

Factors Influencing the Acquisition of Croatian Language in Early Discourse

Katarina Aladrović Slovaček and Dunja Ravlić
Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb

Abstract

The process of language acquisition including the Croatian language begins in the second trimester of pregnancy. The process continues with the child starting school, as the morphological and syntactic knowledge becomes automated only around the age of 11/12. A child starts its institutional learning at the age of seven, or in the first grade of elementary school, entering the phase of concrete thinking operations which ends around the age of 11/12 with the onset of the abstract period. That is why in this early period, language should be taught using strategies that will encourage the development of communicative competence and language learning on the basis of concrete examples. The process of acquiring language is primarily affected by cognitive abilities, but also the social context (place of residence) and attitude toward language. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the level of acquisition of the Croatian language regarding the communicative and language competence. Also, it examined facts that are connected with the process of acquiring language (age, gender, place of residence, grade for the subject Croatian language). The aim is to examine student's knowledge from the second to the fourth grade (junior grades) using an objective type test (Test of communicative and linguistic competence for each class), and attitudes towards Croatian language as a school subject will be tested using the Attitude questionnaire. The results were analyzed through qualitative and quantitative methods using the SPSS program for statistics. The results show that pupils in the 3rd grade are better at the level of linguistic competence but pupils in the 2nd and 4th grade are better at the level of communicative competence. Girls show better results than boys, and participants from the Stokavian area scored lower results than participants from other areas. Also, participants who have better grades in the

subject Croatian language have better results in both competences. They also show positive attitudes to Croatian language as a school subject.

Key words: *communicative competence; early Croatian language learning; linguistic competence; linguistic knowledge; teaching strategies*

Introduction

Language acquisition is a process that starts as early as the second trimester of pregnancy when the child starts hearing voices from its environment and is especially sensitive to high-frequency tones. The pre-language phase of language acquisition is distinguished by babbling and production of rhythmical logatoms, while the appearance of the first word marks the beginning of the language phase (Pavličević-Franić, 2005). The first word very often also has the role of the first sentence that the child has uttered (Jelaska, 2007). Around the age of six, a child of normal language development should master all sounds of the Croatian language, while the acquisition of morphology and syntax still continues until the child fully masters this language level by the end of the concrete operations phase around the age of 11/12 (Jelaska et al., 2005). Institutional language learning starts around the age of seven, when a child enters the first grade of elementary school. From the age of seven to the age of eleven/twelve the child is in the concrete cognitive operations phase (Piaget, 1977) which means that in this period all language learning should be based on actual examples from everyday language and communicative situations. For this reason, the aim of this paper is to investigate the level of language – communicative and linguistic competence and how much it is influenced by the social context in which a child grows up, by a child's sex and attitudes towards Croatian language as a school subject.

Croatian Language Learning

Croatian language is the basic subject of elementary school education and the most comprehensive one. As mentioned, institutional teaching of Croatian language starts around the age of seven or when a child enters the first grade of elementary school. In the pre-school period, children prepare for initial reading and writing through various activities. During the first grade, they master the initial stage of reading and writing all types of letters as well as the first orthographical rules. Learning of orthographical rules and grammatical norms expands in the next grade and the next level of knowledge. The Curriculum for Croatian language for junior grades of elementary school (2006) allows for an equal number of teaching units of grammar, orthography, and language units which include language expression, i.e. the use of learnt orthographical and grammatical rules in speech and writing. Mastery of the Croatian language is extremely important because a child listens, speaks and writes in the Croatian language in other school subjects and therefore its good knowledge is a condition for understanding other school subjects. Good command of the Croatian language is also a precondition for learning other (foreign) languages. This was

confirmed by the European Commission which in 2005 signed the document “Eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning“ emphasizing eight competences which are vital for lifelong learning. The first of the competences is communication in the mother tongue which means that good knowledge of the mother (Croatian) tongue is a condition for good performance in other competences. Thus, the basic aim of Croatian language teaching is the development of language competences or language abilities. Junior grades focus on the development of language-communicative competence which implies the use of language in everyday communicative situations, though the pupils also acquire linguistic competence, i.e. knowledge about language or knowledge of language theory. Although knowledge about language is present in junior grades of elementary school, the focus of Croatian language teaching should be based on the development of language-communicative competence which is often not the case in practice, as can be seen from the results of the research conducted. The Curriculum for Elementary Schools (2006), the National Curriculum Framework (2010) and the Croatian Language Catalogues for Final Secondary School Exam (2014) are focused on the achievement of functional literacy and development of language-communicative competence through Croatian language teaching so that upon completion of elementary and secondary school a person would possess communicative competence, both oral and written. However, functional illiteracy, i.e. everyday situations, as well as insecurity of adult Croatian language speakers in oral and written discourse and large deviations from the standard language in the media show that the process of Croatian language teaching and learning should undergo changes which would reduce the fear of language and communication and increase functional literacy.

