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## **EFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND CREATIVE METHODS OF TEACHING THE CROATIAN LANGUAGE IN EARLY PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION**

**Abstract:** *Learning is an important process in the intellectual maturation and socialization of a person. It is determined by numerous components, the most important being cognition, motivation and emotions. As modern teaching requires an active role of students in the learning process, a key element for successful learning is quality teaching. Teachers' main challenge is how to arouse interest among students for the educational field. Thereby, teaching should be based on the choice of approaches and procedures.*

*In this paper were discussed effective strategies and forms of learning in the teaching of the Croatian language at the lower level of primary education, in the classroom teaching. The Croatian language is a complex teaching subject, so the functional teaching of language and literature requires the purposefulness of methods and forms of work. We monitored the applicability of collaborative, experiential and self-regulated learning. Attached are various creative procedures in the early stages of language learning, and offer guidelines for working with students in the classroom. It is important to facilitate situations in which students will become aware of their learning process and make decisions about how to achieve the planned learning outcomes and goals.*

**Keywords:** *interdisciplinary correlations, linguistic expression, literature, literary communication, student*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of accelerated changes in the modern world, education in the 21st century is gaining an important role in providing answers to the challenges of global changes in society. The modern knowledge society imposes the need

for innovation in the field of education.<sup>1</sup> Teachers with many years of work experience are noticing generational changes, children growing up in different times, with different interests and habits compared to the previous generations of pupils. The so-called *Z generation* is growing up in an environment of modern technology and is most preoccupied with computers and the latest mobile devices. They enjoy dynamism in teaching and move quickly from one activity to the next, imposing on teachers the need to adapt, both methodically and in the teaching approach and knowledge testing.

Psychologists define learning in different ways but generally agree that it is a vital process in the socialization of personality. "It is thanks to the learning process that the entire culture and art of mankind was created" (Tomić & Osmić, 2006, p. 113). Scholars list three components that determine human learning: cognition, motivation, and emotion. Their interaction in complex school activities is very important. Every child has different cognitive abilities, and it is important that they fully realize them in the teaching process. Some pupils are intellectual types, some are visual or auditory, others are so-called kinesthetic types. In this context, the teacher's flexibility<sup>2</sup> is very important, which refers to his ability to adapt to individual and group differences among pupils. Pupils' emotions, on the other hand, affect their achievement, and feedback on success, in turn, affects emotions (Burić, 2008). Just as emotions in interpersonal relationships significantly determine the quality of relationships, pupils' emotions toward their teachers are reflected in the learning process in school. A positive relationship between pupils and teachers will affect the motivation of pupils to perform tasks.

As learning is not just a cognitive process, apart from academic skills (learning, communication, presentation of skills), the teacher also develops life skills (assertiveness, sensibility, cooperation in the community, coping with stress), which meet the emotional and social needs of the individual (Režek, 2014). Numerical assessment is only one of the indicators of pupil achievement in a particular subject area.

Pupils' (lack of) success is influenced by the interests and abilities of the individual, the family context, the organization of the teaching process, the teacher's qualifications, and school's material opportunities (Kadum Bošnjak et al., 2014). However, pupils' success mostly depends on whether they know how to learn and what approaches and strategies they use. The authors of modern theories of motivation in learning seek to determine the internal and external conditions that affect pupils' motivation to work and how these conditions can be achieved in teaching. In addition to extrinsic (external stimulus) and

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that more than 60 percent of pupils who attend school today will in the future perform jobs that do not even exist today (Nad, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Terms teacher and pupil in the text refer to members of both genders.

intrinsic motivation (internal stimulus, internal need), pupils' interests and teacher's action play a crucial role. The main challenge for teachers is how to arouse interest in material that pupils have not been interested in or in new material that is relatively unknown to them (Vizek Vidović, 2009). Formalism in teaching and instrumentalization of learning aimed at testing knowledge and narrowly understood educational goals will certainly not result in the realization of planned learning outcomes or pupils' lasting knowledge.

This paper deals with learning and teaching the Croatian language in early primary school education. The Croatian language is a complex and the most common school subject in the entire educational vertical. Given that learning is a cognitive process that includes emotions and motivation, such a complex topic requires an interdisciplinary research approach. In addition to the experiences of practitioners, the discussion will include knowledge of current research in the field of psychology, pedagogy, didactics, and methodics of the Croatian language. In the first part of the text, the focus is placed on different learning strategies and forms. As modern mother tongue teaching requires the purposefulness of methods and forms of work, the applicability of collaborative, experiential, and self-regulated learning will be considered. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning will be discussed, as well as learning goals and outcomes, and the extent to which the goals and pupil achievements are focused on the pupil's applied knowledge. The second part will offer functional procedures and approaches in the interpretation of literary content and the processing of linguistic rules. The main goal of this paper is to offer a scientifically-grounded relationship between the content realization and the teaching method within the subject Croatian language in early primary school education. It primarily seeks to emphasize the importance of functional and creative learning.

## PUPILS' ACHIEVEMENT AND TEACHERS' ROLE IN TEACHING

The pupil is at the center of the teaching process and should be viewed multidimensionally: as an individual, active collaborator, and dynamic subject (Bjedov, 2019). Instead of asking what pupils need to learn and what they need to *know*, it is good to ask: What should pupils *be able to do*? Indeed, every teacher knows from experience that there is no "average pupil" (Božin et al., 2011). The humanistic approach to teaching implies mutual respect between the participants, and teachers, in particular, must keep in mind the feelings of their pupils and encourage positive emotions in the educational process. Such an approach encourages the development of pupils' self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-realization (Miljević-Ridički et al., 2003).

