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English in Croatia Today: Opportunities for Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

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The authors first look into the current status of the English language in the world and in Croatia. Starting from the fact that, in contrast to other foreign languages taught in Croatia, English distinguishes itself by the amount of exposure in everyday life, they carried out a study to see whether this exposure facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Introduction

Although in the last few decades many authors (e.g. Kachru 1965, Strevens 1980, Brown 1990, Pennycook 1994, Cenoz and Jessner 2000) have looked into the status of the English language in various contexts in the world, it would be fair to say that there is no single view of the issue that is accepted by all. Perhaps the only thing that is accepted without reservation is that the status of English is in a constant state of fluctuation. There are several aspects of this fluctuation.

The changing status of English

Kachru (1982) has introduced the idea of, by now, widely-known three concentric circles of the spread of English. The *inner circle* includes the areas where English is spoken as the mother tongue: Great Britain, the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. From the sociolinguistic point of view, the English(es) spoken there are referred to as *norm-providing varieties*. Once there was only one norm-providing variety – British English. Later American English came to acquire the same status alongside British English. The status of the other inner circle varieties in terms of norm-providing is still



somewhat uncertain. The *outer circle* comprises countries that were former British colonies, where English came to be institutionalized in the most important spheres of life, such as government, education, business and the like. English language users in these contexts have developed their own varieties of English that Kachru calls *norm-developing varieties*. Practically the rest of the world belongs to the *expanding circle*, where English is a foreign language. Here there are the countries that have not undergone a physical colonization by the native speakers of English, although many would insist that they have undergone a colonization of another sort. In Kachru's terminology, the English(es) that developed in these contexts are *norm-dependent varieties*. English language learners and users in the expanding circle base their norm on one of the native speaker varieties. Kachru (1982) has rightly predicted that by the end of the twentieth century non-native speakers of English will outnumber English native speakers (Crystal, 1997).

Phillipson (1992) classifies the contexts in which English is used nowadays in a different way. He groups the outer and the expanding circle countries into *periphery-English countries* and distinguishes them from *core-English countries*, where native speakers of English are the dominant group.

Nowadays, experts often talk about EFL, ESL, EIL, ELF – to name the most frequent acronyms. EFL (English as a foreign language) refers to the English taught or used in contexts where it is not a native language (e.g.: Japan, Sweden, Croatia). ESL (English as a second language) implies that English is widely used by non-native speaker learners/users of English as a means of communication (in contexts such as Canada, Nigeria or Singapore). EIL (English as an international language) and ELF (English as a lingua franca) stress the fact that English is used for communication between different groups of people that each speak a different language.

The changing status of English in different parts of the world has resulted, among other things, in a changed view of the culture that the English language is based on. It is often claimed that English does not belong to anyone any more. An example offered by Povey (1977; cited in Medgyes 1994:6) is very illustrative:

An African student, after he was criticised by the native-speaking teacher for using a non-standard form, burst out like this: "It's our language now and we can do what we like with it!"

However, Hill (1982) stresses that the fact that English is an international language definitely does not make it a neutral instrument of international communication: it is still culture-bound. It is easy to agree, on the other hand, with Medgyes (1994:2) who claims that "English is no longer the carrier of essentially one culture, but that of the cultural heritage of all those individuals and communities who use English in their everyday lives, each of them giving it a distinct identity of their own".

An increasing number of people all over the world are learning English and are turning bilingual, with English being the most frequent component of this bilingualism. Historically viewed, as James (2000) puts it, English has moved from being a component of 'élite' bilingualism to that of 'cultural' bilingualism to that of 'popular' bilingualism. James also





claims that, due to the effect of English as a lingua franca, the traditional dichotomous conceptualizations of being bilingual have been challenged too.

English in Croatia

In this country English is, first of all, traditionally considered a foreign language. However, both laymen and experts are increasingly beginning to realize that there are major differences between English and the other foreign languages taught in Croatian schools, such as French, German and Italian. As far as its role is concerned more and more people see English as a passport to a better career, a better position in society and to a better life in general. The inability to use the English language is considered by many to be a disadvantage. The importance of English as a means of international communication has become so obvious that there is constant pressure (e.g. from parents of schoolchildren) on educational authorities to consider making provisions for an early start of learning English at the national level. For Croatian speakers English has definitely become a lingua franca.

