

Teaching Methodology of Croatian

Metodika 16 (1/2008), 114-125

Review paper

Received: 27.07.2007.

TESTING CROATIAN LANGUAGE AS A FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE¹

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Summary – In the communicative approach to learning/teaching languages there are two possibilities of testing knowledge of language: informal – in communication with native speakers (especially in the case of second language) or formal – language testing. Due to social needs in the mid 90s the latter was approached at the Department of Slavonic languages at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana. The initial part of the article presents the theoretical framework for testing language knowledge (characteristics of language tests and the concept of authenticity in testing) while the latter part presents language testing for the Slovene language within the Center for Slovene as a second/foreign language and language testing for the Croatian language within the Department of Slavonic languages. Our experiences, primarily experiences with the Center for Slovene as a second/foreign language, which has a 15 year tradition in that particular area, can be of great help in establishing a national system of certifying Croatian language as foreign/second language.

¹ The topic was presented at the Fourth international Slavistic Congress in Varaždin and Čakovec, September 5-8, 2006. It was addended and elaborated here.

Key words: *authenticity in testing, Croatian as a foreign language, language tests, Slovene as a foreign language.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Croatian language policy still hasn't sufficiently confronted an important strategic issue of how to present the Croatian language to the EU². Although the first congress on Croatian as a second and foreign language, HIDIS (Gulešić-Machata et al., 2006), took place in 2005, and the second was announced for 2007 followed by the publication of a monography on the subject (Jelaska et al., 2005), a systematic concept of Croatian as a foreign/second language still does not exist. Many issues are dealt with in a hurry or remain open and remain unresolved, as for example one of the main issues of the European language policy – assessment and evaluation of knowledge of national languages. The first part of the paper presents a theoretical framework on evaluation of language knowledge where we talk about language tests and authenticity in language testing. Considering that Slovenia has a 15 year tradition in language testing, the aim of the second part of the paper is to present language testing of the Slovene language and Croatian language and suggest steps in establishing a Croatian national system of certifying foreign languages with special emphasis on the Croatian language.

2. EVALUATING LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When confronting the issue of measuring/evaluating language knowledge, we must first establish a model which will serve as a starting point for such measurement. An appropriate model can be a model of communicative competence in the foreign/second language. A number of definitions of communicative competence can be found in the literature, especially in the area of language testing (Bachman, 1990, Alderson et al., 1995, Bachman and Palmer, 1996); Mihaljević-Djigunović (1998)³ in Croatian literature, or Febežar (1999⁴) in Slovene literature.

² On that article by M. Bratanić (2007) *Je li hrvatski spreman za EU* and talk by D. Škiljana and V. Erdeljac entitled *Hrvatski na pragu Evropske unije* at the 21st international scientific congress HDPL *Language policy and language reality*, Split, 24–26. 5. 2007. Recently HAZU has also woken up with a warning that “Croatia could enter the EU without its language, that is, that west Balkan countries will have to use one common language” (...) The academia believe that “there should be a firm objection to the attempt to impose a so called common and standard language on the Croatian people for the sake of European freedom”. http://www.jutarnji.hr/dogadjaji_dana/clanak/art-2007,5,31,HAZU_jezik,76610.jl

³ The author perceives communicative competence as acquisition of language, sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

⁴ As opposed to Mihaljević-Djigunović, Ferbežar talks about communicative competence consisting of language competence, strategic competence and the so called psycho physiological mechanisms and suggests introducing the concept of dialogue competence, i.e., broadening the term

A simple definition of communicative competence can be as follows: it is an “abstract” system of rules and various competences (e.g. grammatical, lexical, strategic and sociocultural, etc.) which without authentic situations are only potential competences of a speaker. This means that the realization of communicative competence can be observed only in concrete communicative situations which are reflected through language use, that is, language production - in professional literature this is referred to as **language performance**⁵. Performance is “observed” and measurable; due to concrete performance we can make conclusions about an “abstract” competence.

2.1. Language tests

The question posed is how to measure such competence, that is, performance? In everyday life this does not create a problem: we can say that whoever survives with a particular language (without being hungry and thirsty) knows a language. However, it would be rather impractical to measure a person’s communicative competence, since it would be rather impractical to “follow” that person in their everyday (language) situations, even though this would be authentic (authenticity will be discussed further in the article). This is why, at the moment, the most practical instruments for measuring language performance are language tests. However, they are problematic primarily for two reasons: a) they cannot entirely measure language competence of a speaker, but measure only limited and measurable parts, e.g. lexis, grammatical structures, knowledge of rules, etc., and b) tests measure special competences which don’t have much in common with language competence; a successful tests depends on many other different and specific skills often resembling those of solving a crossword puzzle or a riddle, etc. In that case we are referring to **test performance**, which for the above mentioned reasons does not always show an individual’s true language competence.

