him to let me pass through the door; he disappeared once I offered to communicate in English.*

*Two Latvian personal coaches in the fitness center, both speaking two languages, one – Latvian and Russian, the other – Latvian and English: “Speaking only Latvian is not enough to get a good job”.*

*March, 16, Latvian Legion Day: Russian-speaking individuals and groups shouting “Shame on you!” along with elderly Latvian ladies cheering Waffen SS soldiers and other participants in the procession with applause and flowers; and police officers protecting another old lady speaking Russian and holding pictures taken in Salaspils concentration camp with the words “Never forget what you did”.*

*Two elderly ladies met at the bus stop, one is Latvian, the other is Russian; Latvian lady asking about the schedule in Latvian, Russian indicating in Russian that “she is very sorry but...”, and the rest of communication in Russian: “Come and sit with me, we can talk while riding”.*

Such short situations, incidental acquaintances, spontaneous conversations occurred again and again and I found myself more and more not only involved but also active in encouraging my interlocutors to reveal their understanding of the current language situation in Latvia. Something that started as naturalistic covert observation turned into participant disguised observation and in a while into deep interviewing. When I understood that I was actually doing research I began to make notes after having conversations with various people met in various contexts (as a result I have collected about 30 records). Most of them were not aware of the fact that they became participants of such unplanned research but it is almost impossible to identify

them so I strongly believe that their privacy is protected. Those who were aware of the fact that I might use the information they provided for research purposes asked not to reveal their personal data as the topic – as I have mentioned before – is quite sensitive. So all the names are changed and only very basic personal data is used to describe the respondents. 90% of them are females; all are more or less bilingual and speak at least some Russian. While interviewing I did not use a strict set of questions but the structure was always the same: questions about the respondent's mother tongue (the language of thinking and communication at home), the language currently used in the family, proficiency in other languages, the informant's understanding of the main factors of proficiency or the lack of proficiency in Russian for Latvian speakers and in Latvian for Russian speakers, their children's proficiency in both languages (or their intentions to support bilingualism of their children in the future).

**Results and dissemination.** I do not plan to analyze quantitatively and publish the results obtained during this research initiated mainly for developing my own cultural awareness and understanding of the issue. I decided to use some of the examples as illustrations of the tendencies in Latvian society that I could observe while staying in the country. My interpretation of those tendencies was presented in a form of a workshop to the participants of the 13th International students' research conference held on May 13-16, 2014 at the Latvian University, Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art. If this paper reaches the audience of that workshop, especially those who found my speech disrespectful and even offensive, I do beg their pardon again. I chose to be provocative intentionally as I did not want just to inform but rather to urge people to change the situation in case if they started feeling change is worth while.

As the main theme of the aforementioned conference was internationalization for sustainable development I entitled my workshop, "Intercultural competence for sustainable development" and started by providing the key definitions. In the context of internationalization of education I interpret sustainable development in a broader way as a durable development on both individual [personal (adaptability) and professional (competitiveness)] and societal [social (balance) and economical (prosperity)] levels.