Besides the pragmatic usefulness of knowing English, what makes for the unique position of this language among the other foreign languages taught is the omnipresence of English in everyday life in Croatia. The amount of exposure to English, available to everyone, is extremely high and, so it seems, it is on the constant increase. English has penetrated the public domains of the media (TV, radio, the Internet, e-mail), popular entertainment, youth culture, advertising, etc. It has become part of people's private and public discourse. One can often hear people insert English words, phrases and, sometimes, whole sentences into their informal, and not so informal, everyday discourse. The vocabulary of Croatian native speakers has become most receptive to borrowing from English. Lexical borrowing seems to manifest itself in different ways (e.g.: through loan words, calques, hybridisation). In a sense, we could say that English is becoming a part of both societal and individual bilingualism. Almost every day we can testify to an extensive informal usage, one of Fishman's (1996) 'seven relevant ecologies'. There has as yet been no systematic research into the occurrence of English in Croatia, but it seems that this spread is not formalized in any way. English seems to be losing its 'foreignness'. What is happening with English in Croatia (and, presumably, in some other European countries) may be considered an unprecedented sociolinguistic phenomenon. Berns' (1990) plea for a reconsideration of the foreign – second language distinction seems highly appropriate in the Croatian context and it is easy to agree with him that the distinction should only be used as a continuum for language status.

The high amount of English omnipresent in the everyday life in Croatia has provoked adverse attitudes in some people. More and more people are annoyed by what they call 'bombardment' by the English language.



Exposure and language acquisition

The aspects of the fluctuating status of English just described have important implications for English language learning and teaching. On the one hand, they greatly influence attitudes to this language and, on the other, they result in the differing amounts of exposure that may provide the necessary input for language acquisition.

SLA researchers (e.g. Krashen 1981, Long 1981, Gass and Madden 1985) claim that comprehensible input is indispensable (though not enough) for language acquisition. Studies have so far focused on several aspects of the input a learner is exposed to. Some were directed at the frequency of items in the input and its relationship to acquisition. Others focused on the comprehensibility of the input. Still others looked into the role of learner output in interaction. One of the greatest methodological difficulties in all these studies is obtaining representative samples of the input that individual learners are exposed to. Ellis (1994) warns that true progress in SLA research will be possible once there have been enough experimental and longitudinal studies that reliably sample the L2 input that learners receive. We believe that SLA research has yet to go through a lot of smaller, painstaking but enlightening steps before this happens.

Incidental language acquisition

In SLA research, experts make a distinction between *intentional* learning, which implies the ability to deliberately focus one's primary attention on the linguistic code in order to learn the second language (L2), and *incidental* learning, which implies the ability to 'pick up' language while one's primary attention is directed to understanding the meaning of the message. Some authors (e. g. Schmidt 1990) maintain, though, that in incidental learning it is only the so-called focal attention that is directed at meaning, but the so-called peripheral attention is still directed at the linguistic code. This view implies that even incidental learning necessarily involves a degree of consciousness as we, though with the help of only our peripheral attention, do notice the linguistic aspects of the input. Ellis (1999) stresses that this traditional distinction is reflected in, but not equivalent to, Krashen's (1981) distinction between acquisition and learning, and Bialystok's (1978) distinction between implicit and explicit learning.

For incidental learning of L2 vocabulary to take place learners must necessarily make use of the available cues in order to be able to infer the meaning of the new language items from context. Ellis (1999) stresses that oral input lends itself to easier inferencing than written input as it offers not only verbal cues contained in the text but also such cues as intonation, or paralinguistic cues like gestures, as well as situational cues.

Experts on vocabulary acquisition have more often focussed on the breadth of a learner's vocabulary knowledge than on its depth (Ellis 1987) since breadth is easier to



measure. However, learners know different words with differing degrees of vagueness and each word that a particular learner may claim to know may be placed at a different point of a continuum that runs from complete unfamiliarity to complete familiarity (Tweddel 1973).

Research on incidental vocabulary learning has so far been very scarce. Ellis (1999) has suggested a list of factors that may be hypothesized to influence incidental vocabulary learning. Although he calls it only a programmatic statement (Ellis 1999 : 42), it seems to us that it provides a valuable first approximation, or initial model, of incidental vocabulary learning. Since it also seems to be a very useful survey of such factors for our study, we will look more closely into it.

