



METHODS OF TEACHING RUSSIAN  
AS A NATIVE, NON-NATIVE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
МЕТОДИКА ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА  
КАК РОДНОГО, НЕРОДНОГО, ИНОСТРАННОГО

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Research article

**Orthographic literacy  
of Russian-speaking schoolchildren in Latvia**

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**Abstract.** The research is devoted to one of the current problems of speech development of Russian-speaking schoolchildren of the diaspora (grades 4, 6 and 9) – orthographic literacy and is intended to contribute to the research on this problem. The topicality of the problem is substantiated by the necessity to explore the issues related to the quality of written speech, including orthographic knowledge and skills in the Russian (native) language of bilingual schoolchildren living outside Russia. The topic has not been sufficiently studied. The aim of the research is to describe the orthographic literacy of Latvian Russian-speaking schoolchildren of grades 4, 6 and 9 in 2015–2021. The research is based on the analysis of written works of 11 938 schoolchildren that were developed by the author of the article and specialists of education and science of Latvia. The methods of research include comparative, statistical, focus-group discussion. The research results: 1) the level of orthographic literacy of Latvian Russian-speaking bilinguals remains low; 2) the same typical spelling mistakes are found in the speech of schoolchildren of all ages, but the mistakes rate depends on the bilingual education model; 3) schoolchildren have difficulties in spelling arguments; 4) the main reasons of schoolchildren’s spelling mistakes in Russian include the low motivation of schoolchildren to develop literacy in written speech, interlanguage interference, insufficient amount of school hours on studying spelling material of the Russian language at school; 5) the literacy in Russian is less important than in English and Latvian in the value paradigm of schoolchildren. According to the new educational reform of Latvia (Skola2030), the number of Russian language lessons in schools for national minorities is significantly reduced. It is possible to predict a further decline in the level of spelling in schoolchildren in the coming years. Therefore, understanding objective orthographic difficulties encountered of bilingual schoolchildren open prospects for further exploration of effective orthography strategies in teaching the mother tongue to bilingual schoolchildren in a changing environment.

**Keywords:** Russian-speaking schoolchildren, schoolchildren of the diaspora, written speech, orthographic literacy, spelling skills, spelling mistake, grammar argumentation, causes of errors, bilingual education, speech environment

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## Introduction

The development of orthographic literacy of schoolchildren has always been one of the urgent and discussed problems in the methods of learning languages in school education. It has a special significance in the methodology of teaching languages with a complex orthographic system, including the Russian language.

Discussing the necessity of developing orthographic skill, which along with reading is considered an academic skill (Zarić et al., 2020), scientists rightly point out that students' orthographic literacy is an integral part of their general language culture, an important condition for their successful education and career (Razumovskaya, 2005: 3; Valtin, 2017). The ability to spell a thought is directly related to successful written communication (Graham, Santangelo, 2014) and the development of reading skills (Snow et al., 2005). Spelling skills play an important role in the forming students' language thinking, since the spelling skill is based on intellectual actions. The formation of students' spelling skills is directly influenced by their level of intelligence (Malyavina, 2009; Ennemoser et al., 2012), but researchers also attribute an important role in the process of spelling words to implicit knowledge (Steffler, 2001; Critten et al., 2007). At the same time, it is emphasized that the development of spelling skills is a long process (Graham, Santangelo, 2014; Bukovtsova, 2016), cognitive in nature (Treiman, Bourassa, 2000), requiring students' phonological, morphemic and morphological knowledge (Boulware-Gooden et al., 2015).