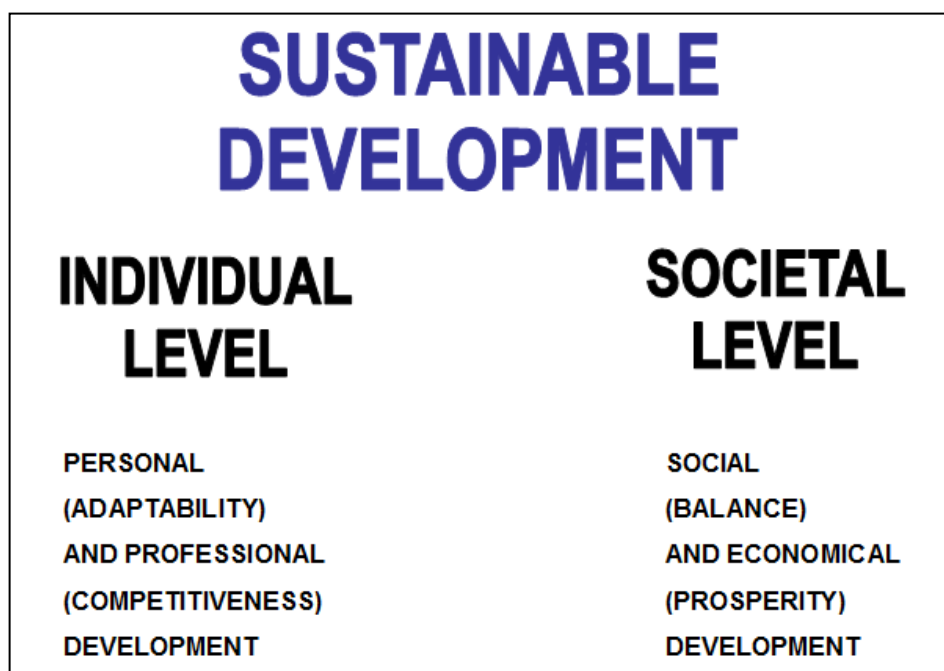


Figure 1. The author's interpretation of sustainable development

Following Barrett M., et al, (2013) I define intercultural competence as the ability to understand and communicate with each other across all kinds of cultural divisions and

distinguish language and social aspects of this ability. I believe that those two aspects can be coupled with three of eight European Union key competencies for life-long learning (2006):

1. communication in the mother tongue (the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts),

2. communication in foreign languages (mentioned above plus mediation and intercultural understanding), and,

3. social competence (personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence and all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life).

After that the participants of the workshop were asked to complete a kind of a simple psychological test. I requested that they not reveal their personal results as I was going to speak about quite controversial issues and preferred to avoid addressing anyone personally. This “test” included some of the questions I had used to interview the informants. The first question “What is your mother tongue?” had three response options: “Latvian”, “other”, “Russian” presented in an alphabetical order. As the audience was quite multi-ethnic (Austrian, Chinese and Spanish students along with Latvian Latvians and Latvian Russians), I explained that “others” would have no other test questions as it would be based on the case of Latvia. Then both Latvian and Russian speaking participants were asked if they are proficient in any other language besides their mother tongue (they were as they participated in a workshop provided in English). The last question was about proficiency in Latvian for Russians and proficiency in Russian for Latvians. Based upon individual responses to those three questions, the participants could find themselves in some part of a proposed chart and those whose “position” was in the red circle in the middle could be considered not to be interculturally competent enough in Latvia and, so to speak, in danger in this particular economy. To support that I used the stories and opinions provided by the informants in my research. Most of those in this category were mono-lingual Latvian-speaking students as I found that almost all Russian-speaking students of the same age were able to speak Latvian.



Figure 2. A model of “testing” the language proficiency of workshop participants

So, why do I believe that the lack of proficiency in the largest minority language in Latvia affects the development of intercultural competence of young Latvians and thus the possibility of their sustainable development as individuals and society members?

1. The lack of language competence → the lack of adaptability

*An anonymous female student at the workshop: “It was my choice not to learn Russian as we had so many troubles with Russia in the past”.*

As J. Hughes (2005) states Russian-speakers in Latvia constitute one of the largest linguistic minorities in Europe and according to the E. Krivtsova (2014) the statistics of 2009 shows that only 8% of the country population does not master the state language and none of them are schoolchildren. That means that due to the educational policy of the Latvian government in the near future almost every Latvian Russian will be proficient in Latvian. At the moment Latvian Latvians (I am using these two definitions to speak about citizenship and ethnic identity at the same time as in Russian there are separate words for them: “россиянин” / “русский”; “латвиец” / “латыш”, etc.) have a chance to exclude Russians by means of language and I observed and was personally involved in numerous situations when it was intentionally and obviously demonstrated. So currently those Russians who do not speak Latvian experience the lack of ability to successfully adapt to the social environment, fully participate in some events and feel comfortable. In but a few years, it will be non-Russian-speaking Latvians who may feel really uncomfortable when they are not able to understand what is told about them behind their backs or even openly while their bilingual counterparts will be just fine.

