

SECOND LANGUAGE GRAMMAR OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN ACQUIRING LATVIAN IN AN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

Ingēra Tomme-Jukēvica
Liepaja University (LATVIA)

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LATVIEŠU VALODA
VALSTS PĒTĪJUMU PROGRAMMA

Introduction

- In Latvia, a new bilingual education model (grades 1-6) will be introduced, ensuring that at least 50 percent of the study contents is in the official language – Latvian (L2) in 2019/2020.
- Previous data (2015) suggest L2 grammar skills of children who studied L2 through pre-school programs adopting formal L2 instruction are not appropriate to enter primary education with 50 percent of the study contents in Latvian.
- It was decided to replicate the experiment to see if there are any pertinent changes in the grammatical competence of preschoolers to ensure their conformity to a new bilingual education model.

Objectives

- Provide an insight into the Latvian language (L2) grammar of preschool Russophone children acquiring Latvian through formal L2 instruction in a pre-school educational institution (PEI)
 - to compare it with the data collected in 2015
 - to identify more difficult grammatical categories to be acquired
 - to explain influence of the mother tongue

Methodology (1): Participants

- twelve 6-year-old bilingual children, who come from monolingual families, speaking Russian (L1) and acquiring L2 (Latvian) in an instructional setting according to the Minority Preschool Education Program (with instruction in Russian)
- have started studying Latvian adopting formal L2 instruction
 - from the age of 3: two classes per week (10-12 min)
 - from the age of 4: two classes per week (15-20 min)
 - from the age of 5: three classes per week (20-25 min)
 - at the age of 6: three classes per week (30 min)
- motivated to learn L2 through informal language environment in real everyday situations during extra-curricular activities, games and walks

Methodology (2): Research instruments and procedures

- Interview – to obtain more detailed information from the Latvian language teacher about the children's L2 proficiency level and grammar acquisition practice
- Grammar test – designed by the researcher
- Experimental study – to examine the preschoolers' receptive and productive L2 grammar skills

Methodology (3): Grammar test

- to examine the children's ability to perceive and produce grammatical categories indicated in the Minority Preschool Education Program (with instruction in Russian):
 - number of nouns – singular and plural in nominative case
 - personal pronouns in nominative case (3 person singular)
 - personal pronouns in dative case (3 person singular)
 - demonstrative pronouns in nominative case
 - the negative verb forms (3 person singular)
 - noun inflexion forms in nominative and accusative case
 - the agreement of adjective and noun by gender and number in nominative case
 - the agreement of numeral and noun by gender and number in nominative case
 - preposition and noun inflexion forms in genitive case

Methodology (4): Grammar test

- each grammatical category – three test items (pictures)
- only one picture corresponds exactly with the test item
- second picture – closely related with the prompt at a semantic level, but deviates with regard to the grammatical item being tested
- third picture – distractor, semantically different from the prompt

e.g., *Suns negu!* (The dog is not sleeping)

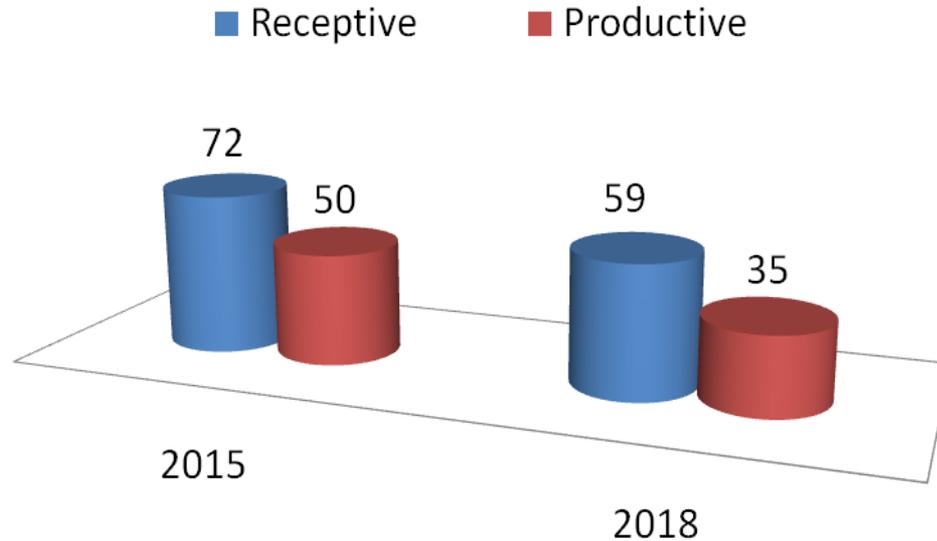


Methodology (5): Experimental study

- Receptive grammar knowledge test – test item presented in the form of word/sentence; participant chose out of three pictures the one which represented the prompt
- Productive grammar knowledge test – the researcher pointed out to one of the three pictures, asked encouraging question about it. Child – expected to answer the question applying L2 morphology or morphosyntax of the grammatical category being tested
- The receptive and productive grammar skills assessed calculating the total number of correct and erroneous usages for each grammatical category
- A list of utterances used was generated, the types of errors – identified