The factors are grouped into *intrinsic word properties factors*, *input factors*, *interactional factors* and *learner factors*.

The *intrinsic word properties factors* imply that there are words that are more difficult to be learnt incidentally despite a large number of contextual cues. *Word pronounceability*, which is especially relevant in case of oral input, may influence a learner's ability to perceive and, consequently, learn a word. Phonologically 'difficult' words may cause learners to avoid attending to them (Laufer 1997). *The part of speech* a word belongs to is suggested as a factor too. Nouns have been shown to be learned more readily than other parts of speech (Rodgers 1969, Yoshida 1978), and it is assumed that this is so probably because they are more useful, more guessable from context and more imageable. In terms of learnability, adjectives have been found to follow nouns, while adverbs and verbs seem to be the most difficult to learn. *Distinctiveness of word form* (Nation 1990) affects incidental vocabulary learning in the sense that words that have a distinct form are easier to learn than words that are similar in form to other words (Huckin and Bloch 1993). The latter can cause 'mistaken identity' and result in unsuccessful guessing. *Length of a word* as a factor points to the fact that monosyllabic words are more readily decoded and learned than polysyllabic ones. Another intrinsic word properties factor is the *degree of correlation between form and meaning*: onomatopoeic words and those whose form signals their grammatical meaning (e.g. through prefixes and suffixes) are easier to learn (Meara 1982). Since some words more easily arouse a mental picture (Ellis and Beaton 1993; cited in Ellis 1999) because they are concrete, *imageability* is also included as a factor. Ellis (1999) adds that the relative difficulty of learning concrete and abstract words may also depend on the differences between L1 and L2 in terms of lexical and conceptual equivalences. *Polysemy* has also been shown to influence incidental vocabulary learning. Research has pointed out that learners may have problems in learning polysemous words because they find it difficult to give up the first meaning of polysemous words that they learned (Laufer 1984). Andersen (1984) explains this with his One-to-One Principle, according to which learners assume there should be one form – one meaning correspondence in the language they are learning.

The *input factors* group includes five factors. *Frequency* of the word in the input is considered to be a relevant factor, although research findings do not always support this





(e.g. Brown 1993). There exists a 'threshold view' according to which the learner has to encounter a word a specific number of times in order to learn it (Carpay 1975, Nagy et al. 1987). The *saliency through 'focus'* factor draws attention to the fact that those words that are more noticeable are more likely to be learned. Some of the ways in which words can be made salient include: repetition, emphasis, topicalizing, etc. Brown (1993) stresses that the importance of a word in a context is a more relevant factor than its frequency. One of the least problematic factors is the *availability of contextual cues*. It is generally agreed that the more contextual cues the input has the easier it is to learn a word embedded in it. It is still unexplored whether the same holds for incidental learning; some claim that, in case of incidental learning, inputs rich in contextual cues may aid understanding but may not necessarily lead to learning. How readily a learner can learn a word depends also on *input complexity*. It is measured by taking into account lexical density and the density of the unfamiliar words in the input.

Ellis' (1999) list of factors includes *interactional factors* as well since he is especially interested in vocabulary acquisition from oral input, which usually implies interaction. Thanks to the interactional component, oral input allows the learner to get modified input, which can help the learner to learn new vocabulary. This is secured through increasing the overall quantity of the input, or through enhanced transparency of meaning that can be achieved by means of elaboration.

As the first among the *learner factors* Ellis (1999) lists *existing knowledge of L2*. Although it is logical to assume that existing knowledge of L2 facilitates acquisition of new vocabulary, Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998) stress that their relationship is not linear. A need to determine a threshold level of prior knowledge of L2 vocabulary that would truly facilitate vocabulary acquisition has been reiterated by Ellis (1999). The learner's *background knowledge* is generally agreed to be a crucial factor. Insights into the role of background knowledge suggest that learners will find it easy to acquire a new word if they already possess the concept to which the new word can be attached, if the semantic domain that the new word belongs to is well developed and, also, if their 'word schemas' (various types of word knowledge such as morphological knowledge, semantic knowledge) are well developed (Ellis 1999:54-55). The *procedural knowledge* factor refers to the metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge about how a new word can be learned. Such knowledge is operationalized during the process of inferencing meaning and, in case of oral interactional input, through negotiating meaning. *Immediate phonological memory* is thought to be significant in learning new L2 words. The ability to form phonological representations of new L2 words efficiently will facilitate L2 vocabulary acquisition. *The learner's L1* is the last factor on the list. Substantial research evidence points to the phonological and semantic distance between L1 and L2 as a factor that can influence vocabulary learning.