The common belief among young Latvians that it was their choice to avoid learning Russian is questionable. They were too young when it became too late to become really bilingual. In addition, many of the “historical facts” used to support this idea are often not facts at all but quite ambiguous interpretations of the past events. What do they actually mean when speak about “troubles with Russia”? Peter the Great’s historical purchase in the 18th century? The Red Latvian Riflemen who arrived in my home region in Russia in 1918 to stifle the local workers and peasants’ uprising against Bolsheviks and killed numerous people? Of course, they are speaking about Soviet occupation. But wait a minute, it is Soviet, not Russian. Ordinary Russians often helped Latvians deported in 1940’s to Siberia to survive and there must be some youngsters who were born just because some Russian shared their shelter and very limited food supplies with their grandparents (according to my Latvian informants). Russians along with other nations fought and died for Baltic cities during the war against Nazis (my own grandfather was wounded on the battlefield in Lithuania). So it must be the cruel Soviet Government who caused all those troubles. If so it is a good idea to check the nationality of the “country managers” from those days and count ethnical Russians. Or they just do not distinguish and prefer to avoid Russian as *lingua franca* used for interethnic communication during and after Soviet period? Though I respect this choice (no matter who really made it) I should remark that due to my observations made in another country – India – only an insane Indian parent would prevent their children from studying English if there is a chance to do that and they could tell us much more about occupation and its consequences.

2. The lack of language competence → the lack of competitiveness in the labour market

*Indra, 38, a Latvian owner of a beauty salon in the city center of Riga: “I would hire a Latvian who speaks no Russian only if I had absolutely no other option”.*

I am not an expert in economy so I prefer to stay away from the topics I am not competent enough to comment on. But even general information obtained from Wikipedia (sorry again and again) shows that Latvia and Russia are very close partners in terms of economy: as of 2012,

Russia was Latvia's main export partner and third most important import partner. In addition, as of 2010, 67.2% of the Latvian labour force was occupied in services. "Services" involve "working with people". I have already mentioned that Russian-speaking minority is quite large (more than 30% of population). Besides, Baltic region is getting more and more popular with tourists from the Russian Federation and other former Soviet Republics who often prefer to speak Russian rather than any other language. According to Latvijas statistika database there were 356,900 non-resident travellers from Russia in 2008. Unfortunately, no updates since that time but according to the web-site of one of the largest Russian tour companies the amount of Russian tourists visiting Latvia increased by 96% in 2011 compared to the same period of the previous year.

At the same time, I am not even able to count how many times I have observed a situation when a Latvian-speaking shop assistant or cashier had to call a bilingual co-worker as he or she was not able to understand the needs of the client. There are still lots of companies where the management is loyal to the ethnic majority but many employers prefer their employees to speak two (Latvian and Russian) or even more languages to make their businesses more attractive for the customers. Currently, the idea that future professionals should speak the languages of neighboring countries is quite strong. For instance, in Austrian Carinthia I had a chance to visit a bilingual vocational school in which they teach in both German and Slovene. And, of course, in English and sometimes in Italian and even Russian as the director Mr. Stefan Schellander seems to be a language addict in the most positive sense of this word. In this school they believe that their graduates will have many more job opportunities in this border region if they speak as many languages as possible. Russia is the largest neighbor of Latvia with the population of more than 140 000 000 people. Even if just one million come and each brings only 100 euros it will have a great impact on the Latvian economy, won't it? Guess who will mainly work with those tourists. Those who are able to communicate with them.