As we have emphasized above, a language test is the most frequently used and the safest method of measuring language competence. This is true only if a test is developed according to appropriate criteria. The nature of a test depends on many things, above all on what we want to measure (in the text we refer to test validity), that is, what information we are seeking. Simply put, a test is a particular kind of question: the question that is put right will yield a desired answer.

communicative competence with intercultural understanding. Language competence, according to the author is divided into: a) organizational: grammatical and textual, and b) pragmatic: illocution and sociolinguistic.

⁵ The Croatian language uses the term *language production* for what is known as *performance* in English, but the concept unfortunately does not cover the other meaning implied in the English word, i.e. *reception* (see e.g. CEF 2005). Performance implies both production and reception: that is why we have opted for the term *language performance*. The term is also used by Rosandić (see www.vjesnik.hr/html/2003/05/09), who in his article provides a definition of language performance according to N. Chomsky: “empirically accessible dimension, behavior which can be observed, language use, speech”.

Validity is therefore an important measuring characteristic of a test; however when developing a test one must take into consideration many other demands. Prior to engaging in test development one must know what the **purpose** of the test is and who is going to be tested (the **target group**). If, for example, we are measuring the language competence of a beginner, the test must be adapted for beginners. At the same time, age should also be taken into consideration – a test for children will be different from a test for adults. If our purpose is classification according to the degree of knowledge, the test will be different from the one which is measuring participants' success in a particular language course; or e.g. test for measuring general language competence will be set up differently than a test which measures specific knowledge (e.g. technical language). Furthermore, a test must be developed so as to be as **objective** and **sensitive** as possible, which means separating better from weaker examiners. Finally, a test must always yield the same results regardless of who will grade it or how many times it will be solved by the same person - test reliability. We refer to reliability when talking about evaluation which is evident when there is a larger number of tests, and it is reflected in the harmony among raters and rater reliability, which is especially important when grading productive parts of the test.

2.2. Authenticity in language testing

The contemporary approach to language testing demands that **communicative methods** be taken into consideration in test development and the same applies in learning and teaching a language. That means that tests must be developed in a way to create “authentic” language use for the test-taker, that is, such language performance which is characteristic for non-testing situations. **Authenticity** is extremely important in language testing as a concept relating not only to texts used in tests, but also questions used for testing language competence, and last but not least to test performance – a test-taker's reaction to a concrete problem.

When referring to text authenticity, we are not talking about so called authentic texts, texts written by native speakers of a particular target language or translated into the target language by native speakers. The question of authenticity has to be broadened here to the question of text relevance for the target audience; it is clear that adult test takers are offered different texts than to children (e.g. the latter will be equipped with a lot of picture material), that texts for beginners will be different from those for advanced learners, etc. This however is often forgotten. In that respect, writing an application letter is more authentic than writing an essay, or answering a question is more authentic than choosing an answer among three or more choices.

If we want to induce authenticity, that is, typical language use characteristic for non-testing situations, we must take into consideration, as we have mentioned before, relevant texts for the target audience on the one hand, and relevant tasks with which we measure language use according to set criteria on the other hand.

Test takers (examinees) should know the task, that is, they should be placed in a situation where they will get a chance to reply with an answer which is typical, usual, therefore authentic regardless whether we are talking about text-related or text unrelated answers (in English these texts are referred to as task-based, and in free translations they are tasks directed to language behavior⁶). What kind of questions should be used for tasks in language tests and whether they (explicitly) check grammar – are some open questions which we talk about in this article.

We have mentioned some of the basic approaches which authors of language tests should take into consideration when doing their work. When preparing tests it one must always take into consideration a series of other characteristics which have not been mentioned so far, such as, the issue of grading, that is, criteria for grading and evaluating results. The issue of grading is so complex that it requires another special paper.

We can conclude that test development – not only language tests - must be well thought out since their results more or less hold judgment on the candidates. Often, depending on the test results a person may or may not get an appropriate job. When talking about formal assessment and evaluation of knowledge, that is, public system of certification, such achievement can shape a person's destiny, as opposed to the less formal or even informal testing for success while learning and teaching a language.