Research shows that pupils' achievement is influenced by two factors: primarily their individual characteristics (intelligence, personality traits, gender,

motivation) and external factors, the environment (family, school, teachers). Parents and teachers are the greatest role models and motivators for children and pupils and key factors in the socialization of pupils, motivation for work, and shaping behaviors and attitudes.

Younger pupils are determined by individual differences: pupils' characteristics, their needs, attitudes, and the concept of self. The teacher needs to be familiar with these characteristics in order to approach each child adequately. Pupils differ from each other based on prior knowledge, abilities, learning style, and emotional attitude toward school and learning. The teacher's challenge is to find the best approach to each individual and the process of using all individual differences in achieving educational goals. Pupil-centered teaching involves the individualization of work.<sup>3</sup>

The teacher must not neglect the physiological specifics and differences between girls and boys. Psychologists warn of different brain development in girls and boys, which is manifested as early as preschool age. Spending time indoors and visual-auditory learning are a challenge for all children but a great difficulty for individuals who are not mature enough. Boys who are accustomed to play and engage in physical activities in the open air find it harder to adjust to the rules of school life in the first grade.<sup>4</sup>

External evaluation of the quality of our education system has revealed deficits in the knowledge of our pupils, primarily the skills of understanding, recognizing, and the ability to think critically. PISA research has confirmed that the emotions that Croatian pupils experience in teaching and learning are one of the most important factors influencing their achievements. Discomfort and fear in the classroom reduce concentration and motivation, having a negative impact on the learning success.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benko et al. (2018) wanted to examine the extent to which teachers are generally familiar with the notion of individualization in primary education. The results of the research showed that teachers are familiar with the term and know how to define it. In addition, teachers identified homogenized classrooms and differentiated tasks, availability of practice space and pupils' involvement in other organizational forms of work and material working conditions, and additional tasks as the most important factors for the implementation of individualized form of work in primary education.

<sup>4</sup> OECD research on the school success of 15-year-olds in terms of gender show that boys achieve the worst, but also the best results, while girls are always in the middle of the scale. In general, girls achieve better results in primary education than boys, in all areas of education except Physical Education. Our education system must adapt to the different characteristics and needs of girls and boys, and teachers should keep in mind that these specifics require the application of different motivation procedures (Režek, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The answer to the question *How do pupils and teachers feel at school?* will be a good indicator of the school climate. It does not matter whether feelings of comfort or discomfort prevail in the classroom, because the classroom climate is an important factor in the pupils' progress and mental development (Mlinarević & Brust Nemet, 2012).

The Finnish model is often cited as an exemplary education system. The Finnish education reform did not accept the logic of educational change based on market rules, but on overcoming school divisions and merging into one general education public school, with the aim of building a more socially equal society.<sup>6</sup> It is important to emphasize that this reform is based on quality higher education teachers. The main view is that successful learning is not influenced by externally set standards or external evaluation, but the key element is quality teaching.<sup>7</sup>

It is not easy to encourage pupils to work and arouse their interest in material that is not very interesting to them. In preparing the lesson, the teacher should make an effort to perceive the teaching process from the pupil's perspective.<sup>8</sup> Pupils differ from each other, so the teacher must recognize these individual characteristics in order to act properly and encourage pupils to learn and fulfill teaching activities. The teacher must recognize what drives an individual pupil in the classroom – achieving success or avoiding failure. It would be ideal for a strong desire for successful achievements to prevail among pupils because it is a positive driver. The desire to avoid failure results in an unwillingness to engage in a particular activity and a low level of motivation.<sup>9</sup>

Pupils are often motivated by external factors rather than intrinsic motivation, they learn because of assessment and not because of learning outcomes, the usefulness of the learning process itself, the knowledge that can be applied in life.<sup>10</sup> In order to purposefully adjust his approach to learning, the pupil needs regular feedback on teachers' specific expectations and how he can achieve

<sup>6</sup> Sahlberg (2012) states that the Finnish model of education reform is based on equity and cooperation, rather than classifying pupils according to abilities and academic competition, resulting in an education system in which children learn well and effectively.

<sup>7</sup> This approach allows Finnish teachers to dedicate themselves to pupils' creative learning and teaching. Pupils, therefore, learn in a relaxed atmosphere without fear of constantly monitoring their success and questioning the expected results.

<sup>8</sup> Conducting research on the position of pupils in the teaching of the Croatian language, Bjedov (2019) found that in pupil perception, the teacher is an indisputable influential factor in shaping pupils' status in teaching.

<sup>9</sup> It is natural that pupils want to excel in activities in which they are successful and recognize the possibility of a positive outcome. In allocating responsibilities and approaching pupils, the teacher should take into account their interests and abilities and properly dose the level of expectation so that the set outcomes are achievable. Otherwise, the effect can be devastating, which inevitably reflects on the pupils' motivation to learn, but also on the teacher-pupil relationship. Exaggeration in assigning tasks in any respect (too difficult and too simple requirements) will not encourage pupils to commit to the lesson (Vizek Vidović, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Extrinsic motivation is not always the most effective measure to encourage pupils to perform a particular activity. The teacher should encourage pupils' focus on learning as much as possible, and not just on grades. The reward for the completed task can be the teacher's permission to engage in an activity that the pupil likes, after completing the task (drawing, playing a computer game, football, walking around the school ground, etc.).

them. For the development of self-regulated learning, the pupil must be an active participant in that process who manages his own learning process and evaluates his own achievements (Nimac, 2018).