Pedagogical Strategies in the Process of Croatian Language Teaching

The key role in the process of knowledge transfer and realization of set educational aims belongs to the class teacher in junior grades of elementary school and the Croatian language teacher in senior grades of elementary school and secondary school. The teacher is the person with whom the child identifies, who is the speaking model and the creator of the educational process. Generally, the teacher also transfers knowledge from its source such as textbooks, curricula, different forms of media, books, articles and other, to the pupil as the person for whom the said knowledge is intended. In early Croatian language learning teachers use different strategies to help pupils master the abstract language contents. In language teaching, the teachers very often use the dogmatic-reproductive system (characterized by classification, listing, describing and paradigm or learning the definitions and their reproduction), analytic-explicative system (the pupil discovers grammatical patterns and defines the paradigm by method of induction and heuristic discussion) or problem solving – creative system (the pupil discovers the paradigms, rules and similar through experiments and tests) (Težak, 1998). In language teaching teachers also very often use elements

of the communicative-functional approach with the aim to simulate communicative competence development, use of language games, pluralism of didactic principles and inclusion of extra-language elements, such as emotions, personality traits, environment and similar (Pavličević-Franić, 2011). Language learning sources are usually textbooks, literary works, professional and scientific articles as well as the media. Teaching resources are nowadays very much diversified due to availability of various audio, visual and audio-visual contents. Despite the fact that, in addition to a large number of textbooks and teaching handbooks, one can find many other resources to carry out the curriculum, such as different computer games and programs, Croatian language lessons are still often boring to pupils and therefore pupils have a negative attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject. Research (Miljević-Riđički, Miljković, Pavličević-Franić, Rijavec, Vizek-Vidović, Vlahović-Štetić, & Zarevski, 2000) shows that Croatian language, along with Mathematics, is the least favorite of all elementary school subjects and among the last ones on the list of favorite subjects. This negative or bad attitude definitely reflects on pupils' knowledge, their learning motivation and surely on the acquisition of functional literacy and communicative competence. This is why the selection of strategies for Croatian language teaching is extremely important in order to create a positive environment and increase the learning motivation, the teacher being the key person in this process.

Research

Sample

The research included pupils from the 2nd to the 4th grade of elementary school (N=500, 2nd grade = 27%, 3rd grade – 35% and 4th grade – 38%) from all regions of the Republic of Croatia (Slavonia, Zagreb and surrounding area, North-West Croatia, Central Croatia, Gorski kotar and Lika, Istria, Central Dalmatia, South Dalmatia). The research included an equal sample of boys (52.1%) and girls (43.7%). In addition, the participants were divided according to their Croatian language subject grades as follows: 44.8% of excellent pupils, 38.7% of very good, 8.4% of good, 1.7% of sufficient and 0.6% of insufficient.

Instruments

The participants completed the test of communicative and linguistic competence and the Attitude Questionnaire regarding Croatian language as a school subject. The test of communicative and linguistic competence investigated the linguistic knowledge of pupils and the level of their communicative competence and it contained the tasks of different types (completion, circling, describing, defining). The test for the second grade contained 14 tasks, for the third grade 16 tasks and for the fourth grade also 14 tasks (examples of tasks: fill the gaps with *ije/je/e* or *i*; put the diacritical mark; rewrite the sentences using the past tense; add a punctuation mark at the end of the sentence and similar). The Attitude Questionnaire consisted of 14 open-ended and close-ended

type questions (e.g. what is your favorite subject; what is your least favorite subject; how much do you like Croatian language and similar). This paper analyzed a part of the results of the Test of communicative and linguistic competence and the Attitude Questionnaire regarding the Croatian language.

