

It has been three years since the introduction of the amendment to the Education Act March 2011. As is widely known, amendments are meant to fix the law. Yet, in this case the amendment passed in 2011 only adds to the confusion as it has had unintended consequences.

Neither teachers nor students seem to be pleased with the changes made in 2011. The officials were quick to propose a uniform Lithuanian language exam, but not so quick to provide the necessary curriculum, textbooks, dictionaries as well as other didactic and methodic materials without which the education process could not be possible. What are the consequences, then? The students are stressed and unwilling to learn Lithuanian which, one should not forget, is a foreign language to them, and a difficult language at that. Also, the Polish students' performance in the exit exam, as regards Lithuanian, has been noticeably poorer after the implementation of the amendment in comparison with their Lithuanian peers.

This year, one thousand two hundred and ninety six school leavers from ethnic minority schools sat an exit exam in Lithuanian as if it were their first language. The fate of those school leavers was being decided the second they handed their exam papers to the invigilator.

Whether they would be admitted to university, or more importantly, get a government-sponsored placement at university depended on the final result of that exam which is not at all surprising but one has to take into account the fact that errors and mistakes are more likely to occur in the written exam of a student whose mother tongue is not the same as the official language of the state. Suffice to say, the more mistakes the fewer points, and an insufficient number of points means that a school-leaver who wishes to continue their education would either have to pay for his or her studies (which is not cheap in Lithuania; Vilnius university offers a degree in philosophy or history for 3 892 Lt a year; studying dentistry for that matter costs 12 080 Lt a year) or quit the idea of studying at all.

‘Regarding the Lithuanian language exam, the final score was significantly lower this and the previous year compared to the earlier years’, says Czesław Dawidowicz, the headmaster of Adam Mickiewicz lower secondary school in Vilnius - one of the best Polish schools in Lithuania. ‘The amendment has caused more harm than good. Instead of providing a better start for our youth, it only makes things worse. The results of the Lithuanian language exit exam were once comparable for both Polish and Lithuanian schools. Nowadays, it is no longer the case’ he continues. For example, according to the National Examination Centre, in the Šalčininkai region a total of 166 students sat the Lithuanian language exam of whom only six scored high (86-100/100 points) which comprises 3.61%. Over half of the students, that is 84, scored low (16-35/100 points) which comprises 50.60%, and one third, that is 52 students, scored medium (36-85/100 points).

‘Ministry of Education promised to check every year the students’ knowledge of Lithuanian in order to set objective assessment criteria’, says Dawidowicz, ‘but nobody does that. The assessment criteria for the Lithuanian language exam need to be adequate for the students’ language skills. The assessment is bias considering that the students have to fulfill curriculum goals set for ten years in just three.

Considerably fewer students decide to take national Lithuanian proficiency test. ‘I suppose the youth are afraid of poor results and choose instead to take a Lithuanian exam on the school

level. The system we have today lowers their chances of admission in prestigious faculties', claims the headmaster Dawidowicz. On the whole, in Lithuania 88.09% of school-leavers have passed the exit exam, or more specifically, 88.4% of students from schools where Lithuanian is the language of instruction, and 83.7% of students from ethnic minority schools.

According to Adam Błaszkiwicz, the headmaster of the leading John Paul 2 lower secondary school, the Lithuanian language exam is not prepared very well. 'There should be no discrepancy in results achieved by students from Lithuanian and ethnic minority schools', he claims.

'If we have to deal with such discrepancies then it means that the education system does not work as it should. It's not the student's fault. It's a deficiency in the system; The school, the ministry, the curriculum, or for that matter the examination centre is to blame, but not the student. We need to be methodically prepared and have text books that will be useful for our students and allow them to sit a uniform exam', remarked the headmaster Błaszkiwicz.

Not only school-leavers encounter problems with the Lithuanian language. The teachers of the language are unanimous in saying that the teaching of Lithuanian resembles an obstacle race from the very beginning that is the first grade. Needless to say that the difference between the Polish and Lithuanian first grade curriculum is huge; Polish first graders only begin to learn basic concepts while at the same time their Lithuanian peers start learning their ABC. The teachers in the Polish schools have to go to great lengths to bring their students' knowledge on the same level. The biggest challenge is lack of new textbooks for ethnic minority schools and well-planned curricula. Although the reform has been passed, nobody knows how to put it into practice.