In Russian science, the nature of orthographic skills and the ways and problems of their formation among schoolchildren studying Russian in the metropolitan area have been characterized with sufficient depth (see, e.g.: Zhuikov, 1965; Bogoyavlenskii, 1966; Algazina, 1987; Lvova, 2001; Razumovskaya, 2005). However, there are still few studies devoted to the state of orthographic literacy and didactic possibilities of its formation among Russian-speaking bilinguals living outside Russia (in diasporas) (see, e.g.: Korneev, Protasova, 2015; Gavrilina, 2018). At the same time, this problem is especially relevant in the diaspora, because the development of students' speech skills (including orthographic) in a bilingual educational environment has its own characteristics, spelling errors of bilinguals are caused not only by intralingual, but also interlingual reasons, the amount of school hours for orthographic material is significantly less than in the metropolis. The search for effective didactic ways for developing orthographic literacy of schoolchildren in this situation largely depends on an objective scientific analysis of students' orthography. The author of the article sees his task in contributing to the study of this problem.

**The aim** of the study is to characterize orthographic literacy of Russian-speaking schoolchildren in Latvia, their typical spelling mistakes, their causes and pupils' attitude towards their own written speech literacy.

### **Methods and materials**

The study was conducted in 2015–2021. The written papers of 11,938 4th, 6th, and 9th graders were analyzed. The choice of pupils of these ages is explained by the fact that it was important to assess orthographic knowledge and skills of the children at the end of elementary school (4th grade), at the middle stage of basic school, when most of the orthographic material is studied (6th grade), and at the end of basic school (9th grade).

Written paper for fourth graders was compiled by the author of the article and included: a) six spelling tasks, where students demonstrated knowledge and skills in spelling (including argumentation); b) a task to write an essay on a specific topic (80–120 words). For sixth- and ninth-graders written work on the Russian language was developed by specialists of Latvian Ministry of Education and Science: a) combined diagnostic work (6th grade); b) exam work (9th grade). For 10 years at the end of each academic year all sixth- and ninth-graders in Latvia wrote these papers. Traditionally the papers consisted of four parts, and each part tested a certain students' speech skill: listening, reading, grammar, and writing. Spelling tasks along with grammar and punctuation were included in the section "Grammar," their purpose was to check the development of spelling concepts and skills, the ability to argue the choice in spelling. In the last part of diagnostic and examination work ("Writing") it was offered to write an essay of 250–300 words to check the ability to create written texts and written speech literacy.

The following methods were used while analyzing the written works:

- statistical – to ascertain the frequency of spelling errors of pupils in each age group;
- comparative – to determine the "rating" of mistakes at different stages of Russian language learning (4th, 6th, 9th grades);
- analysis of the nature of spelling mistakes – to identify the causes of spelling norms violation;
- focus-group discussion – to find out pupils' attitude to orthographic literacy of their written speech (24 groups, 660 pupils, 100 4th graders, 220 6th graders, and 340 9th graders). The following issues were discussed: a) the role of literate written speech in forming personality; b) students' attitude to spelling literacy of their speech; c) attitude to lessons and fragments of lessons that focused on spelling material.

The study analyzed the students' spelling reasoning skills to understand how consciously they mastered the spelling material, controlling the literacy of their

speech behavior. It was also taken into account which model of bilingual education<sup>1</sup> is implemented in the educational process of the school, whether the specific educational situation influences the frequency and character of spelling mistakes.

## Results

The level of schoolchildren Russian orthographic literacy has been remaining unsatisfactory. Compared with other language skills (e.g., grammatical analysis of words and sentences), pupils show the lowest results in spelling. At the same time, students make spelling mistakes less often when they are asked to solve a specific spelling problem in a word (to write a missing letter), much more often in their own written texts, that is, most of them do not have a conscious spelling skill in the process of learning the Russian (native) language.

The main difficulties for pupils of all ages is the spelling of: a) the roots of words with unstressed vowels (alternating, verifiable and unverifiable); b) the particle *not* (written together and separately) with different parts of speech (in 4th grade – not with verbs); c) double consonants in the roots of words, suffixes and at the junction of morphemes (in 4th grade – in the roots); d) prefixes ending in *z* and *s*; e) words with a soft sign (different orthograms). Errors in these orthograms are often found in the texts of high school and college students. If we compare students who study according to different models of bilingual education (1–2nd and 3–4th), the former make mistakes much more often than the latter.

