# Is Tatar safe? Results of monitoring Tatar language proficiency

By

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of a language proficiency test, conducted among the senior schoolchildren of secondary schools in Tatarstan, a bilingual country in the Russian Federation, in terms of language situation and planning perspective. Accelerated globalization and the general socio-economic situation in the world have caused major changes in the people's attitudes towards the choice of language for communicative and career purposes. Language situation in the Republic of Tatarstan led to the adoption of the language law of 1992, which ensures the equality of Tatar and Russian as state languages (Zakon Respubliki Tatarstan, 1992). However, the monitoring of language proficiency of the children, whose mother tongue is Tatar, arouses growing concern. The first part of the study provides an

overview of the tasks complied to test schoolchildren's communicative oral and written skills in Tatar. The second part presents the results reflecting the level of schoolchildren's language proficiency. The charts show how well the mother tongue is used for communicative purposes. The third part reveals the problems that exist in maintaining the level of language skills that ensure the fluent use of Tatar and create a stable bilingual speech community.

**Keywords:** language situation, language proficiency, mother tongue, communicative skills, bilingual speech community.

# 1. Introduction

From April 24 to April 30, 2021, the Center for Language Certification (the Tatar Language) at the Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, KFU, monitored the level of proficiency in Tatar of schoolchildren from grades 9 and 11, attending national (Tatar) educational institutions in Kazan. The monitoring involved 209 randomly selected schoolchildren from nine general education institutions in Kazan. The number of participants was: the 9th grade -126; the 11th grade - 83.

The purpose of the monitoring was to assess the senior schoolchildren's level of native language proficiency in order to determine the "language trouble spots" in the system of oral and written language learning: the pronunciation system, the use of lexical and grammatical categories that perform communicative tasks, schoolchildren's listening comprehension skills and their ability to actively participate in dialogues, produce monologues, and generally use their mother tongue for meaningful utterances. To determine the schoolchildren's level of communicative competencies various types of tasks were used to test the main types of speech activities (listening, reading, writing, and speaking).

The performance tasks of different complexity allowed us to assess the conformity of the participants' speech competence in the Tatar language to different levels (A2-C1) according to the criteria of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (https://rm.coe.int).

# 2. Methods

The monitoring of native language proficiency was carried out according to a single codifier, specification, control and measurement materials (CMM) for all participants. The schoolchildren could score a maximum of 100 points. The tasks were presented in the form of a test, which consisted of four sections, including 38 tasks of different complexity. The results, presented in tables and charts, were subjected to comparative analysis, conducted with the aim of A/B testing. The study involved lesson observations and textbook evaluation (Hasanova et al., 2018; Zəkiev et al., 2015; Zəkiev et al., 2015; Zəkiev et al., 2016). Depending on the results of the monitoring, recommendations are issued concerning the improvement of general approaches and school practices in the area of native (Tatar) language learning.

# 3. Results and Discussion

The participants performed the given tasks in writing, filling in separate forms. Section 1 (listening tasks) included 6 tasks for listening comprehension based on authentic texts (tasks 1- 6, max. 6 points). The text for listening was a recording of interviews about career choices

and youth employment. This section contained multiple choice tests, assessing schoolchildren's ability to understand the general idea of the text, to summarize its main idea and to provide detailed information when listening to a dialogue; we also checked the skill to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context.

Section 2 (reading tasks) included 8 tasks (tasks 7-15, max. 22 points). These were tasks for finding the key information in the text that agreed with the given statement and a multiple-choice test with four options for answers.

Section 3 (tasks on vocabulary and grammar) consisted of 10 tasks (tasks 16-25, max. 20 points). This section included tasks with short answers, to which the participants were supposed to use words transformed lexically and grammatically to correspond to those missing in the text; another test was for filling in the gaps with the vocabulary lexically and grammatically corresponding to the content of the text; the final task of the sections had short questions, to which the participants were supposed to write answers consisting of one to three words.

The tasks of the second and third sections tested the participants' reading skills and abilities (skimming, scanning and detailed reading); their reading comprehension of logically complicated texts, whose authors hold a special position and express their own point of view; of special importance was the participants' ability to understand texts in the modern Tatar literary language, their tonality, original features of the structure and organization.

