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English communicative competence and predominant language for online use through smartphones in Croatia as compared to Slovenia

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Abstract

The study explores which languages are predominant in the online use among the targeted participant population in Croatia and Slovenia and examines the association between the participants' smartphone online use of English and preferred subtitling mode with their perceived communicative competence in English. The findings indicate that in both nationality groups the use of English prevails in receptive language activities, in particular listening and audio-visual reception, while mother tongues are mainly used for productive and interactive activities. Participants who prefer English when engaging in online informal activities through their smartphones and who use English or no subtitles when watching video content also assess their competence in English to be on higher levels.

Keywords: online informal learning of English; smartphones; subtitling; language competence; Croatia; Slovenia.

1. Introduction

The massive use of the Internet, in particular through mobile technologies, has invaded almost every corner of our contemporary lives. Within the EU educational contexts, but more globally as well, the rapid technological changes have been reshaping the processes of teaching and learning, resulting in a rise of informal learning, particularly by means of mobile devices (European Commission, 2018). In 2016, 90–95% of young people aged 16–29 in most EU Member States reported using the Internet on a daily basis. Fur-

thermore, the use of smartphones to connect to the Internet on the move was reported to be significantly higher than that of other mobile devices for all age groups in the EU-28, with 83% of young people reporting to use their smartphones for online uses. Moreover, in 2016 approximately 85% of young people in Croatia and almost 90% in Slovenia reported using mobile devices to connect to the Internet (Eurostat, 2018).

Given the global status of the English language, never before has the presence of English taken up such a big portion of young people's private lives as nowadays when consuming English language popular culture, such as music, TV-series or films (Jarvis, 2014; Kusyk, 2017; Lyrigkou, 2018). This means that the extent and scope of contact with English have broadened beyond the institutionalized educational settings (Trinder, 2017; Peters, 2018).

Within the context of English language learning and teaching, this phenomenon has raised a number of issues. These are, for instance, how online users' practices affect their English, their motivation and attitudes towards learning English, how the choice of one's mother tongue or another language relates to the use of English in online informal activities and how informal learning in general may impact formal language instruction. However, the research into online informal uses of English in many cultural contexts, including the Slovenian/Croatian one, remains underexplored (Jarvis, 2014; Sockett, 2014; Lai et al., 2017). To the best of our knowledge, there has been no comparative research to date into online informal learning of English through the use of smartphones, in particular into the association between online informal learning of English and English language proficiency.

Therefore, the present study focuses on the choice between English and the participants' mother tongue as the predominant language for smartphone online uses among Croatian and Slovene participants, and the association between the predominant language for smartphone online uses and perceived communicative competence in English. In addition, it examines the association between the preferred subtitling mode of watching films and TV series in English and perceived communicative competence in English among Croatian participants as compared against that of their peers from Slovenia.

2. Theoretical framework

Within a wider context of (lifelong) learning, including language learning, a distinction is made between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Unlike the former two, which are associated with a range of (non)formal settings and a continuum of structured educational schemes, informal learning "occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and

through the interests and activities of individuals" (UIL, 2012: 8). Furthermore, "it is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support" and is usually done without any intention to engage in learning (CEDEFOP, 2014: 111). The (non)intentional aspect of informal learning has not been treated unanimously as informal learning may encompass, among others, an individual's deliberate activities aimed to improve language skills (Trinder, 2017; Arndt & Woore, 2018).

Online informal learning of English has very much to do with the above definitions. It occurs in informal settings and involves users' engagement in various online activities performed primarily with the aim of entertainment, interaction or obtaining information rather than learning English, which, however, may be an unintentional side-effect of such activities (Sockett, 2014).

Considering the theoretical framework underlying research in online informal learning of English, Sockett & Toffoli (2012) and Sockett (2014) discuss several theoretical concepts that are considered to be associated with this recent research field, such as the learner autonomy model, incidental acquisition, out-of-class learning, task-based approaches, computer-assisted language learning and the input hypothesis. However, according to Sockett (2014), the theoretical basis of research into online informal learning of English may be best accounted for within the dynamic systems framework (van Geert, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). The complex dynamics systems approach attempts to account for a development or a change in a dynamic system, such as language development (Ellis, 2006; van Geert, 2008). Each dynamic system consists of various multiple components that interact with each other in different ways, facilitating, hindering or altering the development in a system. These processes usually lead to a non-linear development as the system adapts to different contextual factors, including the learner (van Geert, 2008; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012; Sockett, 2014). Importantly, co-adaptation among systems can occur. In this case, change in one system or system component will lead to a change in another system or component, and vice versa (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). For example, the better one is at a foreign language, the more interested they might be in engaging in online informal activities, which can be described as connected growers (van Geert, 2008). One of the central ideas of online informal learning of English is broadly linked with the postulates of incidental learning defined as "the absence of any deliberate intention to learn target L2 information in the L2 input" (Leow & Zamora, 2017: 33). However, though learners engaged in L2 activities may not be primarily driven by the intention to learn the language, they may be aware that unintended learning has taken place at some point during their exposure to an L2 context (Leow & Zamora, 2017). In the case of

online informal learning of English, some studies have reported participants' motivation to gain benefits from English-based informal online practices in terms of improving their English skills, suggesting the occasional intentional character of involvement with online English (Rieder, 2003; Sockett, 2014; Trinder, 2017; Peters, 2018).

Aimed at providing a more comprehensive insight into the link between informal practices and language development, research into online informal learning of English has mainly combined qualitative and quantitative research methodology, the former generally targeting the types, frequency and duration of online leisure activities. Qualitative research in the form of log studies or longitudinal observation has mainly focused on participants' self-reflections concerning their motivation for engaging in certain activities and perceptions on how their online use of English impacts the development of their language skills.

