

Language Games in Early School Age as a Precondition for the Development of Good Communicative Skills

Katarina Aladrović Slovaček¹, Natalija Zovkić² and Andrea Ceković²

¹Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb

²Graduate Study, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb

Abstract

Game is an inborn (immanent) activity to children; it includes a large number of activities and helps children to develop their own abilities. Since it is filled with harmony, pleasure and rhythm, it makes it easier to accept larger amount of information without fatigue. Research (Velički & Peti Stantić, 2009; Aladrović Slovaček, 2011; Pavličević-Franić, Aladrović Slovaček & Ivanković, 2011) suggests that, learning through games, children master larger amount of information and present better attitudes to Croatian language as a school subject. In fact, language is an abstract system of signs and mastering it very often presents a problem to children until the start of the period of language automation (at 12 years old). However, in early language learning, emphasis is placed on the development of language-communicative competence, which means language use in everyday situations. To make language teaching at that age purposeful, it is necessary to use games as one of the teaching methods.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the effects of frequent implementation of language games on the development of communicative skills among primary school children. The research has been conducted in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school (N=128) in three different schools of Central Croatia. The subjects had five Croatian language lessons in which language activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing were encouraged through games. After each lesson a short questionnaire was administered, as well as a test of acquired knowledge. During the fifth lesson, an activity was done in which the efficiency

of mastering communicative skills on the levels of listening, speaking, reading and writing was evaluated.

Respondents showed an improved knowledge and attitude in relation to these studies (Miljević-Riđički et al. 2004; Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2009; Aladrović Slovaček, 2011) and have mastered communication skills in speaking and writing more successfully, which confirms that the use of games in teaching Croatian language encourages the development of communication skills.

Key words: *attitude to Croatian language; Croatian language teaching; language games; language skills.*

Introduction

Croatian language as a school subject is the most represented subject in primary school. The very number of classes - five hours per week or 175 hours per year - tells us that it is extremely important for pupils to acquire and master the educational contents of Croatian language prescribed by the National Curriculum for Primary School (2006). According to the National Curriculum for Primary School, in the first grade of primary school the subject of Croatian language is divided into five educational areas and four educational areas in other grades of primary school as follows: initial reading and writing (only in the 1st grade of primary school), language, language expression, literature and media culture. The educational tasks which aim to be achieved within these educational areas call for encouragement of certain skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Precisely these four language skills are the pillars of Croatian language teaching in all three educational periods as envisaged by the National Framework Curriculum (2010). Knowledge of the mother tongue and good mastering of its contents helps the child to master not only another language, but also the contents of other school subjects since the child mostly speaks, reads and writes in the Croatian language (Pavličević-Franić, 2011). The research thus far conducted (Miljević-Riđički, 2004; Pavličević-Franić, 2005; Aladrović, 2011) shows that the attitude of pupils towards Croatian language as a school subject is very poor since the said pupils ranked Croatian language at the very bottom on the list of their favourite subjects. The assumption is that such attitudes are a result of both the manner of work and the demanding content which the pupils have to master within a certain period. Consequently, such attitudes cause a negative attitude towards Croatian language in general and a low level of literacy.

In order to improve not only the attitudes of pupils towards the school subject, but also their general literacy, it is necessary to introduce different ways of processing and exercising the educational content in order to make it closer, more interesting and less tiresome for the pupils. One of the ways to transfer the content of Croatian language as a school subject in a very interesting manner is a didactic language game. In order to verify how much the pupils love the game and if it helps them to acquire the educational content, a research has been done in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school, results of which are presented in this paper.

Language Skills in Croatian Language Teaching

The contemporary linguistic and didactic literature has been placing ever more importance on the encouragement of language skills in Croatian language teaching, emphasizing the language skills of reading and writing at school age, but also not diminishing the importance of other two language skills, listening and speaking. The National Framework Curriculum (2010), bases the entire Croatian language teaching on language skills as basic structures within the language learning process. "The basic task of the subject of Croatian language is to teach the pupils to communicate, to express their thoughts and feelings and to receive the messages of others in the mother tongue" (Bežen, 2002)¹. Children learn the Croatian language before they have started school, in an unconscious way, listening to the people around them, such as their parents, brothers and sisters. In order to learn to communicate, first it is necessary to learn to listen. Listening is an action where one perceives sounds (be it noise or tone) and, most importantly, one perceives speech. One listens with the visible, external organs, ears, but also the internal organs within the ear (ear-drum, auditory ossicles, cochlea...) and, of course, the auditory centre in one's brain, which is also the storage of our auditory memory. It is well known that in these fast times children are very impatient and, moreover, they "do not have the time" or the patience to listen to one another, let alone listen to what their teachers may read to them during Croatian language lessons. This is why this paper investigates how much children listen to each other, to their teachers and how much information they can remember without difficulty.