3. The lack of language competence → the lack of contribution for social balance and integration

*Olga, 35, a Russian married to a Latvian man with an absolutely bilingual kid and lots of Latvian-speaking friends on the events in Ukraine: "If they gave us guns and rifles we would soon easily find an enemy to shoot".*

There could be another hundred examples like those mentioned in the second section of this paper illustrating that Latvian society is quite diverse and – I am very sorry again – quite disintegrated. Interethnic stereotyping, the legal status of non-citizens, different interpretations of the past events are other very sensitive issues a foreigner can easily notice while staying in Latvia for a more or less long period of time. Those aged 15 to 30 were born or started to socialize in the 1990's which seemed to be an era of hatred and a very strong anti-Soviet / anti-Russian ideology in most of the former Soviet republics. A lot of Russians had to migrate to Russia or to other countries all over the world as they could not adapt to the new post-Soviet realities in their former home countries. Those who chose to stay had to struggle against the attempts to forcibly change their ethnic identity. Many of them are still struggling. The same is true about some Latvians who intended to eliminate Russian from as many spheres as possible. Trying to prove that the counterpart was "the first to start", was "the guiltiest", etc. does not help to reach intercultural understanding. We should never forget our history but it might be a good idea to be more concentrated on possible cooperation in the future rather than on troubles and misunderstandings from the past. Being able to speak the same language as "the foe" may help to understand another culture from the inside and accept the differences.

4. The lack of language competence → the lack of contribution for economical prosperity of the country

*Elena, 40, a teacher of Russian as a second language: "For some of my former Latvian students it appeared to be much easier to find a job abroad rather than here in Riga".*

I will be short as it is economy-related again. It is quite logical that people who do not fit the requirements of the labour market in their home country have to migrate for better job opportunities. Both Latvian Russians and Latvian Latvians have to use this strategy to provide for themselves and their families so being fluent in English or any other (European) language helps them succeed in the new country. Many of them being really successful never come back or visit Latvia just occasionally to see their relatives or to see the doctors who are as competent as their colleagues in other countries but less expensive. Even though those labour migrants bring some money to the economy when they come to Latvia, they are not tax-payers; their professional skills often obtained through getting a good education in their home country do not contribute to its development. And (though this may be too scholastic), when more and more ethnic Latvians leave the country (according to Latvijas statistika database 25,163 individuals left the country in 2012 and 13,303 immigrate to Latvia which means that only that year the Latvian population decreased by 11,860 inhabitants; no data about the ethnic identity of the emigrants but it is obvious that some of them are Latvian Latvians) it seems to make the nation weaker and weaker. I know that such ideas are supersensitive for the majority representatives especially when the concept of "the dying nation" emerges (I should stress that I am not so pessimistic) but it is worth thinking about the current situation more critically in order to foresee possible troubles in the future.

**Conclusions.** Those four points were more or less what I tried to present during the abovementioned workshop. It was more than predictable that the target audience was not pleased to hear these observations. I also did not feel really comfortable as "I hate giving good people bad news" as the Oracle told Neo (The Matrix, 1999). I am not a spiritualist or fortune-teller but I strongly believe that young Latvian Latvians deserve being warned about the possible negative consequences of their decision not to speak any Russian. It is great to feel safe and self-sufficient just because you are at home in your native country. But life is constantly changing and individuals will not always have a chance to stay in their "comfort zone" forever. Anyway, if a person believes that it is absolutely impossible or unnecessary for him or her to learn any Russian it may be a good idea to develop a social component of intercultural competence as learning foreign language is obviously not the only way to improve it [Bennett, J. (2011); Recognising intercultural competence (2012)]. What is more, I am quite positive and believe that young Latvians are still young enough to catch up. Many of them are able to speak some Russian but they may feel shy and lack confidence because of their strong accent and other mistakes in their speech. So it will be important for Russians to support Latvians when they try to speak the other language. And as for the next generation – born in 2000's – it is my hope (and I have already heard about this tendency) that more and more Latvian parents convince their children to choose Russian as their second language at school so they seem to be more oriented towards future rather than past and prefer to think more economically rather than ideologically.

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