The most difficult, regardless of the grade, are rules on writing unstressed vowels in the roots of words (alternating, verifiable and unverifiable). The share of these errors is about 38% of the total of errors. Most often they occur in the following cases: a) if the vowel of the root is in the weak position only with prefixes (in words of different parts of speech); b) if, when checking the unstressed vowels, it is necessary to define the morphemic structure of the word; c) if the meaning of the word, its orthographic appearance is unfamiliar to students.

Rather low results are shown by pupils of all ages in the field of orthographic reasoning which indicates the formation of conscious perception of the orthographic rules of language, controlled speech behavior. 58.5% of fourth graders, 67% of sixth graders, and 66% of ninth graders make the correct choice of spelling (choices are offered), but only 31% of fourth graders, 40% of sixth graders, and 35% of ninth graders can argue it. It is typical for students of all ages to make redundant arguments. For example, a sixth-grader reasoned as follows: “I write the letter *ch* in the suffix of the word *dokladchik*, because it is a noun of

<sup>1</sup> Since 2004, schools of national minorities in Latvia have been implementing the educational process in accordance with one of four models of bilingual education proposed by the Ministry of Education and Science. The difference in these models is the share of Latvian and Russian languages in the educational process. According to the 1st and 2nd models, starting from the first grade most school subjects are studied bilingually and/or in Latvian; according to the 3rd and 4th models in elementary school teaching is carried out mainly in the Russian language, the number of subjects studied in Latvian gradually increases.

the 2nd declension, masculine gender, there is letter d before the suffix.” 56% of sixth-graders and 41% of ninth-graders experience difficulties when they need to name (remember) the rule, based on the proposed arguments, and write out words with this rule from the text. It is in the spelling argumentation that the biggest difference between pupils studying in different bilingual models is observed. Thus, 69% of fourth graders, 56% of sixth graders, and 52% of ninth graders who study in the 1st and 2nd bilingual models, on average 32% in the 3rd and 4th models cannot give correct arguments.

Analysis of the nature of spelling mistakes, as well as their reasoning during focus-group discussions allowed to formulate the main reasons for spelling rules violations:

– peculiarities of students’ system of values: during focus group discussions most of the students expressed the idea that it is more important for them to be literate in Latvian and English, as they already know Russian, as a result – low intellectual activity towards correct spelling of Russian speech;

– interlingual interference, i.e. influence of Latvian orthographic norms on Russian speech behavior of children in a situation of partial similarity or contrast, which is supported by the fact that most subjects are studied in Latvian or bilingually, and the number of Latvian language lessons from the very beginning of school education significantly exceeds the number of Russian language lessons;

– lack of school hours for Russian orthographic skills to form conscious skills, insufficient use of modern methods and techniques that could encourage students’ cognitive activity when mastering orthography, lack of cooperation between Russian language teachers and Latvian language teachers.