Thus, the most frequent English-based online informal activities reported by French university participants typically included listening to music on demand, social networking and watching TV series (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012). Similarly, series-watching, listening to the radio and social networking were ranked top informal online activities by participants in other contexts (Trinder, 2017; Kusyk, 2017). In Trinder's (2017) study, participants reported using dictionaries, watching TV and video clips, listening to music and social networking to be the most helpful activities concerning the improvements in language skills. In addition, Lai et al. (2017) discovered an association between involvement in diverse online activities and language gains while the study conducted by Jurkovič (2019) corroborated the association between smartphone uses involving the use of the English language and self-perceived language competence in English. On the other hand, Lee & Dressman (2018) support the idea that the quality or diversity in addition to the quantity of online informal learning of English is a determining factor that affects language development. These findings support the notion that language development occurs in informal online contexts.

Importantly for this study, the choice of translation mode in terms of the subtitling/dubbing option and its impact on the development of English language skills has drawn particular research interest (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009; Rupérez Micola et al., 2009; Sockett & Toffoli, 2012; RupérezMicola et al., 2019). Thus, the findings of a comprehensive cross-cultural study on the impact of TV translation techniques on English language acquisition (Rupérez Micola et al., 2009) showed that people in subtitling countries are generally more proficient in English than those in dubbing countries, indicating that the exposure to subtitled original media content facilitates language development. Rupérez Micola et al. (2019) further suggest that subtitling could be promoted by governments as a means for the development of lan-

guage competence and consequently economic performance. In addition, Kusyk & Sockett's (2012) research demonstrated that participants who regularly watched original versions of TV series with French subtitles (rather than the dubbed versions) scored better on translation tasks than non-regular watchers.

3. Material and methods

As previously noted, with focus placed on smartphone use, the present study aims to address particular aspects of language use in online informal practices and compare these within a sample of Croatian and Slovene participant population, which is, to our knowledge, the first contrastive research in these two cultural settings. The three major research questions may be formulated as follows:

RQ1: What is the choice between the participants' mother tongue, English, and foreign languages other than English as the predominant language for smartphone online uses among Croatian participants as compared against that of their peers from Slovenia?

RQ2: Assuming that most online activities are performed either through English or the participants' mother tongue and not other foreign languages, is there any association between the predominant language for smartphone online uses and perceived communicative competence in English among Croatian participants as compared against that of their peers from Slovenia? If yes, what is the level?

RQ3: Is there any association between the preferred subtitling mode of watching films and TV series in the English language and perceived communicative competence in English among Croatian participants as compared against that of their peers from Slovenia? If yes, what is the level?

3.1. *Participants*

The quantitative part of the study addressed 904 full-time undergraduate students from Slovenia and 117 full-time undergraduate students from Croatia. The mean age, gender and discipline of study of the participants in both examined countries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants by age, gender, nationality and discipline of study.

	Age		Gender (%)		Discipline of study (%)			
	Mean	SD	Male	Female	Tech.	Biotech.	Social	Hum.
Croatia	19.87	1.42	18	82	32	0	52	15
Slovenia	20.54	2.02	32	68	14	10	55	21
Total	20.45	1.96	13	87	16	9	55	20

The independent samples t-test was used to compare the mean age of the participants from Croatia against the mean age of the participants from Slovenia. At the level of $p<0.05$ set for this study, the results show that the mean age of the participants from Croatia is statistically significantly lower than that of the participants from Slovenia ($t=-4.452$, $p=0.000$).

Figure 1 shows how the participants self-assessed their language competence in English using the CEFRL descriptors. The data indicate that most participants from Croatia perceived their English language competence to be at level B2 (45%), followed by B1 (20%) and C1 (19%). Eight percent of the participants thought that their English language competence is at level A2, four percent that it is at level C2 while four percent of the participants believed that it is at level A1. Most participants from Slovenia perceived their English language competence to be at level B2 (61%), followed by B1 (15%) and C1 (15%). Six percent of the participants thought that their English language competence is at level C2 while the remaining three percent believed it is at levels A1 or A2.

The independent samples t-test was conducted to test the differences in mean scores for perceived communicative competence in English among Croatian and Slovene participants (A1 = 1, A2 = 2, B1 = 3, B2 = 4, C1 = 5, C2 = 6). The results of the test and the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2.

The results of the test show that the mean perceived communicative competence (4.04) is statistically significantly higher among Slovene participants than the mean perceived communicative competence among Croatian participants (3.77).

Figure 1: Participants by language competence in English (%).

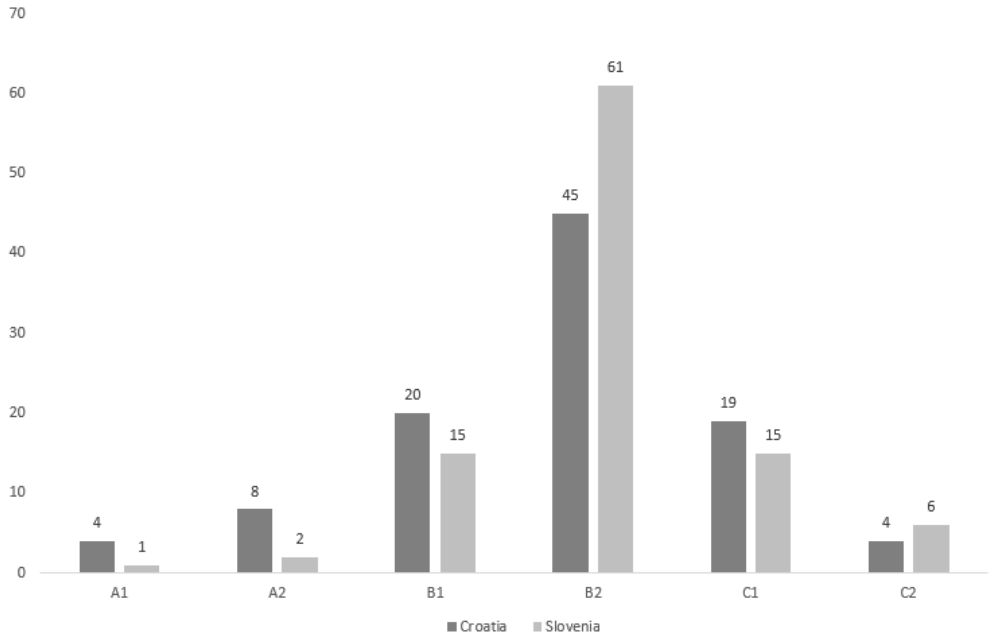

Table 2: Communicative competence in English among Croatian and Slovene participants.