We cannot but agree with Ellis (1999 : 60) when he stresses that an understanding of incidental vocabulary learning has to address not only psycholinguistic aspects but personal and affective factors as well.



Acquisition of English vocabulary through informal exposure

Aim

In the pilot study that we carried out we tried to answer the following two research questions:

- What are the attitudes of Croatian native speakers to the increasing informal exposure to English in everyday life in Croatia?
- What effect does this exposure have on the incidental learning of English vocabulary by Croatian L1 speakers?

Instrument

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part focused on sociobiographical information and included elicited information on the age, gender and educational background of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire was comprised of questions about the subjects' attitudes to the presence of English in Croatia, about the type and frequency of exposure to English, about the command of English and the other languages they had learned, and about how they would react, language-wise, in a language contact situation given as the basis for language choice.

In the third part, the subjects were asked about 44 English words and expressions. In the questionnaire, the 44 items were given in their original English spelling, in the adapted Croatian form, or both versions were offered side by side. Besides stating their meanings (if they knew them), they were asked to note down where they had encountered the items. The 44 vocabulary items were chosen by the authors among the many that an ordinary person living in Croatia is exposed to on a daily basis. In terms of the parts of speech, the vocabulary set included nouns (e.g. *party, skinhedsi, bestseler*), adjectives (e.g. *cool, favorite*), verbs (e.g. *konektirati, postati, surfati*) and prepositions (e.g. *in*). Some items were nouns derived from English verbs (e.g. *spika* > Engl. to speak) or adjectives (e.g. *bed* > Engl. bad). Besides single-word items, there were multi-word examples (e.g. *check-in, cash and carry*) and two abbreviations (*www, .com*). Some of the items could typically be encountered in written input (e.g. *health club, exchange*), some primarily in oral input (e.g. *kul, fuck you*) and some in both (e.g. *check-in, telebanking*).

31 items were offered in sentences (as context) and the rest were simply listed. The latter were mainly expressions that could be found on shop or counter signboards and we felt that they did not need a linguistic context to be recognized.

The participants could choose among the following options: never encountered the expression, encountered the expression but don't know what it means, encountered the expression and think it means... The last option was later analyzed according to whether



the participant's explanation of meaning was inaccurate, partially accurate or completely accurate.

Sample

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 50 adult Croatian L1 speakers whose age ranged from 18 to 58 (the average age being 35.3 years). They were all attending English courses in a private English language school in Zagreb. Among them, 43 had, prior to starting the course, learned English either in school or in private lessons, some had also learned French (N=10), some German (N=26), some Italian (N=9), some Russian (N=13), two had learned Spanish and one Dutch. 11 of the participants were male, 38 female and one did not state the gender.

Results and discussion

Asked to assess their command of English, one participant reported being able to understand a few words only, 9 said they could follow a simple conversation, 8 could express simple ideas, while the majority (31 participants) could take part in a conversation about a familiar topic.

One of the questions referred to language choice in a situation where the participant would have to communicate with a foreigner (the example given was with a Danish person). 43 of the participants named English as the language they would choose to communicate with foreigners.

The participants were rather non-unanimous as to how much English was present in Croatia. 16 thought that we were 'bombarded' by English, but similar numbers of the participants decided that English was less present in Croatia than in highly developed countries and that it was as much present as the other foreign languages (14 participants for each option).

The daily exposure to English, in the participants' estimation, ranged from one to 15 (!) hours, the average being 3.9 hours. Asked where they had heard or read the 44 items, the participants mentioned 32 different places and situations. Television was mentioned the most frequently (203 times), followed by "everywhere", "in daily conversation", work, magazines, radio, the Internet, advertisements. Some mentioned films, the airport, the disco, the tram, shopping centres. Among the least often mentioned places were books, cafés, music, concerts. The number of places and their wide range testify to the omnipresence of English in Croatia most evidently.

32 out of 50 participants reported that their status in life would be significantly better if they could speak English well.