3. LANGUAGE TESTING IN SLOVENIA

3.1. Slovenian language – Center for Slovenian as a second/foreign language (CSD/SJ)

Language testing and certification of Slovene as a second/foreign language has a tradition which is as old as the Slovene state. Considering that in recent years testing knowledge of national languages is one of the current issues of the European language policy, language testing became the major research topic at the Center for Slovene as a second/foreign language at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Ljubljana (www.centerslo.net), more specifically in one of its programs – The Testing Center (IC).⁷

In the Republic of Slovenia, the official list of foreign language knowledge is given based on external evaluation of knowledge according to publicly valid educational programs. This kind of a system was introduced for various foreign languages; the central institution covering this area is the National Test Center (RIC),

⁶ The concept has still not been translated into the Croatian language. We are grateful for the suggested translation by Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović «tasks that imply solving (nonlinguistic) issues» or «content oriented tasks» and also mentioned that within the doctoral program of study of foreign language learning, there was a course planned on terminology which will try to solve some of the many issues in translating terminology relating to foreign language learning .

⁷ On the history of certification in the Republic of Slovenia see. Ferbežar, Pirih Svetina 2004a.

and all public official documents are available in the *Programoteka* at www.acs.si. The same applies for the program Slovene as a foreign language which is under the authority of CSD/SJ. The issue here is the national system of certification⁸ which appoints all of those at the CSD/SJ who are involved in the area, primarily those involved in language testing research, test development, pretest questions related to language planning in Slovenia. Within CSD/SJ in the year 2000, a three-level standardization document was prepared – the educational program Slovene for Foreigners (Ferbežar, Pirih Svetina, 2002), which set detailed standards at three levels of knowledge of Slovene as a second/foreign language, formally known as the basic, intermediate and advanced level. The program was based on communicative principles of learning and assessing knowledge of language, which is why all three levels take into consideration the speaker and his level of independence while communicating in the Slovene language⁹. The program gives candidates an opportunity to choose a test at a particular level depending on their needs, especially formal (e.g. in order to obtain Slovene citizenship, one must have a certificate that proves knowledge of the Slovene language at the basic level; for entering Slovene language the level is middle; and for obtaining work e.g. doctors – the highest level, which was demanded by the Slovene Chamber of Commerce): The program levels are internationally comparable; at the six level scale proposed by the Council of Europe, the basic level is comparable with level B1, the middle level with B2 and the highest level with C1. These tests, however, have not been calibrated yet since *The Common European Framework of Reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment* (Framework) has not been translated yet. Only in that segment is Croatia ahead, since it published that document in 2005, which will be discussed later in the text¹⁰.

The fifteen-years of experience by the IC in the area of Slovene language testing resulted in connections with similar European institutions; in that respect the University of Ljubljana, that is. the IC as its representative since 2000 is a member of ALTE, *Association of Language Testers in Europe*, www.alte.org – one of the most influential organizations in that particular area.

Through ALTA, the Center tries to harmonize standards in testing the Slovene language as a foreign language with international standards and norms, and based on the common approaches tries to internationalize the existing system of certi-

⁸ In 1994, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia appointed CSD/TJ a professional committee responsible for testing knowledge of Slovene as a foreign language (Uradni list RS, no. 47/1994).

⁹ At the basic level this implies independence in understanding routine tasks which we do on a daily basis either privately or publicly; at that level, receptive language skills are emphasized. At the intermediate level, the speaker is independent in oral and written communication even under unforeseen circumstances. At the advanced level, complete independence and creativity in language use are expected.

¹⁰ In Croatian literature, the document is also known under the acronym CEF (see Passini, Juričić 2005a, 2005b) as the *Common European Framework*. In this paper we use the abbreviation *Framework* (2005), which is used in the document translated into Croatian.

fication. Over the last years, major improvements were visible in that area within the Socrates project Lingua 2 TiPS (*Testing in Polish and Slovene*), where five documents were reformulated, that is, made into handbooks in the area of learning and testing the Slovene language: *Pojmovnik s področja jezikovnega testiranja* (Ferbežar et al., 2004b), *Kontrolni vprašalniki za opis in razvoj jezikovnih izpitov in testnih nalog : slovenska verzija* (Ferbežar et al., 2004c), *Priročnik za avtorje testnih gradiv verzija* (Ferbežar et al., 2004c), *Opisi ravni znanja : the ALTE can do statements – Slovene version* (Pirih Svetina et al., 2004a), *Preživetvena raven v slovenščini = Breakthrough level Slovene* (Pirih Svetina et al., 2004b).

Other activities of the IC should be mentioned here which are more or less related to testing Slovene as a second/foreign language: this would be the development of a collection of tests intended for preparation for examining knowledge of the Slovene language at the primary, secondary and tertiary level (Ferbežar and Petric 2006; Pirih Svetina and Ferbežar, 2006; Ferbežar and Pirih Svetina, 2006), Gruntvig project SPICES, with which IC “enters” a very current area of integrations, development of a bank of tasks CSD/SJ based on statistical analyses of existing tests and numerous other research (e.g. sociolinguistic research of inter-language etc.), which are actually a precondition for further development of this area.