## Discussion

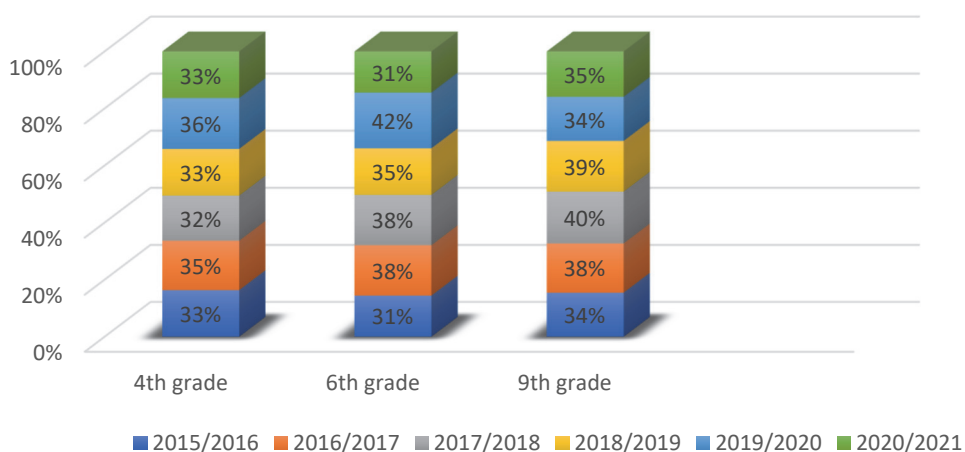
Spelling literacy indicates not only the level of language proficiency, but also a person’s exposure to universal values, one of which is, undoubtedly, literate speech. Literacy of Latvian schoolchildren is a serious problem which in some cases can be treated as dysorfographia (i.e. a persistent violation of orthographic skills by children with preserved intellect and oral speech).

### ***Spelling mistakes of schoolchildren***

The analysis of the written works of 4th, 6th and 9th graders allows to conclude that the level of their orthographic skills is remaining quite low (Figure 1).

On average, only 34% of fourth graders, 36% of sixth graders, and 37% of ninth graders make five or fewer spelling mistakes in their own texts. The nature of spelling mistakes has similarities and differences (the latter is caused by the increase in the spelling material from grade to grade). However, most often all students make mistakes in writing a) roots with unstressed vowels (alternating, verifiable and unverifiable); b) the particle *not* (written together and separately) with different parts of speech (in 4th grade – not with verbs); c) double consonants in the roots of words, suffixes and at the junction of morphemes (in 4th grade –

in the roots); d) prefixes ending in *z* and *s*; e) words with a soft sign (different spelling patterns).



**Figure 1.** Number of schoolchildren with 5 or less spelling mistakes in written tasks and texts

Spelling root vowels is the most serious problem for students of all ages. However, fourth graders, unlike sixth and ninth graders, often make mistakes even in words where the vowel is in a strong position and there is a tendency to choose the letter *o*. Sixth- and ninth-graders do not make such mistakes, but often misspell roots with alternating vowels, with the letters *o*, *yo* after hissing consonants. The frequency of these mistakes is 57% higher for students who study in the 1st bilingual model and 36% higher for those who study in the 2nd model (than for those who study in the 3rd and 4th models).

“The risky zone” for fourth graders are those cases when the particle *ne* ‘not’ is combined with “short” verbs (e.g.: *nebudu* (‘I will’), *nemogu* (‘I cannot’), *nehochu* (‘I don’t want’), *neznayu* (‘I don’t know’), etc.). If this verb is followed by the particle *by* (‘would’), pupils write it in one word (e.g.: *nemogby*, *nebylaby*, etc.). Especially often we find writing by ear in the texts of students who study in the 1st and 2nd bilingual models. Sixth- and ninth-graders make fewer mistakes in writing *not* with verbs, their “risky zone” is the spelling of the particle *not* with pronouns, adjectives, participles and gerunds; besides, they have difficulties in choosing between particles *ne* and *ni*.

Fifty-six percent of fourth graders have an “extra” soft sign between the consonant and vowel *yu*, but they pronounce words correctly, and also – spellings: *kupatsa*, *katatsa*, *sobiratsa* (usually those who study by the 1st and 2nd bilingual models). Sixth graders (42%) and ninth graders (38%) make mistakes in verbs (missing the soft sign or an extra soft sign), in short adjectives (masculine) and adverbs.