As can be seen in Table 1, all the participants reported on being familiar with 19 out of the 44 items. There were two items (*postati*=to post, and *dejting*=dating) that more than 10 of the participants found totally unfamiliar.

25 items had been encountered by some participants but they reported not knowing their meaning. The numbers were the highest for *.com*, *www*, *offshore* and *hard kopi* (=hard copy). The results for the items where the participants attempted some definition of meaning show that most were at least partially correct. The exceptions were *softver* (=software), *check in*, *hard kopi* and *desk*: here more than one third of the participants gave completely inaccurate meanings. The most prominent item among those with only partly accurate meaning was *skinhedsi* (=skinheads).

The items for which a vast majority of the participants stated the completely accurate meaning were the following: *exchange*, *tičERICA* (=female teacher), *sorry*, *DJ*, *šoping* (shopping), *cash and carry*, *frendice* (=friends), *party*, *password* and *bend* (=band). It is interesting to note that for none of the items was the correct meaning given by all the participants.

The items for which the least number of participants (less than a half) could provide the completely accurate meaning included: *postati*, *health club*, *dejting*, *.com*, *check-in*, *skinhedsi*, *offshore*, *desk* and *hard kopi*.

Table 1: Numbers of participants that stated the accurate meaning (4), partly accurate meaning (3), inaccurate meaning (2), that they had encountered the item but didn't know what it meant (1), that they had never encountered the item (0).

| Item | (4) | (3) | (2) | (1) | (0) |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. konektirati (=to connect) | 41 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| 2. in | 44 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. favorite | 29 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. exchange | 49 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. stejd (stage) | 43 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. tičERICA (female teacher) | 47 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. sorry | 49 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. DJ | 45 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. bed (bad) | 44 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. mejl (mail) | 43 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. softver (software) | 30 | 2 | 15 | 2 | 0 |
| 12. postati (post) | 21 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 17 |
| 13. spika (speech, speak) | 44 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 14. www | 25 | 3 | 3 | 13 | 1 |
| 15. konzalting (=consulting) | 26 | 7 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| 16. telebenking (telebanking) | 31 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 3 |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| 17. šoping (shopping) | 48 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 18. lizing (=leasing) | 38 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 0 |
| 19. cash & carry | 46 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 20. fan | 43 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| 21. kul (cool) | 38 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 22. health club | 0 | 19 | 5 | 13 | 11 |
| 23. frendice (female friends) | 49 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 24. party | 46 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 25. fitness | 39 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 26. check-in | 15 | 5 | 26 | 2 | 1 |
| 27. trade | 29 | 2 | 13 | 6 | 0 |
| 28. tours | 36 | 12 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 29. skinhedsi (skinheads) | 15 | 24 | 6 | 2 | 0 |
| 30. password | 45 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 31. menadžment (=management) | 27 | 5 | 11 | 4 | 0 |
| 33. fak ju (fuck you) | 39 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 33. dejting (dating) | 18 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 12 |
| 34. bend (band) | 48 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 35. fejs lifting (face lifting) | 40 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 36. call girls | 30 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 2 |
| 37. hard kopi (hard copy) | 5 | 4 | 18 | 12 | 5 |
| 38. .com | 16 | 1 | 9 | 14 | 1 |
| 39. rooms | 43 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 40. heavy metal | 38 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| 41. bestseler (=bestseller) | 29 | 14 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| 42. desk | 6 | 3 | 17 | 10 | 2 |
| 43. offshore | 7 | 3 | 10 | 13 | 9 |
| 44. surfati po netu (=surf the net) | 34 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

The results obtained are very interesting. The words whose meaning was correctly guessed by a high number of participants seem to be those that have been present in Croatia for some time now (e.g. *šoping*, *DJ*, *frendica*) and have thus been encountered frequently, those that are used a lot by young people (e.g. *tičERICA*) in colloquial speech with both peers and adults, those whose pronounceability does not present a problem (*party*, *bend*), and those that can be encountered while taking care of basic needs in everyday life (e.g. *cash and carry*, *exchange*).

The items for which the highest number of the participants reported not having encountered were *postati* and *dejting*. They may be assumed to represent words that can be of interest only to people with specific needs (*dejting*) or that are used by only sections of specific groups of the population (*postati*). Among the items that the participants had



encountered, but did not have any idea what they meant, the most prominent were two 'electronic' words (*www* and *.com*), *health club* and *offshore*.