Methods

All data were processed using the content analysis method and SPSS statistical program through the Mann Whitney U test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test and Kruskal Wallis test, as well as the Spearman correlation coefficient. Nonparametric statistical tests were used since the variables (the results of the test of linguistic competence and the results of the test of communicative competence) statistically significantly differ from the normal distribution which was confirmed by the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the second ($z_k = 1.38, p < 0.01, z_l = 1.12, p < 0.01$), third ($z_k = 1.02, p < 0.01, z_l = 1.27, p < 0.01$) and the fourth grade ($z_k = 2.50, p < 0.01, z_l = 2.39, p < 0.01$). In addition, the distribution of grades for the subject Croatian language also deviates from the normal distribution which was confirmed by the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test as well ($z = 1.36, p < 0.05$).

Aims and Hypotheses

The main aim of the research is to describe which factors influence the process of mastering the standard Croatian language in early learning (junior grades of elementary school). In accordance with the main research, the following problems were set:

- 1) to investigate the level of communicative and linguistic competence of Croatian language among pupils in junior grades of elementary school;
- 2) to investigate the correlation between the pupils' gender, school location, and the level of Croatian language mastery;
- 3) to investigate the correlation between the grade for the subject Croatian language and the level of Croatian language mastery;
- 4) to investigate the attitude pupils have towards the school subject Croatian language.

In accordance with the main aim and the problems of the research, the following hypotheses were set:

H1 – It is expected that pupils will have better developed their linguistic competence than the communicative competence of Croatian language in junior grades of elementary school since teaching the Croatian language is focused more on mastering language theory than the practical use of language in everyday situations.

H2 – It is expected that girls will achieve better results than boys and that pupils coming from the shtokavian areas (Slavonia and Lika) will show a higher level of Croatian language mastery. Girls at that age are more prone to writing and reading

than boys and therefore it is expected that girls have better results. In addition, a higher level of Croatian language mastery is expected in pupils from Slavonia and Lika since they live in a shtokavian area and their organic idiom is the closest to the standard language (as opposed to pupils from Istria, Međimurje and Zagorje).

H3 – It is expected that pupils with higher grades for the subject Croatian language will achieve a higher level of Croatian language mastery. It is assumed that the pupils with better achievement will have better results in both tests – the test of linguistic and communicative competence.

H4 – It is expected that the majority of pupils like Croatian language as a school subject. In junior grades, pupils generally have a positive attitude towards school and learning and therefore it is expected that the majority of them will like Croatian language as a school subject, especially because they have it in their schedule almost every day.

Results

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test showed that the pupils of the second ($z=-9.85, p < 0.01$) and the fourth grade ($z=-1.12, p < 0.01$) have statistically significantly better developed communicative competence, while pupils in the third grade ($z=-6.26, p < 0.01$) have a better developed linguistic competence (Figure 1). The results show that teaching the Croatian language in junior grades of elementary school is still not fully focused on developing communicative competence and functional literacy since pupils in the third grade are better at theory than language use. This partially confirmed the first hypothesis that the pupils will have better developed their linguistic competence than communicative competence in junior grades of elementary school.

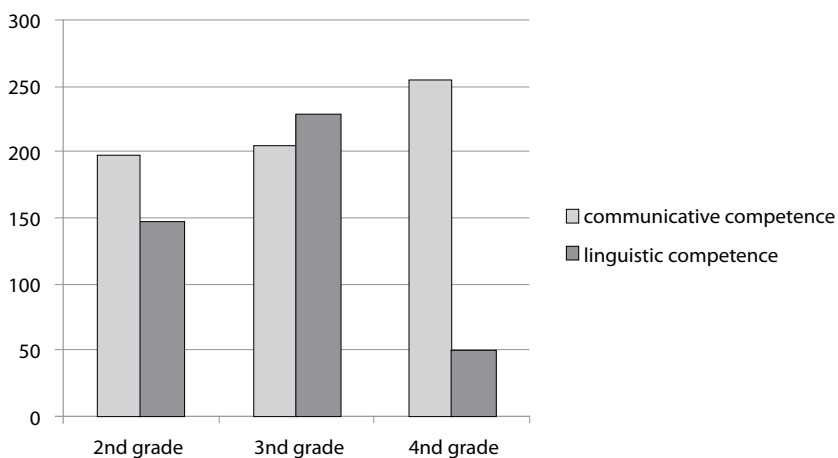


Figure 1. Results on the test of communicative and the test of linguistic competence

The results of the Mann Whitney U test also show that girls achieved significantly better results than boys in both tests – the one of linguistic ($z=-2.81$, $df=499$, $p<0.01$) and communicative competence ($z=-1.98$, $df=499$, $p<0.01$).