'In theory, there are a few text books you can choose from, but they are designed for Lithuanian schools and are completely unsuitable for the Polish schools. I pick the subjects, exercises, and try to make my own "textbook", says Łucja Mickiewicz-Ozarowska, a Lithuanian teacher from Michał Baliński lower secondary school in Jašiūnai. According to her, there has recently been published a sort of a textbook for beginners, but it's just a drop in the ocean. Plus, it's not a proper textbook; It's only a supplementary material.

'When I read ministerial education programme, what do I learn? You have to teach the kids how to listen, speak, and write. Nowhere does it say how to do it', says Mickiewicz-Ozarowska. Other Lithuanian teachers claim that there is a shortage of textbooks that will step by step familiarize the students with the new language, systematize their knowledge, enrich vocabulary, and teach them grammar. 'There is also a shortage of voice recordings which could help the students learn the sounds of the language', says the Lithuanian teacher. 'My colleague and I recorded our own voices and then combined them with pictures. For instance, the phrase 'Čiaa yraa gaidyys' went together with the picture of a rooster in the background. We used recordings from English lessons as an example. If only we had more recordings available', she claims. The teachers of Lithuanian complain that the reading part in the textbooks is difficult and not that interesting, often written in an archaic manner. The activity books, they say, are completely useless.

The ministry of education pledges to prepare methodic materials for ethnic minority school teachers working with first or second graders by the end of this year. ‘The methodic materials will contain exercises in the form of entertainment which will help the students develop skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Provided will be also links to audio and visual recordings on the Internet’, told “Kurier” Vice Minister of Education Genoveita Krasauskienė. The didactic materials will be available for schools from the beginning of 2015. Qualifications upgrade programme for teachers is also in the schedule.

The new textbook for first and second graders is planned to be published before the end of 2016. ‘I was helping my daughter with her Lithuanian homework for the entire first grade. We used to learn vocabulary together and translate texts’, says the mother of a second grader.

‘Halfway through the school year I realized that my daughter did not ask for help with English at all. It turned out that she got the best marks without anybody’s help. Interestingly, her English vocabulary range was greater than her Lithuanian despite the fact that it was Lithuanian she learned the most. Something’s not right with the curriculum if a child faces no difficulty learning a foreign language while having problems with the national language’.

According to data from the Ministry of Education, currently students from grades 1-10 follow two different curricula regarding the learning of Lithuanian: one designed for students from ethnic minority schools, the other for students from schools where Lithuanian is the language of instruction. However, in grades 11-12 there is only one such curriculum. In ethnic minority schools students have additional 1,5 hours of Lithuanian weekly. The Lithuanian language curriculum for primary schools has been more or less standardized while in 5-10 grades the number of Lithuanian lessons have been the same for all schools since 2011. Regarding grades 1-4 in ethnic minority schools there are four more hours of Lithuanian lessons weekly than previously.

‘Society expects school-leavers to be literate and so the Lithuanian exam assessment norms will be more rigorous every year. It’s in the interest of the state’, reads a statement on the NCE website. Students who finish school in Lithuania have to have a command of Lithuanian, that is they have to be literate and that’s why requirements will be higher every year regardless of the language of instruction’, answers Vice Minister Krasauskiene to the ‘Kurier’ question of why the exam assessment criteria will be more rigorous every year and from 2020 the assessment will be completely standardized.

In what grade do students from Polish and Lithuanian schools achieve a comparable command of Lithuanian? “I think even 12 years of education is too little for the learned language to be like mother tongue. I even think it’s impossible. That’s why, in my opinion, the Lithuanian language exam assessment criteria should be different for Lithuanian and Polish students”, says with conviction Łucja Mickiewicz-Ozarowska, a Lithuanian teacher.

Up until now the state has not ensured that the reform will go smoothly. The burden of teaching the language of the state fell on the teachers’ shoulders who still have no curricula, good text books nor methodic and didactic materials. The good results of the students depend on the teachers’ good will and creative force.

‘I have an impression that it’s a purposeful action on the part of the Lithuanian government. The students want to learn Lithuanian despite all the difficulties. But if the state doesn’t create good learning environment, it’s probably because the state wants to make the learning process difficult’, says an outraged father of a second grader.

The Lithuanian language exam for schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction and ethnic minority schools was standardized by the introduction of the amendment to the Education Act in 2011. The Polish community in Lithuania protested many times against the amendment. Yet, the state ignored the protests and sixty thousand signatures.