	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig
Croatia	115	3.77	1.09	-2.545	0.012
Slovenia	905	4.04	0.86		

Given that statistically significant differences were found between the two nationality groups in terms of age and mean perceived communication competence, Pearson's coefficient of correlation was used to test the association between these two variables to verify whether the difference in age could account for a higher communicative competence in English among the participants from Slovenia. At p=0.004, the value of the coefficient (0.097) indicates a slight but statistically significant positive correlation between age and perceived communicative competence in English. This means that a higher age value indicates a higher perceived communicative competence

level. Therefore, some of the higher communicative competence among the Slovene participants can be attributed to their higher mean age.

The participants from the quantitative part of the study that indicated their disposition to be involved in the qualitative part of the study were sent an invitation to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The final inventory of Slovene participants, interviewed in April and May 2017 consisted of sixteen participants. The final inventory of Croatian participants, interviewed in March 2018 consisted of seven participants.

3.2. *Instruments and data collection*

Three instruments were used to collect data for this survey: an online survey used for the collection of quantitative data (see Appendix 1), the self-assessment language competence grid of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth CEFRL)(Council of Europe, 2001) and semi-structured interviews for the collection of qualitative data (see Appendix 2). It should be noted that the same research design was used in another study with Polish and Croatian students (Sierocka et al., 2019). The design of the online survey started with a group of participants in Slovenia that were asked to record all online activities performed through the use of their smartphones. The validation process involved suggestions of three language teachers and a methodologist that corroborated that the inventory of possible receptive, productive and interactive language activities through the use of smartphones included in the online survey was appropriate. A group of participants then tested the survey in order to identify confusing statements and gave feedback, based on which the final version of the online survey was designed. Finally, to reduce the impact of the order effect, the random function of Microsoft Excel was used to order the statements describing online smartphone activities. These statements were then transferred into the online survey. In Slovenia, the online survey was active from December 2016 to March 2017, whereas in Croatia it was active from October to December 2017. Higher education teachers of foreign languages at the Slovene universities of Ljubljana, Maribor, and Primorska, and the Croatian University of Osijek were asked to direct their participants to the online survey. This means that convenience sampling was used to select the participants for the quantitative part of the research. With the online survey, data was collected on the participants' age, gender, discipline of study, perceived level of communicative competence in English, online use of smartphones, predominant language for online use through smartphones and preferred subtitling modes. Second, the online survey asked the participants to self-assess their communicative competence in English on a scale between A1 and C2 using the CEFRL descriptors (Council of Europe 2001, 26–27). Third, the qualitative part of the research was conducted after the completion of the

quantitative analysis in order to further explore the findings, in particular why for specific activities the mother tongue is chosen more often than English or another foreign language or vice versa, preferred subtitling modes when watching foreign films and TV series and how, in the opinion of the interviewees, using English online through their smartphones affects their English language development.

3.3. *Data collection and analysis*

In the online survey, the participants were asked to indicate which language they most frequently used for a particular online activity. Value 1 indicated that they never perform a particular activity, value 2 indicated their mother tongue, value 3 indicated English and value 4 indicated a foreign language other than English. Dichotomous variables were then created for predominant language use so that the values of "I never do this" and using another foreign language were defined as missing values. Thus, value 1 was assigned to the mother language as the predominant language for online use and value 2 was assigned to the English language as the predominant language for online use.

Watching TV series and films in English inherently involves the use of English and thus the participants were asked to rate the frequency at which they perform these activities on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 - never or almost never, 2 – several times a month, 3 – several times a week, 4 – every day, 5 – several times a day). In order to produce frequency rates comparable with other recent studies (Kusyk, 2017; Trinder, 2017; Lyrigkou, 2018), in the analysis two nominal variables were created: frequent users (values 5, 4 and 3) and infrequent users (values 2 and 1).

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0. Two main statistical methods were used. The chi-square test was adopted for identifying significant relationships between two nominal variables (in our case, first the predominant use of the mother tongue or English for online activities and the nationality of the participants and second the predominant subtitling mode of watching films and TV series in English and the nationality of the participants). The second statistical method was the independent samples t-test. This test can be applied when we want to compare two groups (in this paper the groups that prefer their mother tongue or English as the predominant language for online use) using the mean value of the variable that we would like to explore (in this paper, for instance, the mean CEFRL score) Finally, Pearson's coefficient of correlation is the most common coefficient used to test the association between scale variables (in this paper age and perceived communicative competence in English) (Singh, 2007).

Triangulation engendered by the combination of different quantitative and qualitative methods yields a more accurate picture of the observed phenomenon (Stickler & Hampel, 2015). As a result, quantitative data were obtained through the online survey while semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data, which helped us understand the participants' experience and their perception of the relevant details (Seidman, 2006) of their online involvement through smartphones. Two-stage content analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts was then used. In the first stage, data were examined repetitive times to get conversant with the relevant details that were related to various aspects of online informal learning through smartphones. In the second stage, we coded the transcripts so that common themes emerged across different participants. To anonymize the participants, C is used to refer to a Croatian respondent, while S is used to refer to a Slovene respondent.

4. Results

In the following section, we will present the results of the quantitative and qualitative research by examining each research question.