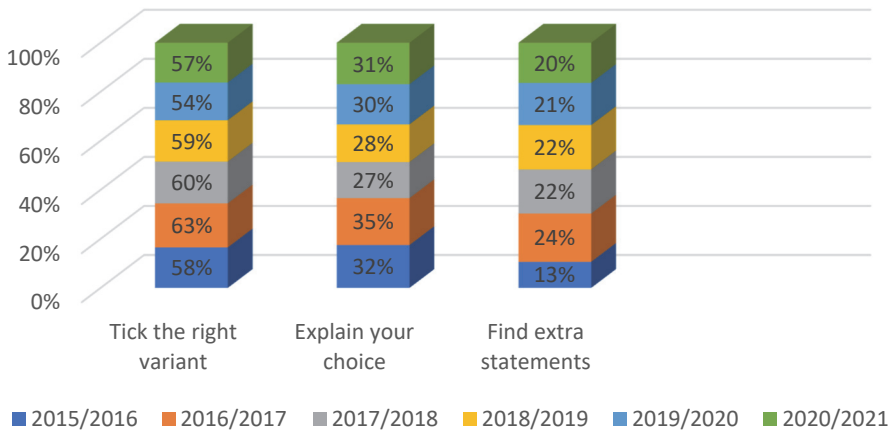
Writing words with prefixes ending in *z* and *s* 46% of fourth graders, 39% of sixth graders and 35% of ninth graders prefer the letter *z* (e.g., *bezplatny*,

*izpech*). When writing words with doubled consonants in the root of the word, 62% of students of all ages usually write one letter instead of doubled consonants. For sixth-graders (49%) and ninth-graders (34%) the same is observed when writing doubled consonants in suffixes and at the junction of morphemes.

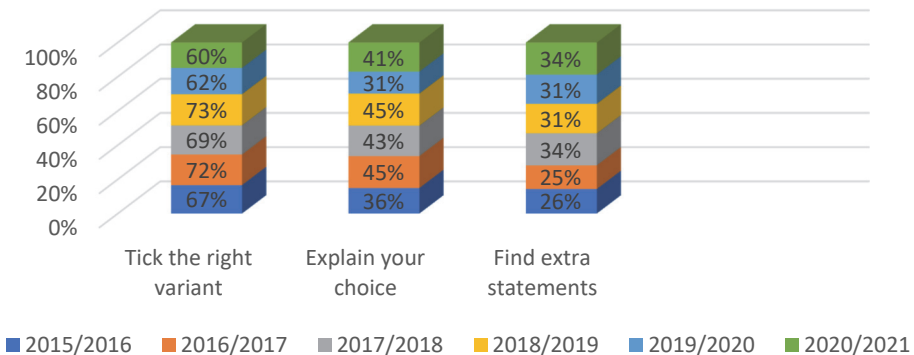
**Spelling reasoning of schoolchildren**

Spelling argumentation can be considered in a broader context – the linguistic ability of a pupil, i.e. the ability to operate with linguistic concepts, the rules of language (to think in terms of language). That is why the ability to reasonably solve spelling problems indicates the level of the students’ conscious perception of the spelling system of language, controls their speech behavior.

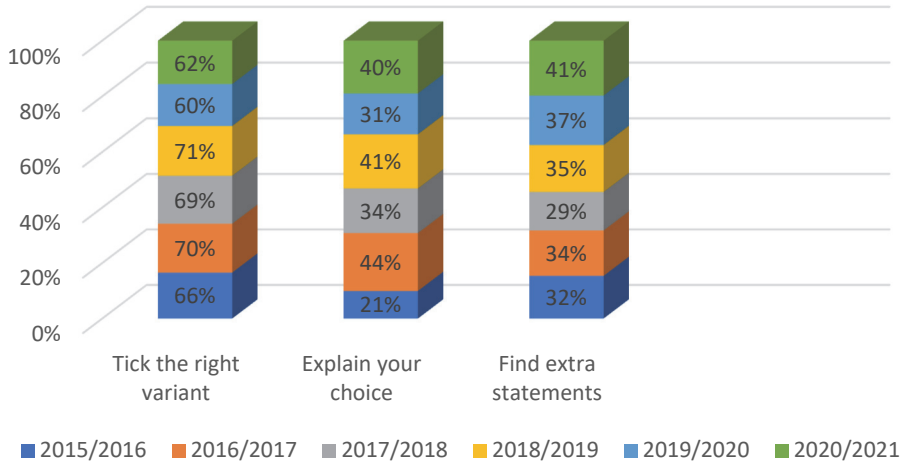
Studying the students’ spelling ability was tested using different tasks: a) to mark the correct spelling, then to give arguments; b) to join the opinion of somebody in the dialogue (text-dialogue), to argue that their choice is correct; c) to analyze the proposed arguments, to find correct, incorrect, superfluous; d) to compare two “similar” spelling, decide whether they are the same or different, to argue their position; e) to analyze a letter that is not spelled in the same way.