Results (1): Overall test results

- Receptive skills (72% – 2015, 59% – 2018)
- Productive skills (50% – 2015, 35% – 2018)



Results (2): Grammatical categories

Receptive language skills

- Best

Agreement of the numeral and noun by gender and number (100% – 2015, 94% – 2018)

- Worst

Demonstrative pronouns (44% – 2015, 42% – 2018)

Productive language skills

- Best

Personal pronouns in nominative case (89% – 2015, 78% – 2018)

- Worst

*Preposition and noun inflexion form in genitive case (8% – 2015),
Demonstrative pronouns – not used at all*

Results (3): Grammatical categories

No	Grammatical Category	Receptive (%)		Productive (%)	
		2015	2018	2015	2018
1	Number of nouns – singular and plural (nominative)	75	42	67	14
2	Personal pronouns (nominative, 3 person singular)	89	61	89	78
3	Personal pronouns (dative, 3 person singular)	69	53	83	72
4	Demonstrative pronouns (nominative)	44	42	–	–
5	Negative verb forms (3 person singular)	97	75	86	75
6	Noun inflexion forms (nominative and accusative)	50	42	25	6
7	Agreement of the adjectives and nouns by gender and number (nominative)	67	53	33	19
8	Agreement of the numeral and noun by gender and number (nominative)	100	94	64	53
9	Preposition and noun inflexion forms (genitive)	58	72	8	–

Results (4)

Grammatical categories

- *Preposition and noun inflexion forms in genitive case* – much better perceived (58% – 2015, 72% – 2018) than produced (8% – 2015)
- *Number of nouns – singular and plural (nominative)* – much better perceived (75%) and produced (67%) in 2015 than in 2018 – perceived (42%), produced (14%)

From the interview:

- Direct attention
- Frequent use in Latvian classes
- Individual differences of children – one of the reasons why overall results in all grammatical categories are worse in the 2018 study than in the 2015 study
- The other reason – data of 2015 were collected at the end of the study year, data of 2018 – earlier, in the middle of the study year

Results (5): Erroneous utterances

- do not understand the grammatical correlations
 - ✓ omit and do not pronounce the endings of the words
e.g., *zēn*, *balt*, *dīvan* (boy, white, sofa)
 - ✓ use the wrong morpheme (less often)
e.g., *balte* instead of *balṭs* (white)
- cannot form numerical and gender grammatical meaning
 - ✓ there are mixed forms of gender, number and case
e.g., male personal pronouns *viṅi*, *viṅam* (they, him) instead of a female gender pronoun *viṅai* (her)
- separate words rather than full sentences
e.g., *sarkana* (red) instead of *Rozes ir sarkanās* (Roses are red), or *viṅam, kaḳis* (him, cat) instead of *Viṅam ir kaḳis* (He has got a cat)
- mother tongue
 - ✓ lexical units spoken in Russian
e.g., *котики*, *утки*, *три*, *белый*, *под столом* (cats, ducks, three, white, under the table)

Conclusions (1)

- Acquiring L2 grammar children's receptive language skills precede the productive language skills, i.e. Russophone preschoolers develop the understanding of affixes earlier than the ability to use these affixes productively.
- Children show better perception of agreement of the numeral and noun in case and number and negative verb forms, they less perceive demonstrative pronouns and differences between noun inflexion forms in nominative and accusative case.
- Children better produce the personal pronouns in nominative case and the negative verb forms, but worse – preposition and noun inflexion forms in genitive case; demonstrative pronouns are not used at all.
- Similar to the acquisition of L1, the L2 basic grammatical categories, which require smaller changes, are learned faster. In the same way, the phonetic similarity of semantic and grammatical categories, e.g., *trīs* – *mpu* (three) or *neskrien* – *he бежум* (is not running) gives children an opportunity to understand and produce the corresponding grammatical units more accurately.

Conclusions (2)

- Children omit the endings of the words and mostly produce separate words rather than full sentences; they do not manage the grammatical structures of sentences, so they mention only the word they certainly know. Characteristically, while speaking L2, children use their mother tongue.
- The frequency of L2 grammatical forms in the language input, which is planned by the curriculum and is implemented in PEI, does not provide children with the opportunity to acquire the grammar categories of the Latvian language completely and qualitatively. It is necessary to be exposed to a high frequency of permanent language input to create the activation of single grammatical forms and morphemes. In future, the acquisition of L2 grammar should be more closely linked to the Latvian environment and carried out through content and language integrated learning.
- Preschoolers' L2 grammar skills in 2018 are similar to 2015 at a very low level to acquire the study contents in Latvian at school. A wide range of materials is needed to precisely interpret the facts and generalize imperfect utterances.



Thank You!

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