In encouraging pupils' responsibility for work and success, teachers should develop pupils' self-evaluation skills in teaching because pupils' formative self-evaluation during school learning has a positive effect on the level of their achievement and interest in the teaching content (Bursać et al., 2016).

Since almost all subjects in early primary school education are taught by the same person, it will not be difficult for the teacher to notice their pupils' preferences and affinities. In addition, praise is always welcome because it is very motivating, and there is the impression that teachers do not use it very often.

The teacher's role is vital in the process of a child's adaptation to society and the establishment of independence, thus creating the conditions for self-fulfillment. He is the moderator and organizer of a stimulating learning environment.<sup>11</sup> In a meta-analytical study, Danişman et al. (2019) analyzed the relationship between teachers' characteristics and pupils' achievement based on existing literature. It was shown that pupils' achievement is mostly influenced by teachers' personal qualities, while the management of the learning process had the least effect.

## LEARNING STRATEGIES AND FORMS

Although the modern school emphasizes the pupils' active role, it seems that even today, in many schools, the pupils' declarative knowledge is more represented than the procedural. When it comes to educational outcomes, the most important issues are the organization of the educational process and teaching methods. The still represented approach of frontal teaching does not show satisfactory results and generates the failure of a larger number of pupils. It is necessary to shift the focus to the management of learning and teaching processes as important internal factors that are reflected in the learning outcomes and the pupils' educational achievements (Nenadić-Tabak, 2019).

Contemporary teaching requires a more active role of pupils in the learning process, the transition from a passive listener (object) to an active participant (subject) and researcher in various methodic teaching systems (Božin et al., 2011).

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<sup>11</sup> Good and diligent pupils do not need to be further motivated to learn, but the real challenge is lively pupils who do not show much interest in learning and practicing the material from which they usually achieve poorer results. Recent research in the field of educational psychology shows that, in such cases, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be combined, which do not always have to be in opposition.

**Table 1** Characteristics of traditional and pupil-centered teaching  
(Source: Mirković, 2016)

<b>Traditional teaching</b>	<b>Pupil-centered teaching</b>
Providing information	Exchange of information
Factual, knowledge-based	Critical thinking, informed decision making
Pupils receive information	Pupils review and solve problems
Formal classroom layout	Flexible, changeable environment
Emphasis on learning for memory sake	Emphasis on understanding/application
Assessment using traditional testing	Diverse assessment, incl. work on projects
Passive learning	Active research-based learning

Pupil-centered teaching has been gaining in value due to obtained insights from neuroscience.<sup>12</sup> Teachers should be familiar with the achievements of neurodidactics. This refers to teaching that includes research and problem-solving learning, experiential, collaborative learning, project-based learning, self-regulated learning, action-oriented learning, and game-based learning. These are all learning mechanisms inherent to the human brain (Ischinger, 2007; Lawson, 2003).

Pupils' success in learning depends on whether they know how to learn and what approaches and strategies they use.<sup>13</sup> There are teaching strategies that can be functionally used in the classroom. Marzano et al. (2000) list nine teaching strategies that will improve pupils' achievement in different educational areas, and each strategy allows for a different amount and quality of teacher-pupil relationship.<sup>14</sup> One of the most important is setting goals and providing feedback. Adults also often have problems with planning and performing professional

<sup>12</sup> In the last ten years, the connection between neuroscience and learning within the field of neuroeducation (neuroscience of education) has been intensively studied. Psychologists state that the structure of the brain changes under the influence of stimuli from the human environment and is strengthened by receiving each new stimulus (Jensen, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Buljan Gudelj (2018) investigated the connection between the perception of the school climate and the use of learning strategies in primary school pupils. There are statistically significant differences in the use of learning strategies with respect to the success with which pupils had completed the previous school year. Very good and excellent pupils use different learning strategies much more frequently (cycle of metacognitive learning control, deep cognitive processing).

<sup>14</sup> These activities include identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and recording, setting goals, supporting effort and ensuring understanding, homework and exercise, collaborative learning, non-linguistic presentation, setting and activating hypotheses, and activating prior knowledge.

activities and do not know how to set their work goals correctly. It is even more difficult for pupils, but the teacher can help them plan their obligations.

Affective attitudes significantly determine pupils' access to school obligations, indicating the relationship between attracting or rejecting educational content and forms of teaching. *Affective learning* (Čudina-Obradović, 1997) is an approach to cognition that involves the development of occupations, judgments, values, and inclinations in the school environment. Pupils' emotions play a very important role in teaching; they trigger children's thinking and behavior, significantly affect the understanding of the material and the learning process itself (Immordino-Yang, 2015). Learning is a dynamic process that greatly depends on the environment in which it takes place, and emotions determine how and why we remember and learn. In order for a teacher to stimulate interest in the contents of teaching, he should find ways in which the emotional aspects of learning can be exploited. While positive emotions, such as interest and excitement, trigger thinking, negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and agitation can significantly impair pupils' achievement.