In section 4 (writing task, max. 17 points), the schoolchildren were supposed to write a short message (100-120 words) by answering to six questions. Their ability to write messages on a wide range of topical issues was assessed, as well as the skill to highlight the most important thoughts and events, arguing their point of view; the ability to express their own opinion, to compare ideas and substantiate their arguments. Among other things we assessed coherence and cohesion of the written text, accuracy of presentation, spelling, and punctuation.

Speaking was tested in two types of communication: a monologue and a dialogue, when the participants talked to experts (2 tasks, max. 35 points).

During the monologue, the participant was supposed to:

- compose a speech on the proposed topic in accordance with the communication tasks.
- produce a monologue text based on a picture.
When conducting a dialogue, the participant was supposed to:
- understand the speech of the interlocutor.
- identify the topic of the conversation and the communicative intentions of the interlocutor in a given number of conversational situations.
- understand in detail the remarks and answer the questions of the interlocutor.
- initiate a conversation and demonstrate their communicative intentions in given conversational situations.
The participant's speech was assessed according to the following parameters:
- the amount of information, the length of the message, the number of phrases.
- the number of simple and complex sentences.
- the number and length of spoken lines in the dialogue.

Also, during the oral part of the test, phonetics, grammar, speech coherence, interactivity, and authenticity were checked. Speaking was to comply with the norms of the

modern Tatar language and the ethics of conversation. Here, as we will see later, the defining adjective "modern" turned out to be of crucial importance.

As a result of completing their test tasks, the participants could receive a maximum of 100 points, which was an indicator of fluency in oral and written Tatar.

The percentage of points for the completed task corresponded to the following levels of language proficiency:

| % of the task completion | level | Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Less than 40% | A1 | Can use a limited number of words and expressions speaking in everyday situations.<br>Can use a few simple grammatical patterns known by heart.<br>Can interact in a simple way, making a lot of pauses when conveying very basic personal and family information.<br>Can ask and answer questions about personal details and talk about him/herself.<br>Can write simple sentences known by heart. Very limited vocabulary: all grammatical patterns are of the same type. |
| 41- 55% | A2 | Can use simple grammatical patterns to talk about everyday situations but makes common grammatical mistakes.<br>Can answer questions and relevantly react to simple utterances of the expert.<br>Can write simple notes and messages. Very limited vocabulary: all grammatical patterns are of the same type. |
| 56-70% | B1 | Can communicate in simple and routine situations, can make him/herself understood in spite of frequent pauses and minor errors.<br>Can initiate and maintain conversations on familiar topics and themes meaningful to the speaker.<br>Can write simple coherent texts on familiar topics. |
| 71- 85% | B2 | Can fluently produce texts describing something or expressing opinion on a wide range of subjects. Can use some complex grammatical patterns without making gross mistakes that might cause misunderstanding. Can speak continuously for a relatively long time. Can initiate, maintain and end conversations at the appropriate moment.<br>Can write comprehensible detailed messages on a wide range of topics providing his/ her own point of view. |
| 86-100% | C1 | Can use extensive vocabulary to speak fluently and spontaneously on a wide range of topics, express original ideas and interact with people from different strata of society.<br>Can use language to effectively express his/her ideas in writing demonstrating good use of grammatical patterns, linking and cohesive devices. |

It was found that the average percentage of students completing the tasks was 54.2%, which corresponded to the A2 level (only!).

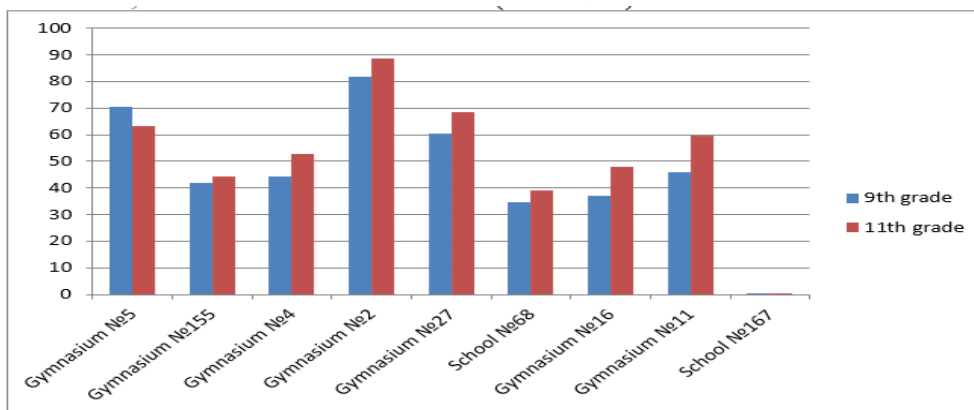In the chart, these indicators look as follows (Chart No.1):