4.1. *Predominant language for smartphone online uses among Croatian and Slovene participants*

The first research question explores the choice between the participants' mother tongue, English, and foreign languages other than English as the predominant language for smartphone online uses among Croatian participants as compared against that of their peers from Slovenia. Table 3 presents the shares of participants from both countries in terms of predominant language for online activities using smartphones, whether the participant's mother tongue, English, or a foreign language other than English. The activities are sorted in ascending order by the share of Croatian participants that indicated that they never perform a particular activity. The chi-square test was used to compare the predominant use of the mother tongue, English, or a foreign language other than English for online activities as the first variable and the nationality of the participants as the second variable.

Table 3: Predominant language for smartphone online uses among Croatian and Slovene participants (%).

	Croatia				Slovenia				Chi-square	Sig.
	I never do this	My mother tongue	English	Another foreign language	I never do this	My mother tongue	English	Another foreign language		
I send short messages.	1	90	9	0	2	91	5	2	5.392	0.145
I communicate with my classmates on study-related issues.	1	97	1	1	3	91	3	3	4.497	0.213
I listen to music.	2	6	89	3	3	9	78	10	8.483	0.075
I watch short video clips with text.	2	4	91	4	3	6	86	5	1.781	0.619
I read emails.	4	84	9	3	2	90	5	3	5.174	0.159
I look for study-related information.	4	54	37	5	2	60	32	6	3.183	0.364
I write emails.	5	88	3	4	3	90	4	3	1.122	0.772
I communicate with my teachers on study-related issues.	6	87	2	5	7	85	3	5	0.596	0.897
I read social media comments.	10	52	38	0	5	58	34	3	8.817	0.032*
I read the daily news.	10	68	20	2	9	68	20	3	0.852	0.837
I check non-study related information.	13	44	43	0	7	48	41	4	7.512	0.057
I access online dictionaries.	20	10	62	8	14	26	43	17	23.229	0.000*
I post social media comments.	24	60	16	0	20	66	12	2	4.022	0.259
I listen to radio shows.	32	43	23	2	32	52	11	6	16.000	0.003*

I write down new words that I learn in a foreign language.	48	11	25	16	55	10	24	11	2.768	0.429	
I access websites with language learning exercises.	51	6	35	8	53	9	24	14	7.810	0.050*	
I read e-books.	56	20	21	3	59	10	28	3	10.010	0.018*	
I listen to recorded lectures.	56	19	18	7	68	13	18	2	17.828	0.000*	
I play language games such as crosswords.	58	30	11	1	65	24	9	2	3.339	0.342	
I play games that require reading instructions.	62	4	34	0	67	5	27	1	4.007	0.261	
I use language learning apps that I have downloaded onto my smartphone.	64	2	21	13	61	6	19	14	2.953	0.399	
I play games that require written communication with other players.	75	5	20	0	76	4	19	1	1.920	0.589	
I listen to podcasts.	76	6	17	1	75	5	18	2	1.001	0.801	
I participate in social media groups that talk about language learning.	80	9	9	2	79	10	8	3	0.949	0.814	
I listen to audio books.	80	4	11	5	83	3	12	2	6.968	0.073	
I leave voice messages to other users.	81	16	4	0	80	16	3	2	1.891	0.595	
I play games that require spoken communication with other players.	83	2	15	0	79	5	15	1	3.668	0.300	
I keep a blog.	84	7	8	0	90	5	4	1	4.929	0.177	
I keep an audio blog.	94	4	3	0	96	2	1	1	2.642	0.450	

The results show that the Croatian participants generally tend to use their mother tongue for smartphone online uses overall and the same can be claimed for their Slovene counterparts. However, when it comes to the predominant language and specific online activities, the findings point to several trends, similarities and differences between the two nationality groups.

In terms of predominant language for online use through smartphones, the activities presented in Table 3 can be divided into three groups. The first group comprises activities for which the mother tongue is mostly used by the majority of participants, in the second group we can find activities for which English is the predominant language and in the last group, there are activities for which both the mother tongue and English are frequently used. In no case is a foreign language other than English the predominant language for online use through smartphones for most participants, although we can see that some users prefer other foreign languages when, for instance, writing down new words that they learn in a foreign language or when using language learning apps. Therefore, the presentation of the results in the continuation will focus on the differences between the use of the participants' mother tongue and English. First, the data for the Croatian participants will be presented and then compared against the data for their Slovene counterparts. This analysis will only include the activities that are performed by at least one half of the participants in either nationality group (i.e., when the value of the "I never do this" indicator is lower than 50%).

Among the Croatian participants, their mother tongue is the predominant language for the productive writing of short messages, emails and posting social media comments. They also tend to use the Croatian language when interacting with their classmates and teachers. Among the receptive activities, Croatian is mostly used when reading emails and the daily news. Most Croatian participants tend to choose English when listening to music and watching short video clips, both are receptive activities, and when accessing online dictionaries as an activity that supports intentional language learning. Among the online smartphone activities for which the English language is the first language of choice, we cannot find any productive or interaction activity. Finally, several activities (all receptive) are divided between Croatian and English. These include are looking for study-related information, reading social media comments (whereas posting is mostly done in Croatian), checking non-study related information and listening to radio shows. Among the language learning activities, smartphones may be used for writing down new words that the participants learn in a foreign language; this will be done in Croatian, English or another foreign language.

The use of Croatian when texting, messaging, writing emails and posting social media comments is conditioned by the language of the receiver of the message who will in most cases be a speaker of Croatian. As a result, the

participants do not feel the need to use English in their communication, as is corroborated by the following statement of C7: "Mostly I use Croatian because a vast majority of my friends and acquaintances are from the Croatian- or Slavic-speaking area." On the other hand, English will be used if necessary (C2): "Sometimes I use English when texting since I have friends in the USA and when writing an email since I am in contact with some international federations." The situation in Slovenia mirrors that in Croatia (S3): "Because on a daily basis we mostly communicate with people who speak the same mother tongue."