It is also interesting to look into the words for which a high number of the participants gave either wrong or partially correct meaning. Again, there are two expressions relating to computers: *hard kopi* and *softver*. Using computers, obviously, does not necessarily imply that people know all the technical aspects of the machine or its use. People do, however, seem to form an idea, though vague or incorrect, about the technical terms they keep hearing. The availability of cues may play a role here. *Hard kopi* and *softver* both refer to a highly specialized field and are, perhaps, therefore used in everyday conversation without many cues. People who do not specialize in this area simply connect the words with this area as a semantic field without bothering with defining the exact meaning. *Hard kopi* is also an interesting example from another point of view: what might have contributed to the low level of familiarity of its meaning is the fact that in Croatian there have existed, from the beginning, other ways of expressing the idea (e.g. 'papirnata verzija' or 'isprint' and the like).

The expression with the highest number of misinterpretations was *check-in*. When we looked into the places where the participants had encountered the expression, we noticed that those participants that reported encountering it in hotels usually explained the meaning correctly, while those that mentioned other locations were usually wrong. It seems that the participants in the latter group were misguided by one component of the airport check-in procedure and were determined that the *check-in* meant 'baggage check'.

The group of items with the highest number of partially correct meaning is headed by *health club* and *skinhedsi*. The meaning of *health club* was often narrowed down to 'gym', while the offered explanations for *skinhedsi* usually excluded one of the important components of its meaning (most often, it was the violence component). Items like *offshore* were attached partially or completely wrong meanings by the participants presumably because they usually appear, for example in newspaper ads, without enough contextual cues.

In order to look into the relationship between the knowledge of the meaning of individual items and the several other variables measured with the questionnaire we computed the correlational coefficients between them. The following variables were included: age, educational level, length of learning English, self-assessment of knowledge of English, estimation of the amount of exposure to English and attitudes to the presence of English in Croatia. The coefficients of significant correlations are presented in Tables 2-5 below.

None of the correlations between the individual lexical items and the estimation of the amount of exposure to English and attitudes to the presence of English in Croatia were statistically significant.



Table 2: Statistically significant correlation between vocabulary items and age of the participant

| | <i>favorite</i> | <i>cash and carry</i> | <i>fan</i> | <i>.com</i> | <i>rooms</i> |
|-----|-----------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| age | -.33* | -.29* | -.50** | -.37 | -.30* |

p < .05; p < .01

Age correlated significantly (and negatively) with the following items: *favorite*, *cash and carry*, *fan*, *.com* and *rooms*. The younger the participant, the better they knew the meaning of these items. *Fan* is a word that young people often hear and use when among their peers. We may assume that they know *.com* better because they generally are into computers more than older people. *Cash and carry* is a relatively new concept in Croatia and it is usually younger people that accept and make use of new ideas more quickly. *Rooms* as part of an ad for letting accommodation to foreign tourists is also relatively new, compared to the German 'Zimmer' or Italian 'camere'. *Favorite* is a word that has recently appeared in an ad for mobile phones (the TV ad: Nazovite svoje *favorite* brojeve!). It is connected with cheaper rates and thus, perhaps, of special interest to younger people. This exemplifies the potential importance for incidental vocabulary learning of such factors as interest and motivation.

Table 3: Statistically significant correlation between vocabulary items and educational level of the participant

| | <i>.com</i> | <i>favorite</i> |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| level of education | -.32* | -.32* |

p < .05

The educational level of the participants correlated significantly with the items *.com* and *favorite*. Interestingly, the lower the level of education, the more accurately they knew these items. It may be assumed that since *.com* is a special profession vocabulary word and that the special profession requires secondary technical education (the lowest educational level included in our study), it is not surprising that the correlation is negative. If the cheap rates that are advertised in the ad in which *favorite* is used are the motivation for the incidental acquisition of this item, then perhaps the negative correlation with *favorite* maybe pointing to a connection between different levels of education and the financial status of people.