Pupils with lower educational attainment in their mother tongue usually lack self-confidence, so they should be careful not to compare themselves with other pupils, especially successful ones. Instead, they should be encouraged to compare themselves with themselves – that way they will not fail. Like adults, children easily give up on a certain task for fear of failure. A sense of progress is important, so the teacher should provide them with tasks of appropriate difficulty and divide them into smaller units to make learning certain content easier. In order to gain self-confidence, it is beneficial to organize *collaborative learning* in which the pupil takes responsibility for the success of the group, so he is not burdened only by his own achievement.<sup>15</sup>

Practitioners' experiences and the latest research results show that by involving pupils in regulating their own learning and encouraging collaborative learning, pupils become more active in the knowledge acquisition processes and take responsibility for their learning and learning outcomes (Holcar Brunauer et al., 2016). In the collaborative form of learning, the teacher encourages his pupils to cooperate, and the pupils learn independently and from each other. In

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<sup>15</sup> This refers to joint learning in pairs or small groups, whose main goal is to explore a common topic, solve problems, improve upon the existing knowledge, create new ideas, combinations, or unique innovations (Cota Bekavac, 2002). Pupils work on a common task trying to coordinate their efforts to solve it properly. All pupils have the same task, and only with the active participation of each individual does such learning make sense and the work can be done successfully.

collaborative groups or groups, they exchange their views and opinions, developing their communication and other skills.<sup>16</sup>

*Self-regulated learning* is an independent form of learning that is determined by metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral elements (Zimmerman, 2002). Some scholars (Perry et al., 2004) believe that children of early school age cannot self-regulate the personal learning process. Nevertheless, most methodologists, psychologists, and pedagogists agree that pupils in early primary school teaching successfully develop the self-regulation skill during schooling (Martinez-Pons, 2002; Perry, 1998; Turner, 1995; Zimmerman et al. 1996). Through their research, they confirm how pupils at this age can successfully plan, observe, and self-evaluate their own learning process in teaching and solving demanding tasks. Lončarić (2014) describes a self-regulated pupil as one who is intrinsically motivated to learn, knows what he wants, and finds ways to achieve goals, selects, and creates learning situations, uses strategies for progress, monitors his progress, and connects success with his own efforts.

Self-regulated learning involves planning, observing, and evaluating one's own learning, Pekrun et al. (2002) emphasize that it is facilitated by positive emotions. Joy, hope, and pride are positively related to the pupil's intrinsic motivation and overall motivation to learn and commit. As part of this, teachers should encourage self-monitoring through feedback on the achievement of goals. Self-observing is an important determinant of self-regulated learning, so feedback should contain a laudable dimension with a reference to shortcomings because they affect pupils' self-esteem and encourage positive motivational beliefs.

For pupils who find it difficult to express themselves linguistically by writing or speaking, mental maps can make it easier to express and structure their own thoughts. Since the Internet also provides education through mental maps, free online tools will be of great help to the teacher, as they provide access to a larger number of users. Pupils make maps as a team, and the teacher can

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<sup>16</sup> Pecko (2019) investigated how often teachers apply collaborative learning in early primary school teaching and how effective this learning strategy has proven to be. The results of the research show that teachers usually plan weekly and daily collaborative learning in the subjects Nature and Society and the Croatian Language. Pecko believes that collaborative learning can be started sooner and parents can be instructed in certain methods so that they can also contribute to their use in repetition and learning of teaching content at home.

simultaneously observe their work by entering comments and guidelines (Bajić, 2015).<sup>17</sup>

In the new millennium, experiential, research, innovative, and transformational learning are experiencing their affirmation. *Experiential learning* is based on the knowledge of how meaningful knowledge is acquired through lived experiences.<sup>18</sup> It is important to recognize the child's potential, talent, and interest in a particular area, whether it is teaching or sports, music, movement, and to encourage that talent. Success in this activity will certainly raise pupils' self-confidence and stimulate interest in an area where optimal results have not been achieved. The teacher must always keep in mind that he does not equate the pupil's abilities in a particular teaching area with his personality and personal value. Indeed, a grade is not a measure of humanity (Miljković et al., 2014).

Pupils' obedience and passivity during the lesson belong to some past days of traditional teaching. Teaching today is focused on knowledge that includes understanding, skill, and improving upon the already acquired knowledge. In the foreground is active learning on which the system of thinking and learning is based. Like frequently used terms and phrases, *competencies*, *achievements*, *learning outcomes*, the phrase *active learning* is often used in educational discourse. Indeed, modern approaches to teaching require pupils' active role and a high degree of independence in learning.

Technology can also play a significant role in encouraging pupils' activity. At the beginning of the new decade, teachers noticed that the pupils' needs change from one year to the next. Teachers are therefore forced to adapt to

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<sup>17</sup> Our methodics experts examined whether there were significant differences in the activities of younger school-age pupils between the traditional form of teaching and collaborative teaching. One study (Peko et al., 2006) confirmed that collaborative learning encourages greater pupil activity in teaching, camaraderie, and satisfaction with the success achieved in group work. In 2005, researchers at the Beli Manastir Primary School, on a sample of about forty fourth-grade pupils, examined the assessment of pupils' personal activity in Croatian language teaching. Two approaches were applied – direct teaching and collaborative learning using the puzzle method. Both classes followed the same educational content – the interpretation of the text *The Elm-Charnted Forest* (Čudesna šuma). A self-assessment questionnaire in teaching activities was used to analyze the results. The research confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative learning, an increase in pupils' activity, and a high level of the sense of mutual success and mutual trust (Peko et al., 2006).