3.2. The Croatian Language – Department of Slavonic Languages and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana

Knowledge tests of various languages¹¹ can be taken at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana, and the certificates obtained can be used for various purposes (most often, they are used for enrollment into postgraduate studies, for particular jobs, for obtaining scholarships, etc.). In former Yugoslavia, when (Srbo)Croatian language in Slovenia had the status of reserve code (Požgaj Hadži and Balažic Bulc, 2005), there were very few candidates at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana who sat for the Serbo-Croatian language exam. Most often these candidates were Slovene radio and television correspondents who had to go to former Yugoslav centers. When new states emerged, new standard languages emerged as well and obtained different statuses in Slovenia, i.e., became foreign languages. This fact, especially from the 90s of the last century is confirmed by a greater number of candidates¹² for the Croatian and Serbian language exams.¹³

¹¹ The exam is usually oral; the candidate brings his/her own article/book or the teacher selects the text which is the source for the oral exam of a particular foreign language.

¹² Velika je navala kandidata bila sredinom 90-ih godina prošloga stoljeća, kada su turističke agencije u Sloveniji za svoju registraciju trebale potvrde da njihovi namještenici znaju najmanje dva strana jezika.

¹² There has been a great interest by candidates during the mid 90s, when tourist agencies in Slovenia needed certificates that stated that their employees knew at least two foreign languages. This was necessary for their registration.

¹³ At this point we have an organized exam for testing knowledge of the Croatian language and the

In addition to the greater number of candidates, the reorganizations the exam was also influenced by at least two major reasons: a) specific position of the former Serbo-Croatian in Slovenia (it was a mandatory subject in primary school until the 1992/93 school year, but it was also present in the media, especially in various literature); the established (wrong) opinion that everyone knows “our” language and that that is the easiest way to obtain a certificate for knowing a language. Due to that and the fact that these are related languages, the Department for Croatian and Serbian languages at the Department of Slavic languages of the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana began a reorganization of exams during the mid 90s of the last century: development of new exams, examination guides (Požgaj Hadži and Balažic Bulc, 2004), and organization of exam preparation courses. Because of the characteristic position of the neighboring and related language we decided that the Croatian language knowledge test (and Serbian language knowledge test) be taken only at the advanced (C1) level. The exam is therefore adapted to European standards of knowledge and to date we are the only institution in Slovenia where it can be taken; furthermore we became the only language (except for Slovene) at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana which has standardized tests¹⁴.

Candidates, who wish to take the Croatian language exam at the high level, can get all the necessary information in the guide (Požgaj Hadži and Balažic Bulc, 2004): from what knowledge of language is expected at the high level to what the exam look likes and how it is evaluated. In addition to information on the exam, the guide also contains a chapter called «From the Croatian Grammar» and two practice chapters (on the relationship between Croatian and Serbian and Serbian and Slovenian languages) which will help candidates in intercepting and removing typical inferential mistakes. Test samples with answer keys are located at the end of the exam guide book, in addition to literature and a dictionary of linguistic terminology translated into the Slovene language which will make reading the guide easier for candidates.

We are aware of the fact that our department should be more proactive with issues of certifying the Croatian language; however we believe that we have made significant progress in testing the Croatian language thanks to cooperation and exceptional help of the Testing Center CSD/SJ.

4. LANGUAGE TESTING IN CROATIA

As mentioned in the introduction, the area of learning/teaching the Croatian language as a foreign/second language, is still not systematic, there are still ele-

Serbian language. In the future, the problem of Bosnian and Montenegro languages should be solved.

¹⁴ At the moment publicly valid educational programs for various foreign languages are being developed based on the Framework at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana. They will become a basis for language testing and certification.

ments of hastiness and diversity which are reflected in the area of language testing. This has been pointed out by several authors (Požgaj Hadži, Smolić, 1998, 2000; Cvikić, 2005; Pasini, Juričić, 2005a, 2005b et al.). Although various foreign language schools offer courses in the Croatian language (Croaticum – Croatian for foreigners, The Slavistic school of Zagreb, University school of the Croatian language, Center for foreign languages – Vodnikova, Lin-Cro Croatian language courses, School of foreign languages of the Croatian Heritage Foundation, etc), a valid educational program Croatian for Foreigners, harmonious with the Framework¹⁵ and which would be a base for standardized testing of the Croatian language still does not exist. Some authors, e.g. Cvikić (2005, p. 316) cite reasons for such situations:

«insufficient number of scientific research, few professionals who are concerned with Croatian as a foreign language in a systematic way especially, a small number of participants who would enable precise research, etc.» Unfortunately, among the reasons mentioned, the most important one is not present – until there is a central institution which will take care of Croatian language as a foreign/second language (which has been pointed out for about 15 years) we will still not know who is doing what and how (each school dealing with Croatian as a foreign/second language is actually an entity of its own). Because of that we could not obtain necessary information on language testing of the Croatian language in Croatia. At the Croaticum webpage there is information that they organize and implement examinations of Croatian language knowledge as a foreign and second language, and that the certificate can be used for enrolling into higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia, for foreign degree validation, work, obtaining citizenship and other needs. In addition to formal information on the exam (where and how it is implemented, the cost, the number of correct answers a candidate must have in order to pass, etc) there is also information about 5 “test units” (understanding listening and reading, grammar structures, written and oral communication). Among the units mentioned, only oral communication is elaborated, for which the candidate must prepare one “familiar” topic from everyday life to present (5 minutes) and talk about with the lector.” There is no information on the language level. Although the purposes for which the Croaticum certificate can be used are mentioned at the beginning, at the end it states that the certificate enables candidates to **only** (emphasized by authors of this text) apply for entrance exams at Croatian higher education institutions. Even more awkward or we could say worrisome information was found at www.vodnikova.hr/index.php?mod=certifikati the Center for foreign languages in Vodnikova street, which issues certificates for English, German, Italian, Spanish and conducts exams for court interpreters for various languages, among others Slovene at the C2 level.

¹⁵ In that respect, major work was done by Croaticum (Pasini, Juričić 2005a, 2005b); although the Ministry issued a licence to Croaticum, it is still not harmonious with CEF. Other schools individually harmonize their programs with CEEF. However, at the moment systematic harmonization of programs for the Croatian language at the state level is of declarative nature.

The exam for court interpreters consists of a written part (“reading comprehension, language use, where grammar and vocabulary are tested, essay writing on a given topic and translation”) and oral part (oral production: presentation on a particular topic or text and oral interaction: conversation with the examiner on a chosen topic”). We could not find out what the tests for Slovene language looked like and who carried them out.¹⁶ Unfortunately, we cannot say much about language tests used by various schools since they are a “secret” – in our opinion tests should be made public in test compilations, or should at least have a model available on the internet (which is common practice of the IC CSD/SJ).

5. MOVING ON

In 2005, Školska knjiga in cooperation with the Council of Europe published the document *Framework* which has as a goal to standardize the area of learning and teaching foreign languages and is base for the “development of teaching curricula for languages, program guidelines, exams, textbooks, etc. in Europe” (*Framework*, 2005: 1). Based on that document a publicly valid educational program Croatian for Foreigners should be developed. The program would have three major levels (basic, independent and experienced user) and three interlevels. The program would determine standards of knowledge which users should attain in order to get a valid certificate on knowing the Croatian language as a foreign/second language (the level they wish to take is chosen by users themselves). An important part of the program is the exam catalogue which determines the levels of knowledge of the Croatian language at each level, exam goals, exam parts and content and criteria for evaluation. The program is therefore a base for developing standardized tests for each level. In order to prepare examinees for the test, test catalogues should be made, just as in the case of test catalogues for the Slovene language at all three levels, and banks of test questions. Permanent education for future test developers should be organized as well, etc. We emphasize again that the first step in establishing a Center for Croatian as a foreign/second language, that is, a central and primary institution which will cover various programs for the Croatian as a foreign language: e.g. the Slavistic School of Zagreb, the University summer school, various courses, the testing center, lectors for the Croatian language throughout the world, publishing, conferences for lectors, etc. This institution should get authorization from the Government of the Republic of Croatia for issuing valid announcements on the knowledge of Croatian as a second/foreign language, which means that only that certificate is valid at the state level (the exam can of course be administered by other institutions in Croatia which are authorized by the center). It would be advisable to take into consideration positive experiences of the Center for Slovene as a second/foreign language, especially the

¹⁶ Interesting data was obtained from a Slovene court interpreter living in Croatia, who cancelled her exam at the C1 level in Ljubljana, since she had to take the C2 level at the Centre for foreign languages Vodnikova; dates for taking the exam can be seen at their internet site.

experiences of the Testing center for the Slovene language, which has a long tradition in that area. We hope that this fact will not be neglected by future authors of the state system of certification for Croatian as a second/foreign language. After all, common and neighboring languages are at issue.

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