The choice whether to read the daily news or non-academic content in English or Croatian primarily depends on geographical coverage (C4: "Depending on which information I want to acquire. If the news is related only to my country I will search Croatian news portals, but for more information about other countries I will choose English web pages.") or is entirely arbitrary (C3: "Personally, I do not even make a decision about it. If I am 'scrolling through' my mobile apps like FB, IG or some other and notice something interesting to read, I manage to read it all in either language."). That the choice of the English language might be intentional is corroborated by C2: "I think it is better that way because I get to learn more about both languages outside the classroom."

When looking for information needed for their academic studies, Croatian is the predominant language but English will be chosen when there is no other option because most of the available literature is in English or when timely and quality information is needed, as has been corroborated by C1: "Most literature, including research articles required for the psychology course, is in English. Therefore, despite my effort and desire to read scientific literature in Croatian, it is very difficult or rather impossible unless I translate it from English."

A comparison with the Slovene participants indicates several statistically significant differences. Firstly, Slovene participants seem to use English (and other foreign languages) more frequently and their mother language less frequently when reading social media comments. The opposite situation can be noted with reference to listening to radio shows. While the Croatian participants tend to choose the English language, the Slovene participants most frequently choose their mother tongue but may also rely on foreign languages other than English, as is corroborated by the following statement (S2): "I live near the Italian border and we have always been strongly influenced by the Italian culture. /…/ I mostly still listen to Italian music, not English." The final statistically significant difference concerns the language learning activity of accessing online dictionaries. While the Croatian participants mostly use English monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, the Slovene participants refer to dictionaries that include other foreign languages,

mostly German and Italian, which may depend on the knowledge of several languages (S6): "My mother language is Italian but I live in Slovenia and also am fluent in English. I know a bit of German but I never use German dictionaries because I am not that good in this language."

4.2. *Association between predominant language for smartphone online uses and perceived communicative competence in English*

The second research question aims to explore the association between the predominant language for smartphone online uses and perceived communicative competence in English among Croatian and Slovene participants (Table 4). Therefore, the independent samples t-test was used to test the association between the predominant language for online smartphone uses as the independent variable and the self-assessment score as the dependent variable to see if higher use of the English language is related to higher perceived English language competence.

The data presented in Table 4 indicate a clear association between the use of English for smartphone online uses and perceived level of communicative competence in English. In fact, the perceived CEFRL level is always higher among the participants that tend to use the English language for online smartphone uses. This means that the participants that use English more frequently than their mother tongue online tend to assign higher CEFRL levels to their communicative competence in English. At the level $p<0.05$, set for this study, this difference is statistically significant for the majority of indicators of online use through smartphones.

The Slovene participants had not been asked how online informal learning of English affects the development of English, which is why here only the answers provided by the Croatian participants are reported. Most interviewees seem to agree that using English online helps them develop their vocabulary and maintain the English that they have learnt at school, for instance, C7: "I think that I have learned most of my English vocabulary precisely in that way because learning occurs in a more relaxed atmosphere. Also, by using online content in English, I have greatly expanded my informal English, in particular informal, everyday communication." Moreover, using English online through smartphones also contributes to the development of intercultural knowledge, as mentioned by C4: "In my opinion, it helped me expand my vocabulary and improve my spelling but also gives me an insight into another culture."

Table 4: Association between the predominant language for online smartphone uses and CEFRL self-assessment scores among Croatian and Slover participants

	Mother tongue			English			t	Sig
	n of users	CEFRL mean	SD	n of users	CEFRL mean	SD		
(P) I send short text messages.	743	3.99	0.86	46	4.37	1.00	-2.557	0.014
(I) I communicate with my classmates on study-related issues.	751	3.99	0.88	24	4.25	0.85	-1.409	0.159
(R) I listen to music.	69	3.41	0.98	638	4.06	0.86	-5.323	0.000
(R) I watch short video clips with text.	48	3.33	0.88	716	4.07	0.85	-5.586	0.000
(R) I read emails.	728	3.99	0.87	46	4.26	1.00	-1.822	0.075
(R) I look for study-related information.	476	3.80	0.83	258	4.35	0.90	-8.140	0.000
(P) I write emails.	733	3.99	0.88	30	4.30	0.84	-1.862	0.063
(I) I communicate with my teachers on study-related issues.	697	4.00	0.88	25	4.00	1.04	-0.16	0.987
(R) I read social media comments.	473	3.77	0.87	289	4.33	0.79	-8.961	0.000
(R) I read the daily news.	558	3.86	0.88	161	4.52	0.79	-8.639	0.000
(R) I check non-study related information.	380	3.74	0.78	329	4.39	0.81	-10.832	0.000
(LL) I access online dictionaries.	189	3.69	0.96	369	4.14	0.82	-5.420	0.000
(P) I post social media comments.	538	3.88	0.84	105	4.52	0.87	-6.949	0.000
(R) I listen to radio shows.	417	3.89	0.84	102	4.30	0.93	-4.106	0.000

(LL) I write down new words that I learn in a foreign language.	84	3.65	0.78	197	4.09	0.95	-3.675	0.000
(LL) I access websites with language learning exercises.	70	3.49	0.88	207	4.05	0.84	-4.719	0.000
(R) I read e-books.	91	3.58	1.04	219	4.41	0.81	-6.724	0.000
(R) I listen to recorded lectures.	202	3.94	0.82	77	4.23	0.92	-2.497	0.014
(LL) I play language games such as crosswords.	38	3.39	1.08	230	4.20	0.92	-4.863	0.000
(R) I play games that require reading instructions.	42	3.31	0.92	156	4.12	0.96	-4.980	0.000
(LL) I use language learning apps that I have downloaded onto my smartphone.	33	3.42	1.09	154	4.40	0.88	-5.570	0.000
(I) I play games that require written communication with other players.	41	3.66	1.33	147	4.43	0.80	-3.522	0.001
(R) I listen to podcasts.	82	3.76	1.03	68	4.34	0.75	-4.019	0.000
(LL) I participate in social media groups that talk about language learning.	24	3.21	1.14	98	4.40	0.76	-4.852	0.000
(R) I listen to audio books.	127	3.92	0.96	27	4.22	1.12	-1.430	0.155
(P) I leave voice messages to other users.	40	3.73	1.09	121	4.40	0.92	-3.831	0.000
(I) I play games that require spoken communication with other players.	42	3.55	1.13	43	4.42	0.96	-3.928	0.000
(P) I keep a blog.	19	3.26	1.15	15	4.53	1.06	-3.345	0.002
(P) I keep an audio blog.								