Language is realized in two forms: speaking and writing. Writing is the skill used to express our own thoughts and feelings by means of a system of signs which is called the script (Bežen, 2002). Writing was very important and significant in the past since this is how the people left a mark in the world (e.g. the Lascaux cave, the Baška tablet, Roman breviary). When a child writes, it is not only the act of writing, but also the act of learning the meaning, form and function of the written letter and word. Children need to exercise writing as much as possible, through motoric imitation, visual base, recollection and copying. The best way to check if the child has mastered writing completely is through a composition. This is why one of the aims of this paper is to identify how children master this most complex language skill through games.

On the other hand, reading is the ability and the skill of decoding (deciphering) the written text (Bežen, 2002). It belongs to one of the six language areas present in primary schooling. This particular research puts emphasis on expressive reading and role reading. Expressive reading includes both empathy with the text and also its sound and intonation value. Pupils should be exposed to expressive reading through rhythmical rhymes and short fiction. For this purpose, the pupils played the game

¹ The quotes in this article are translations of the Croatian original made for the purpose of this paper, unless otherwise indicated.

“Read me accurately“ with the aim to come to the conclusion that it is not important to be the first and the fastest reader because then you cannot pay attention to word intonation and expressive reading. After the game, the pupils understood that it is much more important to read at a moderate speed in order to be able to understand the written text and that the words have to be accurately intoned in order to make the reading expressive.

Another component of the language area is speaking. Speech (speaking) is the ability and skill to express thoughts and feelings by means of articulate sounds and words (Bežen, 2002). When speaking, pupils enrich their vocabulary, learn to express themselves orally and to practice how to apply language communication in accordance with orthoepic standards. Therefore, the task was to create and tell their own stories through games. In conversation, the pupils themselves concluded which elements the story must have and which characters may appear in the story. In order to enrich the pupils' vocabulary, they were given a photograph as a motive and they had to tell as many different words connected to it as possible. The pupils found it interesting because they saw different forms which the oral language may have, how much they can change it solely with their imagination and in this way prepare themselves to one day become successful speakers.

Games in Croatian Language Teaching

One of the important elements of communicative - functional approach in language teaching is the game. Children of early school age are still in the concrete operations phase and therefore the game is an activity which is characteristic and appropriate for them (Cook, 2000). For this reason, acquiring and learning the mother tongue should be concrete, pragmatic, connected with real-life communicative situations, playful and cheerful, but at the same time efficient, different from the traditional lecture (Pavličević-Franić, 2005; Požgaj-Hadži, 2007). According to the described communicative – functional model, almost all educational contents planned by the syllabus of the Croatian language and expression for junior grades of primary school can be successfully taught through the game as one of the key elements of teaching.

The game is the child's natural activity (*homo ludens*, the playing man). The language game, but not exclusively the language game, is not only a manner of communication or transferring information, but also the manner of expressing our feelings, wishes, attitudes and ideas. Each game has clear and previously established rules. Furthermore, the game is one of the basic activities through which a child enters and discovers the world of adults and which, among other things, provides the child with the opportunity to enjoy playing, moving, pronouncing and communicating with other game participants. It is also an important link in the process of the child's socialization and therefore has a multifunctional role in its growing-up process. One can conclude that when playing, the child enters the world of adults and the company of its peers,

while at the same time it can learn through the game. Language games are defined as the area where both adults and children alike free themselves in their own language, enjoying the intuitive acquisition of rules and acquiring the ability to act in accordance with the rules or to break them (Peti-Stantić & Velički, 2009). The game can be divided into three types: functional (acquisition of particular contents), symbolic (learning of future roles – for example, when the girls play with their dolls and in this way prepare themselves for their future role of mothers) and the game with rules (social games, e.g. Ludo). By combining these three types of games, different forms of language games can be created which can help the pupils to learn, repeat, exercise and get motivated. When playing, children learn, which creates a positive atmosphere in the class, unconstrained and free, and therefore such learning is not difficult for children (Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović, 2009).