It is also interesting that the Kruskal Wallis test shows that the participants statistically significantly differ in the total result of linguistic ($\chi^2=14.80$, $df=6$, $p<0.01$) and communicative competence ($\chi^2=19.09$, $df=6$, $p<0.01$) depending on the location of the school (Table 1). The results show that pupils whose mother tongue is the shtokavian dialect (Lika and Slavonia) do not show significantly better results in the test of communicative and linguistic competence. On the contrary, significantly better results were achieved by the participants from Međimurje and Istria whose mother tongue significantly differs from the standard language, which shows that the awareness of the difference between the standard language and the dialect probably stimulates pupils to learn more.

Table 1

The measure of central tendency and the results of Kruskal Wallis Tests

variables	Southern Dalmatia	Lika and Gorski kotarr	Zagreb	Slavonia	Central Dalmatia	Central Croatia	Northwestern Croatia	Istria	The results of Kruskal Wallis Tests
Communicative competence	63	44.5	63	47	49.5	52	57	63	$\chi^2 = 20.02$ $p < 0.01$
Linguistic competence	40	20	40	30	50	40	45	50	$\chi^2 = 22.69$ $p < 0.01$

This result rejects the second part of the second hypothesis assuming that pupils from the shtokavian areas will show significantly better results and confirms the first part of the second hypothesis which assumed that girls will show statistically significantly better results than boys.

The Spearman correlation coefficient shows that the pupils with better grades in the subject Croatian language also have better results in the test of linguistic ($r=0.21$, $p<0.01$, $df=499$) and communicative competence ($r=0.29$, $p<0.01$, $df=499$). This confirms the third hypothesis assuming that pupils with better grades for the subject Croatian language will also have better results in the test of linguistic and communicative competence.

The results of the Attitude Questionnaire regarding Croatian language show that more than 60% of participants like or very much like Croatian language while 15% of the participants dislike or very much dislike Croatian language as a school subject (Figure 2). This confirms the fourth hypothesis assuming that pupils like Croatian language as a school subject. Compared to an earlier research (2004), pupils show a more positive attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject, which can probably be explained by the new, shortened Curriculum and introduction of different methods of work into Croatian language teaching.

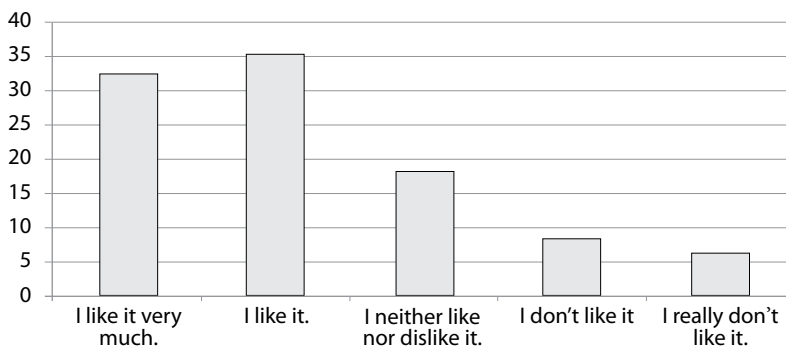


Figure 2. How much do you like Croatian language as a school subject?

Conclusion

Learning and teaching Croatian language at an early age (junior grades of elementary school) is specific in many ways and therefore demanding. The pupils are in the phase of concrete cognitive operations and if taught any language, as an abstract system of signs, they should be taught on the basis of actual examples from everyday communicative situations. However, though the focus of Croatian language teaching should be on the development of communicative competence, according to the research results, the third graders show better results in the test of linguistic competence which means that their knowledge of language theory is better than the application of the said theory in actual situations. This is why teaching Croatian language in junior grades of elementary school should be modernized so that the comfortable and highly motivating atmosphere would stimulate pupils to master, very often, abstract and complex language material. Due to the increase in motivation for Croatian language learning, pupils will develop a better attitude towards the school subject Croatian language and probably a better grade as well and will also be more aware of the importance of learning their mother tongue. This will, in turn, create a good language foundation at an early age, the final result being functional literacy and good language–communicative competence.