In collaborative learning, all pupils in the group are equally important and should feel satisfied because this learning strategy is based on positive interaction between participants, personal responsibility, and positive interdependence (Jensen, 2003; Romić, 2002). A group of pupils in collaborative learning is connected by common needs and goals (Mlinarević & Brust Nemet, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> A special form of experiential learning and teaching is a drama game - a consciously chosen didactic method of drama pedagogy by which the learning process takes place as gaining experience and understanding of the living environment through the complex interaction of teachers and students (Krušić, 2012).

the drastic changes and habits of the new generations of pupils. Young people experience the world around them through their mobile devices and virtual media, which is reflected in learning, memory, and verbal expression. In addition, children have less physical contact with their parents who are preoccupied with existential issues, so many psychologists and pedagogues mention the phrase “telephone education” (Nađ, 2019). Reed, in his book *Digitized Lives* (2014), raises the question: Are our kids getting dumber and phones getting smarter?<sup>19</sup>

The application of digital technology in the teaching of the Croatian language is dubious because the basic tasks of language teaching are the development of verbal expression and communication skills, and the practice of graphomotor skills in writing letters and composing sentences in the teaching of initial reading and writing. Numerous researches have been conducted on the purposefulness of the application of digital technology in teaching, and some authors have also commented on its effectiveness in learning the mother tongue.<sup>20</sup> The Croatian language that we find on the global network, i.e., the Internet, reflects the linguistic reality and linguistic facts that genuinely exist in everyday practice (Milinović & Nemeth-Jajić, 2011).

Despite the fear of the negative consequences of the digitalization of teaching, many practitioners have been convinced of the functionality of using tablets since the first grade of primary school. Especially at the current time of the coronavirus pandemic, when the public was convinced of the applicability of multimedia and the effectiveness of distance learning (Krumes Šimunović & Ružek, 2020).<sup>21</sup>

Pupils’ socio-emotional competencies must not be neglected in the teaching process. Because mental health strongly influences an individual’s life and work in daily life, creative social and emotional learning programs

<sup>19</sup> Mobile and digital devices are not designed to create but to consume content, resulting in reduced concentration and creativity. The child becomes a consumer of the offered virtual content without critical thinking. Teachers, therefore, must be prepared to work with tablets and new technology.

<sup>20</sup> Rosen and Beck-Hill (2012) examined the impact of computer programs Time to Know on the reading abilities of fourth- and fifth-graders. During the school year, pupils’ achievements in the control and experimental classes of two different schools in the UK were observed. The research showed that the participants who used a computer program (experimental group) achieved significantly better results in reading skills. In addition, they were less absent from classes and their discipline was significantly better compared to the control group.

<sup>21</sup> During 2019, Krumes Šimunović and Ružek conducted a research on the effectiveness of a multimedia approach to grammar in the third grade of primary school. Based on the obtained results, they concluded that educational content can be easily mastered with the use of multimedia, while some require more complex preparation of teaching materials, methods, and approaches.

significantly reduce children's problematic behaviors by improving their school performance.<sup>22</sup>

Gardner (1999) developed a theory of multiple intelligences, depending on personal affinities, whether an individual exhibits the propensity for musical expression, the ability of logical-mathematical reasoning, linguistic expression, or body-kinetic traits. The teacher should recognize the type of intelligence and abilities of his pupils in order to individually adapt the way they work to each child.<sup>23</sup> In the teaching of the Croatian language, pupils who possess linguistic intelligence will come to the fore. This implies a pronounced interest in words and the way words are used in reading, writing, and speaking (Ilak, 2020).<sup>24</sup> "Linguistically intelligent" pupils are very communicative, love to tell stories, read books and write essays, enjoy language games and public speaking. Because they think in words, they need to adapt their "learning style."<sup>25</sup> Children who possess linguistic intelligence will be happy to participate in extracurricular activities and activities in the language and art field.

Mastering learning strategies will reflect on the quality of acquired knowledge. Pupils' success mostly depends on whether they know how to learn and what approach they use. The mentioned forms of collaborative, experiential, and self-regulated learning are very effective, and they can also be used by early primary school pupils.

## GOALS, OUTCOMES, MOTIVATION, AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The teaching process, which is based on a cognitive-constructivist and humanistic understanding of learning, is a mental process in which the pupil is realized as a whole person (Marentič Požarnik, 2003). Learning objectives are planned for the purpose of teaching and refer to the elements that the teacher will process in the teaching area while the learning outcomes show what the pupil needs to know. Aims and pupil achievement are focused on the pupil's knowledge, what needs to be learned (Bakota, 2013). The realization of the

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<sup>22</sup> The positive outcomes of socio-emotional learning are noticeable in the pupils' great interest in health topics. Teachers who problematize mental health topics notice that pupils are significantly more active in these classes (Budiša, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> In simple terms, each of the seven types of intelligence requires a different learning style. A pupil who has logical-mathematical competence, for example, is prone to arithmetic and likes to experiment, solve logical puzzles, and tasks, so he should be offered materials for research and thinking and allowed to express himself in research work.

<sup>24</sup> N. Ilak, Nine types of intelligence: What is your trump card? <http://atma.hr/devet-vrsta-inteligencije/>, accessed March 2, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> The teacher can encourage them by preparing appropriate materials, such as books, tapes, and diaries to enable them to have the opportunity to talk, discuss, retell, recite, write songs, and stories as often as possible.

given learning outcomes is conditioned by the selection and transfer of content from the fundamental sciences and the implementation of the methodical act (Kolar Billege, 2020). Learning outcomes determine what a pupil might show after a certain level of learning (Kovač & Kolić-Vehovec, 2008).<sup>26</sup>

Glasser (1999) developed several key conditions for quality teaching: a pleasant and stimulating classroom atmosphere, useful work, requiring pupils to do the best they can, evaluating and improving their own teaching performance. The learning environment implies the creation of a pleasant, educational classroom atmosphere that encourages pupils' interest and motivation to learn and provides them with good interpersonal relationships, mutual assistance, and respect (Krstović et al., 2016).