**Figure 2.** Number of 4th grade schoolchildren who correctly completed spelling tasks



**Figure 3.** Number of 6th grade schoolchildren who correctly completed spelling tasks



**Figure 4.** Number of 9th grade schoolchildren who correctly completed spelling tasks

From the charts below we can see that pupils of all ages cope better with the tasks to choose the correct spelling of a sentence (Figures 2–4). In the case where it is necessary to argue their choice, to find irrelevant (superfluous) arguments, the situation changes for the worse.

Here is an example of a sixth-grader’s argument: “The word *Greece* (*Gretsiya*) is capitalized, and *Greek* (*grecheskii*) is lowercase because: a) the root is the same; b) the adjective is an exception; c) it means a people or some object; d) it is a person’s nationality; e) it is not the first word in a sentence.

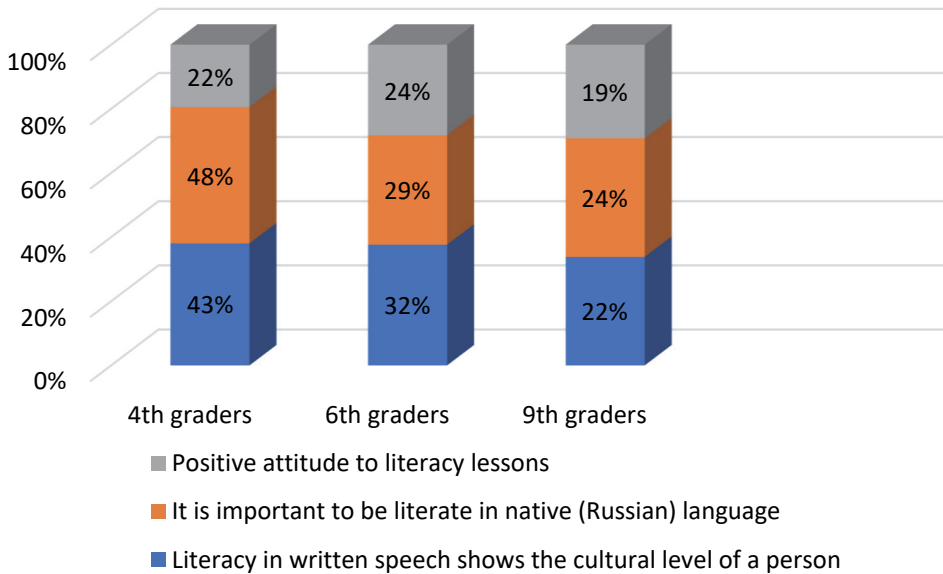
Spelling reasoning is based on the student’s deep, objective knowledge and understanding not only spelling rules, but also grammatical (morphological) rules of language. The fact that morphological awareness contributes to the development of literacy has been pointed out by many scholars (see e.g.: Lam et al., 2012; Sparks et al., 2008; Saiegh-Haddad, Taha, 2017). However, we state that it is morphology that is the weak point in the linguistic awareness of schoolchildren. So, only 17% of fourth-graders, 23% of sixth-graders and 31% of ninth-graders have a fairly high level of morphological concepts (this is evidenced by the results of morphological tasks in the diagnostic and examination works). In other words, pupils do not fully possess the morphological knowledge, necessary as arguments to prove the correctness of spelling.