4.3. *Association between preferred subtitling mode and perceived communicative competence in English*

In the online survey, a separate question was used for predominant subtitling mode when watching films and TV series in English through their smartphones. Table 5 shows the shares of frequent users by predominant mode of watching films or TV series in English among Croatian and Slovene participants and statistically significant differences between these two nominal variables determined through the use of the chi-square test.

Table 5: Predominant mode of watching films and TV series in English using their smartphones among Croatian and Slovene participants.

	Croatia	Slovenia		
	% of freq. users	% of freq. users	Chi-square	Sig.
I watch films and TV series in English with subtitles in English or another foreign language.	28	21	3.015	0.082
I watch films and TV series in English with subtitles in my mother language.	24	16	4.729	0.030*
I watch films and TV series in English with no subtitles.	23	21	0.194	0.660

Firstly, the data presented in Table 5 show that less than a third of Croatian and Slovene participants use their smartphones for watching films and TV series in English, irrespective of the subtitling mode. This may be a result of the small size of smartphone screens, as has been explained by S2: "Having a larger screen is better. The only situation when I use my smartphone for this is when I'm travelling."

Croatian participants tend to use subtitles in English or another foreign language instead of subtitles in Croatian or no subtitles at all. On the other hand, among Slovene frequent viewers of films and TV series in English using subtitles in English or another foreign language is as frequent as watching them without subtitles. The only statistically significant difference between the two nationality groups can be noted with reference to using subtitles in their mother language, where the share of frequent users from Croatia is significantly higher than the share of frequent users from Slovenia. A possible reason for this is the lower availability of subtitles in Slovene, as

has been identified by S6: "If I am unable to find subtitles in Slovene, I will use subtitles in Croatian or Serbian. I know enough to understand more than without subtitles." Using subtitles seems to help understand the spoken text when the viewers do not want to miss any details or when an uncommon accent or dialect is used (C4): "I usually use subtitles because the communication is too fast or because of the dialect used that I don't understand well." The interviewees have also acknowledged the usefulness of using English subtitles because this is an efficient way for learning the English language (C1): "/…/ by using subtitles I was trying to be more efficient in learning English." On the other hand, some interviewees feel more comfortable when they use subtitles in their mother tongue (C6): "If I have subtitles, they will be in the Croatian language, because I feel safer when I have them."

Table 6: Association between CEFRL self-assessment scores and subtitling mode among Croatian and Slovene participants.

	Frequent users			Infrequent users			t	Sig
	n	CEFRL mean	SD	n	CEFRL mean	SD		
I watch films and TV series in a foreign language with subtitles in my mother language.	146	3.99	0.96	727	4.01	0.87	0.290	0.772
I watch films and TV series in a foreign language with subtitles in English or another foreign language.	184	4.29	0.82	686	3.94	0.89	-4.807	0.000
I watch films and TV series in a foreign language with no subtitles.	187	4.33	0.83	688	3.93	0.89	-5.505	0.000

Finally, the independent samples t-test was used to explore the association between the participants' CEFRL levels as the dependent variable and subtitling modes as independent variables (Table 6). In other words, we

aimed to test whether the preferred subtitling mode can be associated with higher or lower language competence levels in English.

The independent samples t-test indicates two statistically significant associations. It seems that frequent users of subtitles in English or another foreign language and users of no subtitles have placed themselves on higher CEFRL levels than infrequent users of these two subtitling modes. On the other hand, no statistically significant difference was found between frequent and infrequent users of subtitles in their mother tongue.

4. Discussion

Excluding the reference to the explicit devices used as the foci of the studies, on the most general level of analysis the current findings confirm some of the main results of previous research, primarily with respect to the most salient online uses of English (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012; Kusyk, 2017; Trinder, 2017; Lyrigkou, 2018). As the present results show, these concern the highest frequency of the two receptive activities, i.e. listening to music and watching video content in the form of short video clips. This indicates that the Croatian and Slovene participants follow the trends shared by their peers across different European cultural settings. Along with leisure-related reasons and the importance of popular culture for young people in general, the salience of listening to music in English is obviously related to the fact that smartphones enable listening on the move, which provides more freedom to enjoy music in a variety of ways.

In both nationality groups, the use of the participants' mother tongues concerned various types of writing, reading and interactive activities. As such, the findings of the present study support previous research (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012; Kusyk, 2017; Trinder, 2017; Lyrigkou, 2018) which show that for English non-native speakers, reading and particularly writing and speaking are less frequent online activities as compared to listening or audiovisual reception.

The present findings are unsurprising given the specific characteristics of the two surveyed cultural contexts. As previously noted, in both countries the vast majority of participants do not possess a real need to use English while performing communication activities or those relevant to their specific academic needs. In case of the latter, the use of English may refer to the specific demands of participants' courses of study, as is the case with the Croatian participants who report looking for English-language reference literature when the same is not available in Croatian. As can be seen from the results, as the activity increases in generality, e.g. checking non-study related information, the use of English increases, suggesting a need for a wider scope of information which may also include English-medium content.