**Chart No.1**

The distribution of the participants' indicators by types of speech activities shows that all schoolchildren, who took part in the monitoring, were able to understand the general idea of the text they had listened to. All schoolchildren correctly answered the questions about the speakers in the dialogue, identified the theme of the talk. However, not everyone was able to highlight the main idea of the text (28% of the schoolchildren), give detailed information when listening to the text in the form of a dialogue (42%), and guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context (34%).

The average percentage of listening comprehension skills, demonstrated by schoolchildren of Kazan, was 59.3%. This is a disappointing result since perception of speech is the foundation of all communicative skills ensuring further success of oral and written interactions.
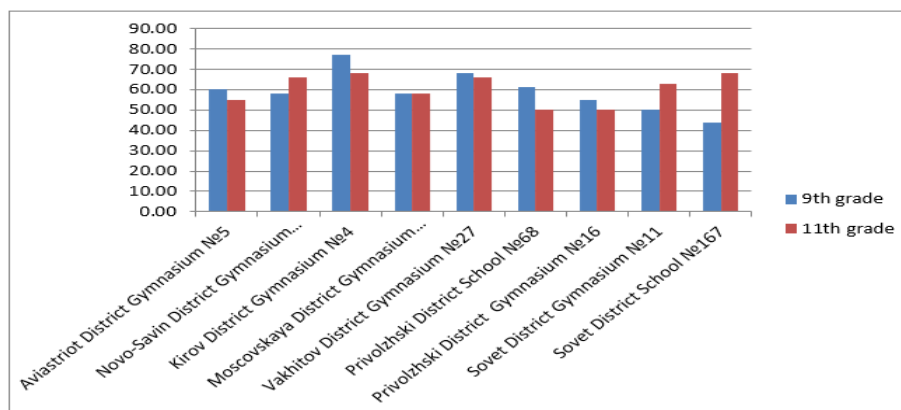


**Chart No.2.** Listening

The second and third sections of the test were reading tasks. The tasks tested the skills and abilities of students in skimming, scanning and detailed reading, and the correct use of lexical units in the text in accordance with the grammatical rules of the modern Tatar language. The average percentage of task completion was even lower than in listening comprehension: 39.8%. The students were able to understand the general idea of the text and to choose the right lexical units according to their semantics; however, they experienced difficulties in detailed comprehension of the text, in choosing the grammatically correct variant of the words and word combinations.

The results of reading comprehension and lexical-grammatical tests are shown in Chart No. 3.
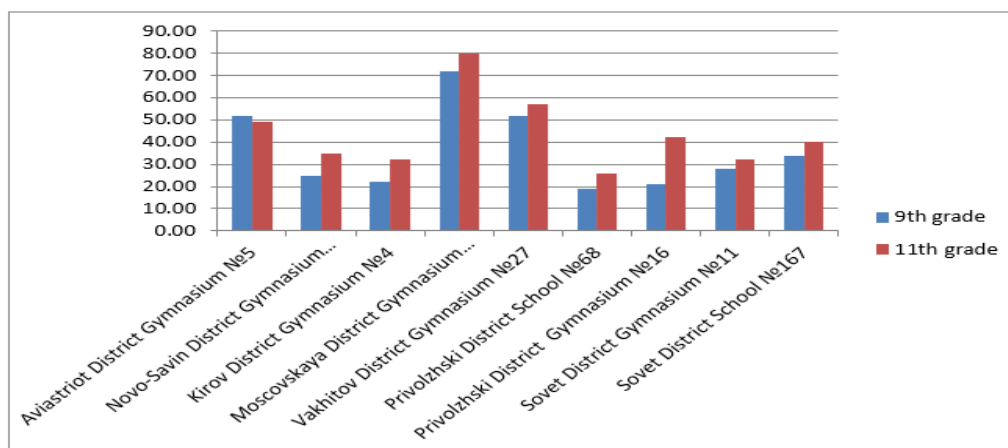
**Chart No. 3.** Reading

These poor results can be attributed to the disparity that exists between the everyday language, spoken in the children's families, and the literary language taught in the classrooms and in the textbooks (Benson, 2005). This is a problem for further research: to what extent should the school curriculum take into account the language changes that are reflected in the vernacular. "A language has no life of its own", "It always develops to meet people's needs". These words belong to the British linguist David Crystal, the author of the famous book "Language Death" (Crystal, 1998). For schoolchildren, whose mother tongue is Tatar, the official literary language presents great difficulties for understanding as it sounds unfamiliar and makes reading comprehension, the least difficult of all speech skills, a complicated task.