Research

Sample and Instruments of the Research

This research included about 130 pupils (N=128) of the fourth (70%) and fifth (30%) grades of primary school, 51% of which were boys and 49% girls. The research involved the fourth grade as the final grade of junior grades of primary school and the fifth grade as the initial grade of senior grades, though, in terms of cognitive processes, the pupils of these grades belong to the same concrete operations phase. It is obvious that the manner of teaching changes as the pupils enter the senior grades and the expectations are much higher, though in terms of their cognitive processes, the pupils of the fifth and sixth grades, i.e. until the age of 12 (Piaget, 1977), as already said, are closer to the pupils of junior grades of primary school. This is why this paper aims to identify the attitudes of these two grades of primary school. The research was conducted in Central Croatia, in a district school in the vicinity of Velika Gorica, in Ivanić-Grad and one primary school in the city of Zagreb.

In order to collect the best possible data, the subjects attended the Croatian language lessons during which language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) were encouraged through games. The lessons were created in the way to motivate the pupils through playing games, to present the basic content of the lesson in the most interesting way and then to exercise the said content through games. In other words, the game was integrated into all parts of the lesson which should have encouraged the subjects to consider if they liked this manner of work and if it changed their attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject. After the lesson, the subjects completed a questionnaire on their opinion about the games played during the lesson and about their attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject, about school and games in general. After the questionnaire, a short test was conducted as well, reviewing the acquisition of the content taught during the lesson (*ije/je*, capital and small letter, role reading, storytelling, story listening). Both the questionnaire and the test were made for and applied in this research only.

The Aim and the Problems

The basic aim of this research is to identify the attitude of subjects towards the game, its application in Croatian language teaching and how much it influences the results related to the pupils' knowledge and their attitudes towards Croatian language lessons. In view of the basic aim of the research, the following problems have been set:

- a) To identify the attitude of the subjects towards Croatian language as a school subject.
- b) To investigate how often the subjects play in school, how much they play at home, with whom they play, in other words, to investigate their playing habits in general.
- c) To investigate if the subjects' answers regarding the attitude towards the game and Croatian language as a school subject differ depending on their grade, sex and their mark in Croatian language.
- d) To investigate if the results of the test of knowledge influence the attitudes of the pupils towards the application of the game in language teaching.
- e) To investigate if the attitudes of the pupils towards school in general influence their results at the test of knowledge and their attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject.

Hypotheses

In accordance with the aim and the problems of the research, the following hypotheses have been set:

- a) The subjects are expected to like Croatian language as a school subject and mostly rank it as "I like it" (very good, 4).
- b) In school, the subjects are expected to play rarely or sometimes, while at home they are expected to play more, though not significantly more. The subjects are also expected to play mostly with their friends, but also to play computer games very often.
- c) The boys are expected to play more than girls, the pupils of lower school achievement are expected to play more than those of better achievement and the pupils of the junior grade of primary school (the fourth grade) are expected to play more than the senior (fifth) graders.
- d) The subjects with the better result at the test of knowledge are expected to consider the game as one of the important factors in language teaching.
- e) The subjects with a better attitude towards school in general are expected to also have a better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject and better results at the test of knowledge.

Results

The first aim of the research was to identify how much the subjects like Croatian language as a school subject. The results (Figure 1) show that the subjects like Croatian language as a school subject (48.4%) and that most subjects either like or like very

much Croatian language as a school subject (75.7%). However, when one looks at Figure 2, one can see that Croatian language is at the bottom of the list of the subjects which the pupils like the most, at the same time being at the bottom of the list of subjects which the pupils like the least. Considering the position of Croatian language on both of the said lists, we can safely conclude that Croatian language is at the golden middle of the list of favourite subjects since some pupils like it and others do not like it, their attitude depending on various factors.

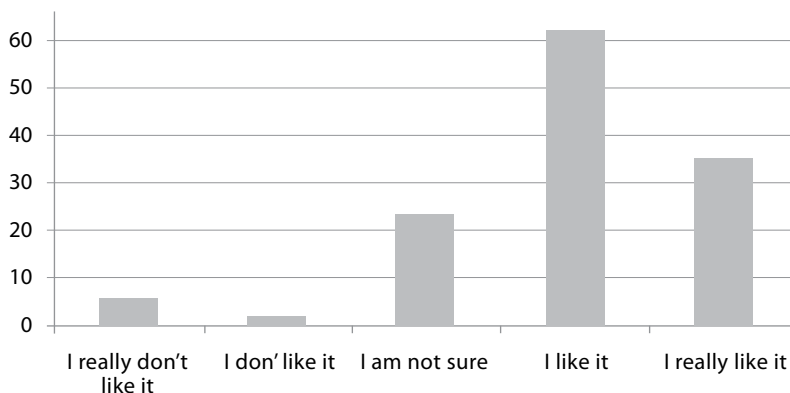


Figure 1. Attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject

The research and the analysis of variance showed that the pupils who like school more also have a better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject ($df = 4, p < 0.01$).