When it comes to the most frequent language learning activities, in both cultural settings using online dictionaries is the most frequently reported activity, which is again in line with the results of previous research (Trinder, 2017; Peters, 2018). The findings suggest the centrality of dictionaries in English language learning as compared to the use of other online language learning tools. Although more data are needed to account for these practices more reliably, it may be presumed that a low frequency of other language learning activities suggests that participants are either not familiar enough with language learning apps or do not find them relevant or attractive enough for their current learning purposes (see Heil et al., 2016). As already mentioned, the findings on the use of online dictionaries point to some statistical differences between the participants in the two nationality groups. The use of German and Italian has also been reported by the Slovene participants for other online activities, such as listening to radio shows. A more diversified use of foreign languages by the Slovene participants as compared to their Croatian peers seems to be related to the specific sample used in the study. The use of the given languages by the Slovene participants is likely due to closer contacts with neighboring languages than in the eastern part of Croatia from which the Croatian sample was collected.

The present study has put particular emphasis on the predominant subtitling modes when watching video content online. The findings point that when given free choice, most Croatian participants watch it with subtitles in English or other languages. On the other hand, among the corresponding Slovene participants, there is no difference in frequency between the choice of English, other languages or no subtitles. With respect to those participants that prefer subtitles in English, the results suggest that for most the level of English proficiency is perceived as high enough to understand the original versions of films or TV series through the assistance of subtitles. This has been confirmed by the statistical data, showing the correlation between participants' perceived higher CEFRL levels and the tendency to choose English or no subtitles as the preferred subtitling modes.

The fact that the Croatian participants choose subtitles in Croatian more frequently than the Slovene participants choose their own mother tongue is hard to account for based on the present data. One of the reasons might be related to the availability of Croatian or Serbian subtitles when Slovene subtitles are unavailable, which may increase comprehension as compared to the complete absence of subtitles, as reported by one of the Slovene participants. In other words, for participants whose competence in English may not be high enough to watch English-language content with English subtitles or even without any, familiarity with the two related languages and the choice of their subtitles is perceived as a safer alternative that facilitates comprehension.

With respect to the association between self-assessments of English language competence and the use of English in smartphone online practices, the results show that the participants who engage more frequently in online informal activities in English also place themselves on higher CEFRL levels. Therefore, on the most general level of analysis, the findings are in line with the general assumptions but also empirical data indicating that frequent exposure to English-language media benefits proficiency in the target language (Rupérez Micola et al., 2009; Kusyk & Sockett, 2012; Kusyk, 2017; Rupérez Micola et al., 2019). Following the terminology of complex dynamics systems, we could say that the data could be interpreted through a perspective of connected growers: namely that frequent exposure to English leads to a better communicative competence in English, and vice versa, also influenced by other dynamic systems and components that this paper did not address.

Taken together, the present results suggest that the participants surveyed in this study seem to be autonomous and active users of English online, selecting the activities that suit a range of their personal and academic needs. Participants' perceptions of the positive effects of English-based online informal practices on the development of their English language skills show that they are aware that exposure to English online has a significant impact not only on their language development but learning in general, as is the case with improving cross-cultural competence. All of these processes point to the characterization of online practitioners as competent target language users rather than learners (Sockett, 2013; Jarvis, 2014; Kusyk, 2017).

Within the context of incidental learning and the notion of the absence of an explicit intention to learn, participants' responses show that despite mostly entertainment-related reasons, they engage in certain types of activities with a clear aim to enhance their English skills, most notably the range of vocabulary. This is in line with Trinder's observation (2017) which underscores that by partaking in informal language learning, participants may consciously combine motives involving leisure, information seeking or interaction along with language learning. Therefore, learning English under such circumstances may not solely be a side-effect of online informal activities but one of the reasons for engaging with them.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, by focusing on smartphone use, the present study aimed to provide insight into the online informal practices on a sample of participants in Croatia and Slovenia and thus contribute to the emerging field of research in this field. The findings demonstrate that mother tongues are predominant in smartphone online use among the Croatian and Slovene participants,

which reflects similar linguistic specifics of the two cultural contexts in terms of small language communities with English having the status of a foreign language. However, the results clearly show that online practices in English are widespread among the two nationality groups, which mirrors global tendencies with respect to the use of English and modern technologies in informal settings.

Against this background, the study should be considered as exploratory steps into online informal practices in English in the given cross-cultural context. Further analyses are required to explore in more detail how the specifics of particular activities facilitate the development of particular language skills (Sockett, 2014). Following the present research on the predominant language choices and types of informal online activities, one of the possible additional steps would be a more comprehensive analysis of language development of individual users through online activities in the form of longitudinal 'emic' case studies (Sockett, 2013; Sockett, 2014; Kusyk, 2017). In addition, it should be noted that the present study is focused on the informal language use through smartphones and as such it points to the specific set of online activities that are suited to the standard screen size of the given devices. However, more comprehensive research into informal online activities and the preferred language use in the given cultural settings might be extended to the use of larger devices, in particular computers and tablets. This would presumably reveal differences into the preferred choices of online activities (e.g. multiplayer and single-player gaming) and would provide additional valuable insights into the distinctive use of mother tongues, English and other foreign languages. Along the same lines, another limitation of our study's focus on smartphones refers to the fact that regardless of the preferred subtitling mode, watching content online is admittedly better suited for larger devices, as acknowledged by one of our interviewees. In that respect, a focus on devices with larger screen sizes would be more revealing regarding students' online video watching behavior, most notably of the preferred choices of the subtitling modes particularly in relation to students' perceived communicative competence in English. However, given the ubiquitous use of smartphones in young people's lives and increasing exposure to English-based online content primarily in informal settings, we believe that our study provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of how non-native speakers' online practices impact their use of English in relation to their mother tongues and other foreign languages.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to assume that the way young people learn and use English outside the language classroom will continue to exert multiple influences on the way the language is taught in formal settings. Language instructors are challenged to understand the implications of these practices for formal teaching and to respond competently to the evolving

trends of multiple language learning forms in that respect (Toffoli & Sockett, 2015). In case of EAP instructors, a particular point of interest might relate to raising participants' awareness of the distinct features of academic and informal English, given that through their online use of English participants seem to be exposed predominantly to the informal register. Bridging the gap between formal and informal language learning processes remains one of the greatest challenges generally, but also the one that educators cannot avoid if formal language instruction is to be meaningful to contemporary language users. Finally, this study has shown that among multilingual speakers English might not be the predominant foreign language for all online uses. As a result, border areas where the number of multilingual speakers might be greatest would provide a relevant context for research into the online languages of speakers that are at least independent users of more than one foreign language.