The quality and tidy spatial environment of the school has a stimulating effect on pupils, developing in them an interest and desire to learn in teaching and cooperate with pupils in the classroom. Contemporary research shows the extent to which the internal space and environment of the school affect learning, so in recent times, the fact that the space in which primary school pupils reside must be as functional and multifunctional as possible (Fošnarič, 2009).<sup>27</sup> Cowley (2006) lists the essential factors that make a classroom a comfortable space: tidiness, organization of objects within the classroom, safety, colors and billboards, desk layout, and stimulating atmosphere.<sup>28</sup>

An effective spatial organization should be focused on the pupils' needs for unhindered communication. Pupils do not have to sit at their desks all the time looking at the backs of their classmates. In activities that require mutual discussion and joint solving of tasks, creative expression, an informal schedule should

<sup>26</sup> Knowledge of psychology and pedagogy greatly contributes to adapting the lesson to the sensibility of the young generation. Modern pedagogy requires directing the professional skill set of teachers towards practices that encourage creative learning, while, within the positive psychology of education, the well-being of children is achieved through the principles of comfort and positive feelings and authentic functioning that leads to the highest ranking need (Čepić & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Pupils spend most of their time in the same classroom every day, and it is not irrelevant if the school provides them with a comfortable and well-organized environment. "The school environment that encourages learning refers to the social, psychological, and pedagogical context in which learning takes place and which influences pupils' achievement and the formation of their attitudes" (Opdenakker & Minnaert, 2011, p. 260).

<sup>28</sup> Blažević (2016) conducted research on the importance of the school's spatial environment in the process of teaching and learning. The research was conducted in 2015 by photo-documenting the space in three schools in the Istrian County. The obtained results confirm that the spatial environment greatly influences teachers' instruction and pupils' learning. Although teachers decorate their classrooms with the best of intentions, they sometimes exaggerate in decorating the walls so their appearance can cause a sensory overload for pupils, which can have the opposite effect on the learning process. In this context, it is worth thinking about a decent arrangement of space, because the connection between the look of the classroom and the function of memory, attention, and self-regulation in pupils is very important.

be organized – circular and semicircular sitting, placement on floor mats, etc. Pupils can choose who to sit with and which group to join in the work, which significantly affects the quality of the relationship between teachers and pupils, as well as a closer working atmosphere (Lučić, 2005).

It is very important that teachers implement the agreed rules of conduct as a prerequisite for creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom, timely identify crisis situations, and apply the principles of prevention in solving behavioral problems. In doing so, they should be aware of the knowledge about the outdated form of frontal teaching because it is inefficient and completely inappropriate and uninteresting to new generations. The way of teaching must be changeable, which comes to the fore at the end of learning (Čudina-Obradović, 2014). Learning goals and outcomes should always be focused on the pupils's applied knowledge.

## LEARNING AND TEACHING WITHIN THE SUBJECT CROATIAN LANGUAGE

The methodical approach to the early teaching of language and literature implies the selection and organization of educational content from the subject curriculum based on the fundamental science of Croatian language methodics (Bežen, 2008; Kolar Billege, 2020). The subject curriculum covers three interrelated areas of the Croatian language: Croatian language and communication, literature and creativity, and culture and media.<sup>29</sup> In addition to learning and teaching language skills, the subject area of *Croatian language and communication* is based on the practical mastery of language as a system. Language knowledge is in the function of developing and mastering communication competencies. *Literature and creativity* are based on the reading and reception of a literary-artistic text with the aim of acquiring a literary education and a culture of reading. Pupils are encouraged to express themselves creatively according to their own interest, based on their own experiences of the literary text. The subject area of *culture and media* refers to the research of connections between texts and their forms, between cultures of living and social relations, and the media as the primary transmitters of culture.

As the focus of this paper is on functional procedures in the processing of language content and creative approaches to the interpretation of content from literature, we will focus on important components of learning and teaching

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<sup>29</sup> [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_01\\_10\\_215.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_01_10_215.html), accessed 28 April 2021. Not all methodics experts agree with this structuring of the subject. Nemeth-Jajić believes that the names “domains” are not justified because the term “creative production” is encouraged in all subject areas, and the term “culture” does not need to be separated into a separate subject area because it is a concept of broad meaning, and culture is taught in different schools (Nemeth-Jajić, 2018, pp. 75-76).

Croatian in early primary school education: language teaching (grammar and spelling), language expression, and literature.

## LANGUAGE TEACHING

Learning as part of language teaching is a complex and layered process of a didactic transfer of scientific knowledge. Learning grammatical content in early primary school education is particularly complex because the principle of scientificity in teaching should be adapted to pupils' cognitive abilities and the level of their language development. Therefore, language teaching is focused on learning functional grammar, i.e., learning a language through communication. In language teaching, the principle of the text is expressed, which is closely related to the spoken or written expression. Težak emphasized that the text is the origin and purpose of grammar teaching because linguistic facts do not function outside the (con)text. This refers to both spoken and written language expression – language practice is everything that surrounds pupils and includes the written and spoken use of language.