According to the results of the task, which tested schoolchildren's written communication skills, the participants were divided into two groups. To write a short review of the book they were supposed to read and to answer 6 questions, which did not cause any difficulty for one group of schoolchildren, they easily coped with the task, gaining maximum points: for example, schoolchildren of Tatar Gymnasium No. 2 at KFU, Gymnasium No. 5 in the Aviastroitelny district did well. The other group of schoolchildren found the same task too complicated and did not answer a single question: for example, not a single student of the 9th grade from Tatar Gymnasium No. 11 in the Sovetsky district and School No. 68 in the Privolzhsky district completed this task. Consequently, the average percentage of written communication skills was 34.4%.
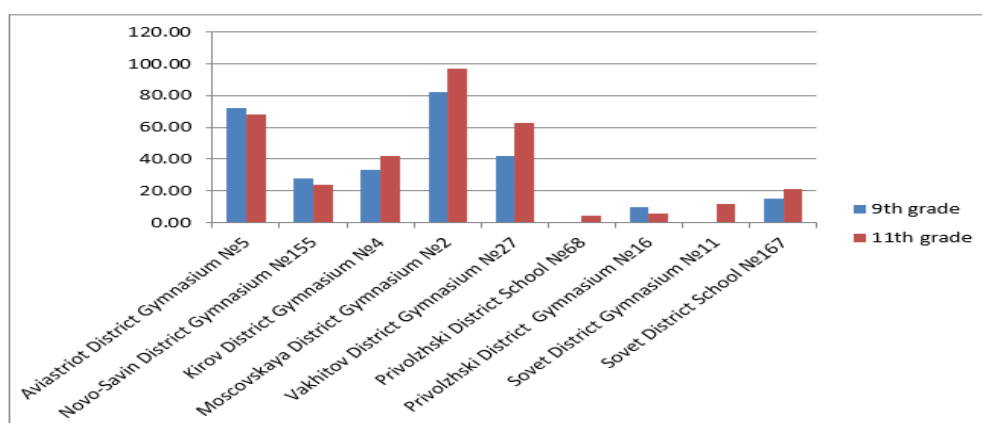


**Chart No.4** Writing

The results of the task on written communication are shown in Chart No.4 and are the evidence of how much time and effort are devoted to this type of speech activity in different

education institutions. The more written tasks the schoolchildren had done in the classroom, the better were their results of this testing.

Oral communication skills were checked by means of speaking tasks on dialogic and monologic speech. The tests assessed schoolchildren's phonetic and grammatical skills, their ability to build up coherent speech, their spontaneity and fluency of answers, a variety of linguistic means and the accuracy of their use, the use of speech formulas and grammatical constructions as well as the relevance of the utterance to the topic.

Out of 209 participants, five ninth graders and two pupils of the eleventh grade could not answer the questions of the dialogue, not even say a few words about themselves. These schoolchildren did not understand Tatar speech. At the same time, most of the participants could freely conduct a dialogue, producing meaningful utterances on a given topic.

The average percentage of the schoolchildren's oral communication skills was 77.7%, which was higher than the results of all other tests. In this type of tasks, the participants were not exposed to formal literary language, they were free to choose the linguistic means that they were familiar with when talking on the topic that reflected their needs and wishes, which ensured the success of this speech activity.