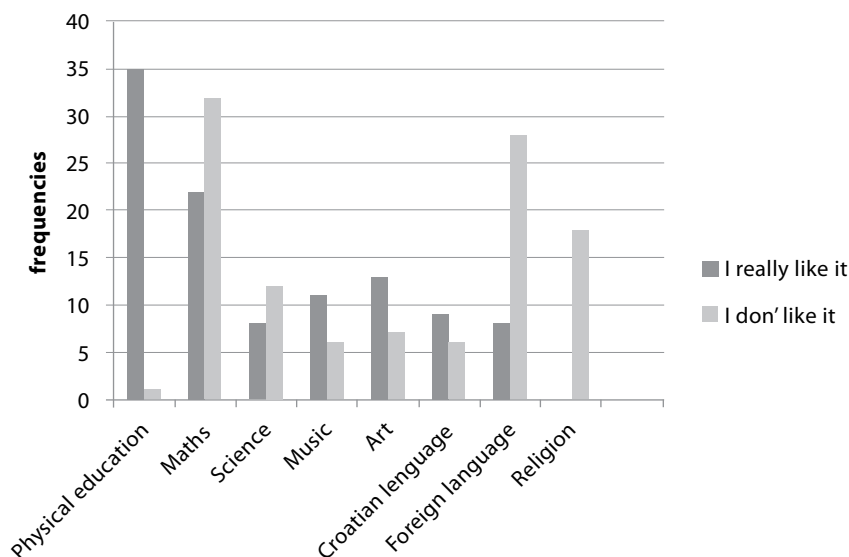


Figure 2. Attitude towards subjects – the favourite and the least favourite subject

The results show that the first hypothesis assuming that the subjects like Croatian language and rank it as “I like it“ (grade 4) can be confirmed.

The second aim of the research was to investigate the subjects’ playing habits. It is interesting that 6.3% subjects play in school, while 33.6% do not play in school. However, the majority of children, as much as 75%, play at home and only a small number or 5% of children do not play at home (Figure 3). Therefore, it can be said that the subjects play at home regularly and only sometimes play at school.

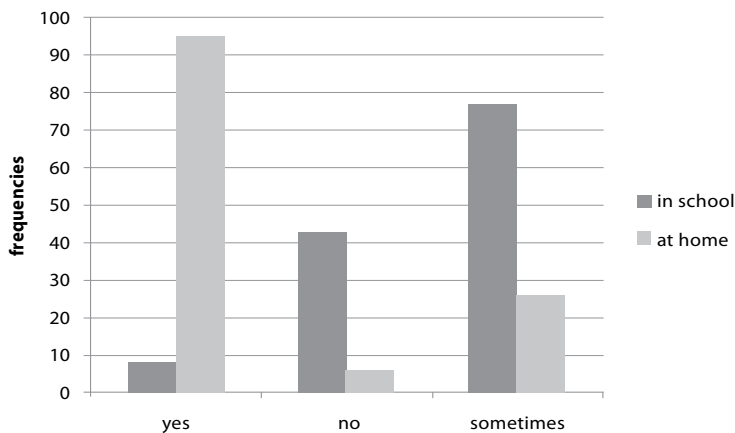


Figure 3. Attitude about playing in school and at home

It is also interesting to see that the subjects play with their brothers and sisters the most, then with their friends and they play alone the least. Some play with animals and a very small number of subjects play with their parents. It is interesting that the subjects do not mention their computer as the thing with which they play the most. Moreover, when talking about playing, they tend to mention people much more often than they mention things, which is somewhat surprising considering the large number of very popular devices which enable the simulation of various games.