### ***Analysis of the causes of spelling errors***

We can give several reasons that influenced the level of spelling knowledge and skills of schoolchildren.

The first one is the pupils’ attitude to the literacy of written speech. The analysis of the results of the focus group discussions allowed to summarize the opinions of the students on the issues discussed (Figure 5).





**Figure 5.** Number of schoolchildren who agree with the issues discussed in focus groups

As we can see from the diagram, for most students of all ages literate written language is not an indicator of the general culture (the opinion of sixth- and ninth-graders is especially significant, because this is the age when this problem is more often discussed). Most of them are sure that it is more important to be literate in Latvian and English, but not in Russian (the children say: “we know Russian anyway,” “Russian will not be useful in the future, so the main thing is to be able to speak it, but not to write it”). Only a fifth of the students have a positive attitude to the lessons, where the spelling material is studied (many said that these lessons are “boring, difficult and uninteresting”). All this, unfortunately, indicates a rather low level of motivation of our students to master literate writing in Russian (native) language. However, it is motivation that is the most important condition for developing literate speech, because it encourages students to purposefully learn and improve themselves (Ryan, Deci, 2000).

The second reason is the “crossing” of Russian and Latvian spelling norms in the minds of students, which leads to mistakes in both languages. Researches of orthography of the two languages among bilingual students, show that bilinguals, compared to monolinguals, to a greater extent rely on phonological strategies, to a lesser extent follow the spelling rules in the first (native) language, in addition, often apply (“transfer”) the spelling rules in the second language, when spelling words in the native language (Guimaraes, Parkins, 2019). In some cases we can talk about positive transfer of orthographic knowledge and skills from one language to another (not leading to mistakes), in other cases – about negative

transfer (the result is spelling mistakes) (Raynolds, Uhry, 2010; Bialystok, 2017). In our situation, the second variant is more often, because many orthographic norms of Latvian and Russian are partially similar or contrasting. For example, in the graphic system of Latvian there is no soft sign (as well as hard sign), and soft consonant graphemes have a special diacritical mark. For bilingual students studying Russian at the same time as Latvian or after being introduced to the Latvian alphabet (in kindergarten) the soft sign is a rather complicated grapheme, its functions are difficult to understand. Writing particle *ne* ‘not’ with verbs in Russian and Latvian is a contrasting norm (cf.: *ne dumaju* (don’t think) – *nedomāju*). In the borrowed words, instead of doubled consonants in Russian, in Latvian we mostly write one letter (cf.: *kolleksiya* (‘collection’) – *kolekcija*). Russian prefixes *bez-* and *bes-* correspond to Latvian *bez-*.

Pupils of all ages who study at schools where Latvian (as the language of instruction) dominates, encountering the same orthograms in two languages (for example, spelling *ne* ‘not’ with verbs), but having different orthographic rules, usually prefer the norm of the second language, which results in spelling errors (interlanguage interference). This is especially frequent when there is partial similarity (for example, writing prefixes ending in *z* and *s*), less often when the orthographic norms of the two languages are contrasting. This situation has been extensively described in studies on different variants of bilingualism (see, e.g.: Mishra, Singh, 2014; Raynolds, Uhry, 2010; Sparks et al., 2008).

The third reason is the peculiarities of the educational environment where a pupil is learning his or her native language. As we mentioned earlier, most of the subjects our students learn bilingually or in Latvian, and the number of Latvian lessons from the very beginning significantly exceeds the number of Russian lessons. The Latvian educational reform of 2018 (Skola2030) significantly reduced the number of Russian language lessons: 3 lessons per week in grades 1–9, in grades 10–12 the subject “Language and Literature of National Minorities” is a specialized course (72 hours) and is offered as an elective course. In addition, the use of Russian in the public and cultural space of Latvia is consistently narrowing, Russian remains the family language and the immediate environment. This situation may lead if not to the attrition/disappearance of the Russian language, but to its “exhaustion” in the minds and speech experience of our students (Yılmaz, Schmid, 2018).