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Appendix 1: Online survey

Dear students,

today all of us use smartphones in our everyday lives. Little is known, however, to what extent these are used for activities that might assist the learning of foreign languages, in particular English.

Therefore, you are kindly asked to take 10 minutes of time, and fill out the following survey.

Thank you.

Violeta Jurkovič, Slovenia

Halina Sierocka, Poland

Mirna Varga, Croatia

Q1 - Country where you study:

☐ Croatia
☐ Poland
☐ Slovenia

Q2 - Age:

[ ]

Q3 - Gender:

◯ Male
◯ Female
◯ I prefer not say.

Q4 - Discipline of study:

[ ]

Q5 - Please mark how often you use your smartphones for the following activities.

	Several times a day	Every day	Several times a week	Several times a month	Never or almost never
I read social media comments.	○	○	○	○	○
I watch television shows.	○	○	○	○	○
I watch short video clips with spoken text (e.g., YouTube).	○	○	○	○	○
I listen to radio shows.	○	○	○	○	○
I listen to lectures.	○	○	○	○	○
I send short text messages.	○	○	○	○	○
I leave voice messages.	○	○	○	○	○
I keep a blog.	○	○	○	○	○
I keep an audio blog.	○	○	○	○	○
I post social media comments.	○	○	○	○	○
I listen to podcasts.	○	○	○	○	○
I listen to audio books.	○	○	○	○	○
I read the daily news.	○	○	○	○	○
I read long texts.	○	○	○	○	○
I play games with written instructions.	○	○	○	○	○
I write down new words that I learn in a foreign language.	○	○	○	○	○
I play games that enable spoken communication with other players.	○	○	○	○	○
I play games that enable written communication with other players.	○	○	○	○	○
I play language games such as crosswords.	○	○	○	○	○
I write emails.	○	○	○	○	○
I read emails.	○	○	○	○	○
I listen to music.	○	○	○	○	○
I communicate with my classmates on study-related issues.	○	○	○	○	○
I communicate with my teachers on study-related issues.	○	○	○	○	○
I look for study-related information.	○	○	○	○	○
I read e-books.	○	○	○	○	○
I access online dictionaries.	○	○	○	○	○

	Several times a day	Every day	Several times a week	Several times a month	Never or almost never
I access websites with language learning exercises.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I use language learning apps that I have downloaded onto my smartphone.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I look for non-study related information.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I am a member of social media groups that talk about language learning.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch films and television series in a foreign language with subtitles in my mother language.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch films and television series in a foreign language with subtitles in English or another foreign language.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch films and television series in a foreign language with no subtitles.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Q6 - Please mark which language you **most often** use for these activities when using your smartphone.

	I never do this	My mother tongue	English	A foreign language other than English
I read social media comments.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch television shows.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch short video clips with spoken text (e.g., YouTube).	◯	◯	◯	◯
I listen to radio shows.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I listen to lectures.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I send short text messages.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I leave voice messages.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I keep a blog.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I keep an audio blog.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I post social media comments.	◯	◯	◯	◯

	I never do this	My mother tongue	English	A foreign language other than English
I listen to podcasts.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I listen to audio books.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I read the daily news.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I read long texts.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I play games with written instructions.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I write down new words that I learn in a foreign language.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I play games that enable spoken communication with other players.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I play games that enable written communication with other players.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I play language games such as crosswords.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I write emails.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I read emails.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I listen to music.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I communicate with my classmates on study-related issues.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I communicate with my teachers on study-related issues.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I look for study-related information.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I read e-books.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I access online dictionaries.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I access websites with language learning exercises.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I use language learning apps that I have downloaded onto my smartphone.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I look for non-study related information.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I am a member of social media groups that talk about language learning.	◯	◯	◯	◯
I watch films and television series	◯	◯	◯	◯

	I never do this	My mother tongue	English	A foreign language other than English
in a foreign language with subtitles in my mother language.				
I watch films and television series in a foreign language with subtitles in English or another foreign language.	○	○	○	○
I watch films and television series in a foreign language with no subtitles.	○	○	○	○

Q7 - Please self-assess your knowledge of the English language.

☐ A1 (Basic User): Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

☐ A2 (Basic User): Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

☐ B1 (Independent User): Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

☐ B2 (Independent User): Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

☐ C1 (Proficient User): Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

☐ C2 (Proficient User): Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

Q9_2 - Now please self-assess your knowledge of the English language on a scale from 1 (very bad) to **10 (excellent).**

Q8 - If you would be willing to participate in a 30-minute online interview on the role of mobile technologies in language learning, please leave your email address here.

Q9 - Is there anything that you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Why do you mostly use your mother tongue when texting, messaging, writing email, and posting social media comments?
2. How do you decide which language to use when reading the daily news?
3. How do you decide which language to use when you need information for your studies?
4. How do you decide which language to use when you need personally relevant information that you do not need for your studies?
5. How do you decide which language to use when listening to radio shows?
6. What are you reasons for using monolingual, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries?
7. How do you decide whether to use subtitles or not when watching films or TV series?
8. How do you decide whether these will be in your mother tongue, English, or another foreign language?
9. In your opinion, how does using online content in English affect your knowledge of the English language?
10. Is there anything that you would like to add?