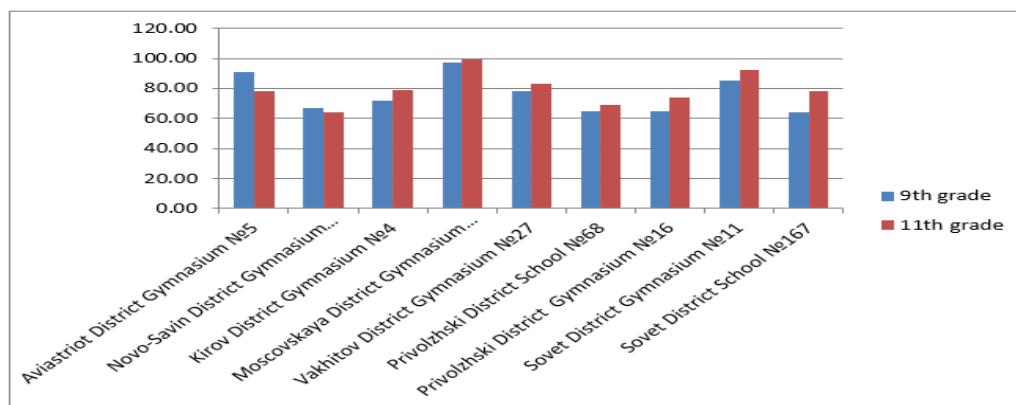The results of the speaking task are shown in Chart No. 5.
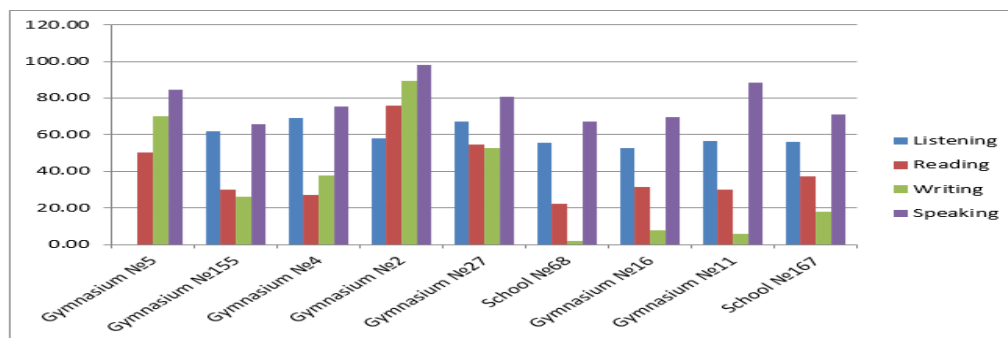


**Chart No. 5**



**Chart No.6.** Listening/Reading/Writing/Speaking

# 4. Summary

To summarize the results, we need to say that the choice of schoolchildren of this age-range was not accidental. Very soon they will be actively involved in social intercourse and the

way they will use their mother tongue will influence the balance of languages in the republic in the near future. That is why the level of their native language proficiency is of crucial importance to the language situation in Tatarstan.

By analyzing the participants' answers, we have come to the conclusion that schoolchildren can understand Tatar speech and participate in a dialogue, answering the questions of the interlocutor and continue the conversation by asking relevant questions. The monologues, produced by most of the participants (~ 67%), are characterized by small-vocabulary speech, the use of many borrowed words and loan translations from the Russian language, the inverted order of words in the Tatar sentence. Very often the schoolchildren found it difficult to produce complete, simple meaningful utterances and demonstrate coherent speech in their native Tatar language.

The diagram shows that the majority of students in general education schools have the highest results in speaking, which correspond to B2-C1 levels. Their listening comprehension corresponds to Levels B1-B2.

# 5. Conclusions

Thus, the monitoring results show that Tatar language proficiency of the 9th and 11th graders from Kazan schools, in terms of their oral speech competencies, is satisfactory, while their reading comprehension and writing skills differ across educational institutions and generally require better methodological support and new approach to the selection of learning content that would meet modern educational goals (Why language matters for the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO); Report of the Independent Expert on minority issues on linguistic minorities; World Bank, Education Notes, In their own Language: Education for All (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2005). The interaction of the Russian and Tatar languages in the republic is meant to develop stable bilingualism. However, the impact of the Russian language on vernacular Tatar is strongly manifested, especially in multiethnic youth vernacular. We need more research into the latest teenage vocabulary to be able to create a balanced language situation (Shayakhmetova et al., 2019). Of primary importance in this respect are school textbooks of Tatar, the ones that would motivate schoolchildren to improve their speech skills in Tatar and would reflect the language young people use in social life (Shakirova Dilyara et al., 2017). This task is particularly complicated as the Tatar literary language should be preserved and passed on to new generations. At the same time, language, as a living being, keeps changing and these changes should be taken into account by those who work on complying new textbooks for schoolchildren whose mother tongue is Tatar.

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