With such a small number of school hours, with low potential of the Russian language environment in Latvia (“language learning element”), with quite low motivation of children to study orthography of their native language it is difficult to form a system of spelling actions, which is the basis of the orthographic skill.

## Conclusion

The study of orthographic literacy of Russian-speaking schoolchildren in Latvia conducted over several years allowed to characterize from different sides the level of formation of orthographic knowledge and skills of Russian-speaking bilingual students in Latvia. Its results are important for Russian-speaking teachers, because understanding the nature and frequency of students' violations of orthographic rules of the Russian language, the causes of orthographic mistakes can help teachers to correct their teaching activities, find effective didactic strategies for developing students' literacy in written speech. Our preliminary research shows that teachers often misjudge the problems in students' orthographic knowledge and skills, their causes, do not always understand how the linguistic (including – spelling) norms of the Latvian language influence the literacy of students in Russian, how to prevent and correct the mistakes caused by interlingual interference didactically correctly.

In addition, according to the content of the Latvian school education reform of 2018 which was aimed at transferring schools of national minorities to the Latvian language of instruction, the number of Russian language lessons is significantly reduced in comparison with previous decades. In a situation of such “compression” of the educational space of the Russian language, we can predict an even greater decrease in the level of orthographic literacy of schoolchildren, and therefore – the need to search for didactic possibilities to solve this problem. In this regard, an objective view of the state of orthographic literacy of students at the moment and in the near future (research perspective) is extremely important.

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Научная статья

## Орфографическая грамотность русскоязычных школьников Латвии

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**Аннотация.** Исследование посвящено одной из важнейших проблем речевого развития русскоязычных школьников диаспоры (4, 6, 9-й классы) – орфографической грамотности и призвано внести вклад в ее разработку. Актуальность проблемы обусловлена тем, что качество русской письменной речи, в том числе орфографические знания и умения учеников-билингвов, проживающих за пределами России, до сих пор недостаточно изучены. Цель исследования – охарактеризовать орфографическую грамотность латвийских русскоязычных учащихся в 2015–2021 годах. Материалом послужили письменные работы 11 938 учеников, разработанные автором статьи и специалистами Министерства образования и науки Латвии. Были использованы сравнительный и статистический методы исследования, а также фокус-групповая дискуссия. Результаты исследования показали, что: 1) уровень орфографической грамотности латвийских русскоязычных билингвов из года в год остается низким; 2) в речи учеников всех возрастов констатируются одни и те же типичные орфографические ошибки,

однако частотность данных ошибок зависит от того, по какой билингвальной модели учатся школьники; 3) ученики испытывают трудности в орфографической аргументации; 4) главные причины нарушения орфографических норм русского языка – низкая мотивация школьников к развитию грамотной письменной речи, межъязыковая интерференция, отсутствие достаточного учебного времени для изучения орфографического материала русского языка в школе; 5) в ценностной парадигме учеников грамотность в русском языке является менее важной, чем в английском и латышском языках. Согласно новой реформе образования Латвии (Skola2030) количество уроков русского языка в школах национальных меньшинств существенно уменьшается, поэтому в ближайшие годы можно прогнозировать еще большее снижение уровня орфографической грамотности школьников. В связи с этим понимание объективных орфографических трудностей, с которыми сталкиваются ученики-билингвы, открывает перспективы для поиска эффективных орфографических стратегий в процессе обучения школьников родному языку в меняющихся условиях.

**Ключевые слова:** русскоязычный ученик, ученик диаспоры, письменная речь, орфографическая грамотность, орфографический навык, орфографическая ошибка, грамматическая аргументация, причины ошибок, билингв, билингвальное образование, речевая среда

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