According to the results of the latest OECD PISA survey in 2019, Croatian 15-year-olds are below average in reading literacy. In this area, Croatian pupils are in the 29th place (out of 79 countries), while every fourth boy and every seventh girl have not even reached basic level 2.<sup>30</sup> Croatian language teachers are certainly not the only ones to blame for the results and learning outcomes. The curriculum, especially in subject teaching, is too extensive, and a different approach to educational outcomes is needed.

When teaching language content, one should avoid learning definitions by heart, without understanding. Pupils certainly do not have to memorize complex definitions but should observe linguistic laws on selected examples.<sup>31</sup> It is more appropriate to use the method of induction, to teach from simpler grammatical contents to generalizations and more demanding contents. During the processing or exercises of language laws, it is good to encourage collaborative learning, joint learning of pupils in tandem or in small groups with the aim of solving common tasks. In addition to the classroom, this form of teaching can be organized in the school library, which is an ideal space for collaborative learning (Vincek, 2017).

Nikčević Milković et al. (2018) wanted to examine the effectiveness of the learning self-regulation model on the domain areas of reading and writing.

<sup>30</sup> Six thousand pupils born in 2002 from 79 countries participated in the PISA 2018 survey. In Croatia, the survey was conducted in the spring of 2018 in four primary and 179 secondary schools, and a total of 6,609 15-year-olds participated.

<sup>31</sup> In the upper grades, they will learn the rules in lessons on school grammar. Although no morphological changes are mentioned in class, such as the declension of nouns and the conjugation of verbs, the variability of words can be practiced in the teaching of initial reading and writing, for example, in picture stories.

They investigated the extent to which language activity strategies contribute to reading and writing behaviors in pupils of different ages and genders, and the relationship with general success in the school subject Croatian Language.<sup>32</sup> The results showed that the tendencies and interests towards reading and writing are significantly higher among primary school pupils and that pupils have more positive attitudes towards the usefulness of reading and writing strategies.

When learning or repeating language content, it is good to design interesting and creative speech situations, language games in which pupils will more easily master the material being learned. Research confirms the effectiveness of the motivational role of didactic play as a teaching method, pupils are more motivated through play than in the traditional way of teaching, and the difference in the durability of acquired knowledge is not insignificant. Well-designed educational games can be very instructive, as it is a medium that pupils are well acquainted with and enjoy.<sup>33</sup> Nikčević-Milković et al. (2011) investigated the effectiveness of didactic play in teaching. Research has shown that teachers apply play several times a week, considering them very functional in working with children.<sup>34</sup> Through play, the pupil can develop certain cognitive abilities: critical thinking, creativity, intellectual curiosity, sense of humor. When it comes to speech development, play can contribute to the development of language competency and the adoption of language rules and functions.<sup>35</sup>

The teacher can offer pupils a set of sentences supplemented by drawings of a concept that should be said or written in a certain form (case). In addition to case sequels, voice changes can also be observed, which pupils will learn more about in the subject. The goal of language games is to master the language and its content from grammar and spelling, as well as basic language activities. By imitating situations from everyday life, pupils develop language and communication competencies (Pavličević-Franić, 2011). Language games such as role-playing contain elements of dramatic situations and are extremely useful because they help children to express themselves more easily and better later

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<sup>32</sup> The researchers found that pupils who have a greater propensity and interest in reading and writing and who use less frequently digital media for reading and writing show better overall school performance. Pupils who have a greater inclination and interest in reading and writing show better success in the school subject Croatian language.

<sup>33</sup> Research mainly follows the motivational role of didactic games, but the educational success (relative to the classical approach to teaching) of this approach has not been sufficiently documented (Butler et al., 1988; Jolicoeur & Berger 1988). Studies have shown a mild effectiveness of language games in developing reading techniques (Raghavan & Katz, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> Association games, word games, competition games, math games, crossword puzzles, and rebuses have proven to be particularly effective. Pupils prefer association games and competition games, while teachers mostly use games in the introductory and final part of a lesson.

<sup>35</sup> Examples of games: *Memory cards*, *Football of words*, *Imitating sounds*, *Chain of knowledge*, *Group – find an object, thing*, *Pantomime*, *Hangman game*, *Find the second part of the sentence*, and others.

in language (Peti-Stantić & Velički, 2008). One of the basic tasks of teachers in Croatian language teaching is to encourage and develop children's speech competence, and language games that affect the dynamism and interestingness of teaching will certainly help them (Aladrović Slovaček et al., 2013). By playing with words and creating new expressions, neologisms, children enrich their vocabulary and unconsciously practice word formation.

In language teaching, it is desirable to apply a problem-based approach and give pupils language problems that they will solve themselves. In the second grade, they can add capital letters to shorter texts written in small letters. A language problem for third graders could be the exercise of transforming a text from a native language into a literary standard or creating a text filled with "big" or "small" nouns, which will precede the acquisition of knowledge about diminutives and augmentatives (Lazarich, 2017, p. 90). In this way, pupils functionally learn linguistic laws, learn "language in its communicative and stylistic function, in this creative problem-solving approach notice ways of creation and stylistic function of these same diminutives" (Turza-Bogdan, 2003, p. 103).