Table 4: Statistically significant correlation between vocabulary items and length of learning English

| | <i>exchange</i> | <i>šoping</i> | <i>tičerica</i> | <i>sorry</i> | <i>friendica</i> | <i>bend</i> |
|----------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|------------------|-------------|
| length of learning English | -.31* | -.31* | -.33* | -.31* | -.31* | -.31* |

$p < .05$

Correlations between the 44 lexical items and the length of learning English showed six coefficients to be statistically significant. Again, all the correlations were negative. Thus, the less time the participants had been learning English, the better they knew the following items: *exchange*, *tičerica*, *sorry*, *šoping*, *friendica* and *bend*. The participants reported encountering these words on a daily basis, on trams, in conversation with peers, etc. Some reported learning the word *tičerica* from their children who used the word frequently. It is possible that beginner learners of English are more receptive to the English around them. With words like *sorry* or *bend*, besides their frequency, the role of immediate phonological memory may be a significant factor: they are rather short and include sounds that are very similar to Croatian sounds and, thus, can be easily remembered by beginner learners.

Table 5: Statistically significant correlations between vocabulary items and self-assessment of English proficiency

| | <i>telebanking</i> | <i>check-in</i> | <i>dejting</i> | <i>.com</i> | <i>bestseler</i> | <i>offshore</i> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| self-assessment of proficiency | .36* | .52** | .42** | .42** | .41** | .35* |

$p < .05$; $p < .01$

Background knowledge of the learner opens possibilities for explanations of some results as well. Items like *telebanking*, *check-in*, *dejting*, *.com*, *offshore* were more often accurately explained by those participants who assessed their English proficiency higher. It is possible to assume that such participants developed better semantic domains and 'word schemas' for the items in question. They might have also possessed concepts to which they could attach the new words. These are the items for which, generally, few participants gave the completely correct meaning. It may be possible that the growing knowledge of the English language contributes to an increasing ability for incidental vocabulary comprehension and learning.



Conclusion

The pilot study described above illustrates that the exposure to English in Croatia provides good opportunities for incidental learning of English vocabulary. Of course, different vocabulary items are acquired to a different extent. There are probably many factors that govern the process of incidental vocabulary acquisition by Croatian learners of English.

Although our study was not large-scale and the sample was by no means representative, it is our belief that the findings we obtained may be indicative of the processes underlying incidental English vocabulary learning by Croatian L1 speakers. The results point to the following factors that may influence vocabulary learning from informal exposure to English: age, level of education, background knowledge of the world and of English, length of learning English, interest and motivation, frequency of the item in the input, word pronounceability, availability of contextual cues.

In terms of attitudes, our study showed that only one third of the participants thought that there was too much English present in Croatia. We do, however, have to keep in mind that all our participants were learners of English and that this fact may have led to obtaining biased data.

The incidental vocabulary learning in our study differs in some important aspects from most of the incidental vocabulary learning studies described in the literature to date. We are talking about incidental learning of English vocabulary that is embedded in the Croatian linguistic and cultural context. It is logical to assume that our participants (like Croatian L1 speakers in general) had, on the one hand, different cues to rely on since they were exposed to English input that was, at the same time, part of a broader Croatian input. On the other hand, the motivation underlying incidental learning of this kind is, presumably, also different from the motivation of, say, those who learn ESL, or those who learn EFL in a formal setting. These are important factors to be kept in mind when looking at incidental vocabulary learning in contexts like the Croatian context.

Implication for further study

A study of this type should be carried out on a much larger sample that would include participants that have never learned English in a formal setting. With such a sample we may get a much clearer picture of incidental learning. It would be interesting to see if the results of those who already possess some knowledge of English that they acquired formally would be the same as of those who can rely on informal exposure only. A larger sample would allow a bigger age range and this may throw some more light on the incidental learning phenomenon.





The data-collection method should be refined so as to collect a more balanced list of vocabulary. As the parts of speech factor has been identified as important, a good list of vocabulary items would have to include enough items from different groups. One criterion should probably be the type of input (spoken or written) a particular item is mostly found in.

Studying incidental learning of English vocabulary in contexts like the Croatian context may offer new insights into language acquisition.

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ENGLESKI JEZIK U HRVATSKOJ DANAS: MOGUĆNOST NENAMJERNOG USVAJANJA VOKABULARA

Autorice najprije razmatraju status engleskog jezika u svijetu i kod nas. Polazeći od činjenice da se engleski jezik u Hrvatskoj razlikuje od drugih stranih jezika količinom izloženosti tome jeziku, provele su istraživanje kojim su ispitale potiče li ta izloženost nenamjerno usvajanje vokabulara engleskog jezika.