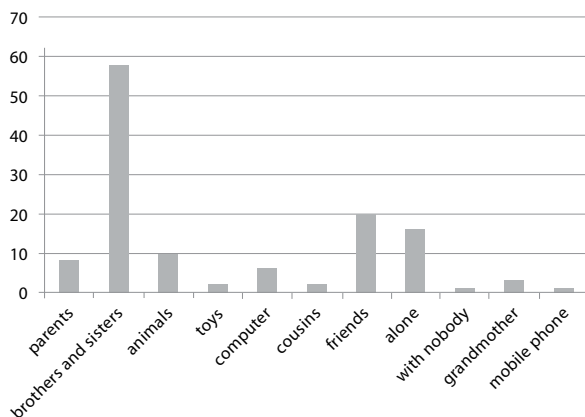


Figure 4. Attitude of subjects towards choosing the person with whom they play the most

Table 1 shows which games the pupils mostly play during Croatian language lessons and at home, and which their favourite games in general are. The pupils were expected to say that they play on their computers the most. However, the results showed that pupils prefer spending their time with peers, playing social games. The pupils also spend quite a lot of time (though not the most) playing with their parents, despite the general opinion that modern parents are very busy and do not have time for their children. A curious fact discovered in this research is that the pupils believe that one should not play in school because the school is a place where one should learn and not play, and also that one goes to school with the sole purpose to learn something. Asked “What would you like to change in school?“, most pupils answered that they would like to play more while learning, since they know that it is easier to learn when you play. The question remains why the pupils still believe that school is not a place for playing, though they are well aware of the fact that they can learn by playing. However, this question is difficult to answer.

Table 1. Attitude of subjects towards the games played in school and at home

Number of pupils (f)	The most often played games during Croatian language lessons	Number of pupils (f)	Which games do you mostly play at home?	Number of pupils (f)	The favourite game
32	We do not play	17	Social games	8	Hide and seek
12	Theatre	9	Video games	6	Football
11	Super talent	9	Football	3	Video games
4	Chinese whisper	7	War	3	Chess
6	Crossword puzzle	4	School teachers	2	With my pet

The results also show (Figure 5) that the subjects’ favourite activity is retelling and telling stories, which involves speaking skills, followed by listening to stories (listening skills), writing compositions (writing skills) and in the end, reading texts (reading skills). This is as expected, since reading and writing skills are particularly exercised during the entire primary school education.

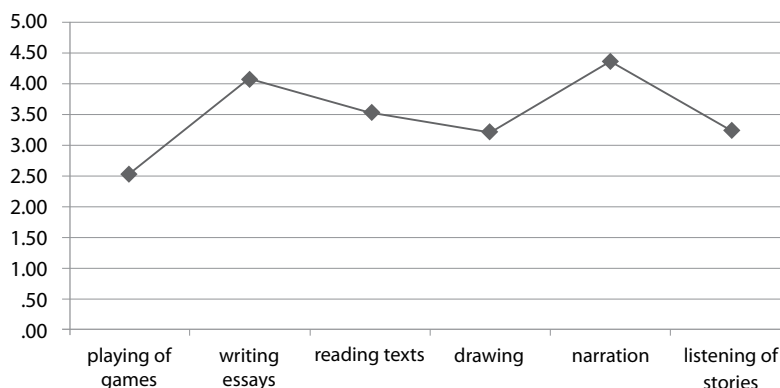


Figure 5. Attitude of subjects towards activities in Croatian language lessons

The results show that the second hypothesis can be partly confirmed since the subjects indeed very rarely play in school, and play at home much more often than in school.

The third problem was to investigate if the subjects' answers differ depending on their sex, grade and mark in Croatian language. Mann-Whitney U test shows that the subjects differ in the variable "Do you like playing at home?", since a significantly larger number of girls than boys said that they played at home ($z = -2.42, p < 0.05$). Mann-Whitney U test also shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the subjects' answers depending on their grade (the fourth and the fifth), which only confirms that the subjects are in the same cognitive phase, which is the phase of concrete operations when the game as a teaching method is very much desired. The analysis of variance ($p < 0.76, df = 2$) also shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the subjects related to their mark in Croatian language, implying that the subject's mark in Croatian language does not significantly influence their attitudes and playing habits. The results show that the third hypothesis can be partly confirmed since the girls indeed play more often than the boys. However, the second part of the third hypothesis is rejected, since it assumes that the pupils of lower school achievement and the pupils of the junior grade of primary school will be more prone to playing.

The fourth problem was to investigate if the results of the test of knowledge influence the subjects' attitude on the application of games in language teaching. The analysis of variance ($p < 0.98, df=5$) shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the subjects' attitudes on the application of games in Croatian language teaching depending on the test of knowledge. This disproves the fourth hypothesis assuming that the success at the test of knowledge would cause different attitudes of subjects towards the application of games in language learning.

The fifth problem was to investigate if the achievement of the pupil at the test of knowledge influences their attitudes towards Croatian language as a school subject. The analysis of variance ($p < 0.78, df=4$) proved that there is no statistically significant difference, meaning that a better achievement does not necessarily imply a better attitude towards the school subject, which disproves the fifth hypothesis that a better achievement at the test of knowledge would cause a better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject.