References

- Jelaska, Z. et al. (2005). *Hrvatski kao drugi i strani jezik*. Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada.
- Jelaska, Z. (2007). Teorijski okviri jezikoslovnemu znanju u novom nastavnom programu hrvatskoga jezika za osnovnu školu. In M. Češi & M. Barbaroša-Šikić (Eds.), *Komunikacija u nastavi hrvatskoga jezika 1* (pp. 9-34). Zagreb: Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje.
- Miljević-Riđički, R., Miljković D., Pavličević-Franić, D., Rijavec M., Vizek-Vidović V., Vlahović-Štetić V. & Zarevski P. (2000). *Učitelji za učitelje*. Zagreb: IEP.

- Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa RH (2010). *Nacionalni okvirni kurikulum* /online/. Retrieved on 12th March 2014 from <http://www.mzos.hr>
- Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa RH (2006). *Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu u Republici Hrvatskoj* /online/. Retrieved on 12th March 2014 from <http://www.mzos.hr>
- Pavličević-Franić, D. (2005). *Komunikacijom do gramatike*. Zagreb: Alfa.
- Pavličević-Franić, D. (2011). *Jezikopisnice*. Zagreb: Alfa.
- Piaget, J. (1977). Odnos jezika i mišljenja s genetičkog stajališta. In J. Piaget, & B. Onhelder (Eds.), *Intelektualni razvoj djeteta – izabrani radovi*. Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva.
- Težak, S. (1996, 1998). *Teorija i praksa nastave hrvatskoga jezika 1 i 2*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.

Katarina Aladrović Slovaček

Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
kaladrovic@gmail.com

Dunja Ravlić

Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
dunja.ravlic@gmail.com

Čimbenici ovladavanja hrvatskim jezikom u ranome diskursu

Sažetak

Proces usvajanja svakoga, pa i hrvatskoga jezika, započinje već u drugom trimestru trudnoće, a polaskom djeteta u školu ne završava, nego se nastavlja jer se morfološko i sintaktičko znanje automatizira tek oko 11./12. godine. S institucionalnim učenjem dijete započinje oko sedme godine kada kreće u prvi razred osnovne škole i ulazi u fazu konkretnih misaonih operacija koja završava oko 11./12. godine, a tada započinje faza apstraktnoga mišljenja. Upravo je zato u tome ranome razdoblju jezik potrebno poučavati upotrebljavajući strategije koje će poticati razvoj jezično-komunikacijske kompetencije i učenje jezika na temelju konkretnih primjera. Na proces ovladavanja jezikom, prije svega, utječu kognitivne (spoznajne) sposobnosti, ali i socijalni kontekst (mjesto stanovanja), kao i stav prema jeziku. Stoga je cilj ovoga rada ispitati razinu ovladanosti hrvatskim jezikom na dvjema razinama: jezično-komunikacijskoj i jezičnoj (lingvističkoj). Također su ispitani čimbenici koji su povezani s procesom ovladavanja jezika (dob, spol, mjesto u kojemu se nalazi škola, ocjena iz hrvatskoga jezika). Ispitanici su ispitani testom objektivnoga tipa (Test komunikacijske i lingvističke kompetencije za svaki razred), a upitnikom su ispitani stavovi prema Hrvatskome jeziku kao nastavnome predmetu. Podaci su obrađeni metodom analize sadržaja, a potom u SPSS programu za statistiku. Rezultati pokazuju da su učenici trećega razreda uspješniji na testu lingvističke, a učenici drugoga i četvrtoga razreda na testu komunikacijske kompetencije. Djevojčice pokazuju značajno bolje rezultate od dječaka, a ispitanici koji dolaze iz štokavskih područja značajno slabije rezultate od ispitanika iz drugih regija Republike Hrvatske. Također, ispitanici koji imaju bolju ocjenu iz Hrvatskoga jezika imaju i bolje rezultate na oba testa. Ispitanici također pokazuju pozitivan stav prema Hrvatskome jeziku kao nastavnome predmetu.

Ključne riječi: jezično znanje; komunikacijska kompetencija; lingvistička kompetencija; rano učenje hrvatskoga jezika; strategije poučavanja.