Conclusion

Game, as an activity immanent to children, is important for their cognitive development, for the second socialization which they go through and also for the stimulation of their creativity, especially the creative way of expression and imagination. In Croatian language teaching, playing games has been proven to influence the attitude of subjects towards the school subject and therefore its introduction into teaching is necessary. However, this research showed that the subjects play during Croatian

language lessons only occasionally and usually remember the following games: *Chinese whisper*, *Crossword puzzle* and *Theatre*. It is interesting that some subjects believe that games are very useful for learning since they stimulate concentration and make the lessons more attractive while, on the other hand, some subjects believe that games are not welcome in their lessons since they signify a bad attitude towards school, which is a serious place intended predominantly for learning. This is, in fact, the reflection of the attitudes of their parents or teachers who convince the children that school is a serious institution where one should only learn and definitely not play. However, the integration of the game, which is extremely important for this research, influenced positively the attitude of subjects towards Croatian language as a school subject and especially the results of their tests of knowledge. The majority of subjects achieved good or very good results at the test of knowledge and what helped them to remember the information so easily was the game.

In view of the above-mentioned facts, one can conclude that not only in junior grades of primary school, but also in senior grades, as long as the pupils are in the concrete operations phase, it is necessary to play didactic language games which will help them to better understand and master often abstract and complicated contents of Croatian language lessons. Moreover, when playing, the pupils will learn more easily and be better concentrated, while the lessons will be more pleasurable and interesting. All these elements will result not only in the successful acquisition of educational contents, but also in a better attitude towards the school subject, which is often a precondition for successful mastering of the said subject.

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Katarina Aladrović Slovaček

Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
katarina.aladrovic@ufzg.hr

Natalija Zovkić

Graduate Study, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
natalija.zovkic@gmail.com

Andrea Ceković

Graduate Study, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
andreacekovic@hotmail.com

Jezična igra u ranoj školskoj dobi kao preduvjet razvoja dobrih komunikacijskih vještina

Sažetak

Igra je djeci urođena (imanentna) aktivnost, uključuje velik broj aktivnosti i kroz nju djeca razvijaju svoje sposobnosti. Budući da je ispunjena skladom, osjećajem ugone i ritmom, olakšava ovladavanje većim brojem informacija bez zamora. Istraživanja (Velički i Peti Stantić, 2009; Aladrović Slovaček, 2011; Pavličević-Franić, Aladrović Slovaček i Ivanković, 2011) pokazuju da djeca učeći kroz igru ovladaju većim brojem informacija te pokazuju bolje stavove prema hrvatskome jeziku kao nastavnome predmetu. Naime, jezik je apstraktan sustav znakova i ovladavanje njime vrlo često djeci do razdoblja jezične automatizacije (12. godina) predstavlja problem. Međutim, u ranome učenju jezika naglasak je na razvoju jezično-komunikacijske kompetencije koja podrazumijeva uporabu jezika u svakodnevnim situacijama. Da bi poučavanje jezika u toj dobi bilo svrhovito, potrebno je koristiti igru kao jednu od metoda poučavanja.

Upravo stoga cilj je ovoga rada pokazati učinke česte provedbe jezičnih igara na razvoj komunikacijskih vještina učenika osnovnoškolske dobi. Istraživanje je provedeno u četvrtome i petom razredu osnovne škole (N = 128) u tri različite škole središnje Hrvatske. Ispitanici su imali pet sati hrvatskoga jezika u kojima su se kroz igru poticale jezične djelatnosti slušanja, govorenja, čitanja i pisanja. Nakon svakoga sata proveden je kratak upitnik i provjera stečenoga znanja. Peti sat nastave provedena je vježba u kojoj se procjenjivala uspješnost ovladavanja komunikacijskim vještinama na razini slušanja, govorenja, čitanja i pisanja.

Ispitanici su pokazali bolje znanje i stavove u odnosu na spomenuta istraživanja (Miljević-Riđički et al. 2004; Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2009; Aladrović Slovaček, 2011) i uspješnije su ovladali komunikacijskim vještinama u govoru i pismu, što potvrđuje da korištenje igre u nastavi hrvatskoga jezika potiče razvoj komunikacijskih vještina.

Ključne riječi: jezične djelatnosti; jezične igre; poučavanje hrvatskoga jezika; stavovi prema hrvatskome jeziku.