When revising material on word types in the third grade, it is advisable to observe a linguistic phenomenon on a literary-artistic template. An appropriate text is chosen, saturated with noun and verb forms. A brief interpretation of the text is followed by an observation of the linguistic phenomenon (noticing word types and listing grammatical categories of nouns, verbs, and adjectives). Repetition will then continue on new examples, for example, on worksheets. Since the acquired knowledge about word types is repeated in class, the teacher checks the level of adoption with numerous procedures – whether the pupil only recognizes words or if his knowledge is operational. Thus, for nouns, he can ask the pupils, in addition to noticing the type of nouns, to transform words from their singular to plural form and vice versa. To test the acquired knowledge of adjectives, he can suggest to pupils to create an adjective or verb from a noun. By connecting content from language and spelling, he can test pupils' spelling knowledge of writing possessive adjectives derived from proper names and adjectives derived from general nouns (Lazarich, 2017).

Experiential and collaborative learning should be insisted on in language teaching. Miljević-Ridički et al. (2003) offered creative methodical models with the stated learning strategies. We will provide an example for processing the teaching unit *Capitalization in the fourth grade (Učitelji za učitelje*, pp. 132–135). One school hour is required to practice the correct spelling of multi-member names and apply spelling rules. In the introductory part of the lesson, the teacher divides the pupils into groups by giving them instructions for work. Each pupil is given a worksheet with tasks to be solved – expressions written in capital formal letters. The words offered on the worksheet should be copied correctly into their notebook. Pupils then solve the tasks, collaborate with each

other using the textbook while the teacher supervises their work. When they have completed this activity, they can swap worksheets with another group and solve new spelling tasks. An accuracy check follows: group representatives come before the class and write down the correct solutions in cursive letters. Other pupils comment and correct possible mistakes. Once the examples from the worksheet have been written on the board, a short discussion begins and the pupils explain capitalization rules. In the final part of the lesson, a test of knowledge is carried out on new examples. The teacher uses a linguistic-methodical template by first reading the text and then handing out to the pupils the sheets on which the text is written in capital formal letters. The task is to find and mark multi-nomial expressions in the text. Pupils read aloud sentence by sentence, underlining the given concepts. They write underlined multi-nomial expressions correctly in their notebook. If they do not complete the task in class, they will complete it for homework.

Since pupils acquire language skills through imitation, the teacher's language competency is very important. He must be aware of the complexity of language content from the pupil's perspective because pupils are sometimes surprised by the language rules that they must learn and master in speaking and writing. Special attention should be paid to the preparation of language lessons without burdening pupils with theoretical definitions. Pupils must get rid of the fear of language, and language knowledge will become a means of practical communication in their mother tongue.

## TEACHING LANGUAGE EXPRESSION

During teaching, different strategies should be used to acquire new knowledge. Pupils' reading literacy is the foundation of further education. In order to successfully shape their thoughts in oral and written expression, the pupil needs to understand the messages while reading. The teacher must adapt the teaching procedures in the teaching of initial reading, depending on how well his pupils master the technique of decoding and understanding the text and their different initial levels of reading ability (Budinski, 2019). "A good teacher knows how to organize learning because he prepares children for smooth routines and rules, increases the time of internal engagement of pupils, especially makes sure that pupils have less developed reading skills and exercises" (Čudina-Obradović, 2014, p. 87).

Linguistic-verbal intelligence is in the foreground in the teaching of the mother tongue, but other abilities, primarily logical, musical, and interpersonal intelligence, also come to the fore in language expression classes. Among the skills that pupils will desperately need in the near future is improving the skills

of proper written and verbal communication (Smith, 2019).<sup>36</sup> The best communicators are adorned with speaking skills. The ability to speak confidently and expressively should be instilled in pupils from an early age. Individuals who have difficulty with verbal expression can learn articulated pronunciation, speed, volume, gestures, and eye contact with the interlocutor through exercise. When it comes to written communication, teachers need to continuously insist on spelling literacy by informing pupils know how they can also use spell-checking technology. The difference between formal and informal writing is important, so pupils need to adopt and apply it in their communication from an early school age.

Much like learning, both reading and writing are active processes. During reading, the pupil controls his thoughts and behavior in the environment in which he reads, so this language activity requires a certain degree of self-regulation – planning, observing during reading, control, and self-reflection after reading. “When self-regulating the reading process, it is important that the reader has knowledge about himself as a reader, about the task or text that he is reading, and reading strategies, enough motivation to use that knowledge and to be able to adapt the context in which reading is taking place. The context should be adequate for reading processes, as well as stimulating for reading” (Nikčević-Milković & Brđanin, 2017, p. 107).<sup>37</sup> To encourage sensory culture and educate young readers, the teacher must be familiar with reading strategies and methodical procedures for teaching younger school-age pupils reading comprehension strategies (Bakota, 2020).

Mastering all forms of language expression contributes to the development of pupils’ communication competencies (Visinko, 2010), but the impression is gained that teachers in teaching insist mainly on respecting the standard language norm. Our methodologists warn against neglecting other functional forms of written expression. “Functional writing and speaking are not given as much attention in teaching practice as is necessary” (Nemeth-Jajić, 2018, p. 16).

Methodical models of teaching in the teaching of language expression include the selection of appropriate approaches and procedures (Budinski, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> A. Smith, *8 Innovative Ways To Prepare Pupils For An Unknown Future*, <https://assignmentshelp.com.sg/blog/ways-to-prepare-for-un-known-future/>, accessed 15 November 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Research confirms that good readers (skilled, so-called *strategic readers*) use different reading strategies and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of selected strategies (Ames, 1992). Some of the effective strategies include predicting the development of the text based on the title, connecting the content of the text with previous knowledge and personal experiences, imagining places, characters, and events, searching for the main idea of the text, changing reading speed, checking comprehension, and asking mentally complex questions. If they notice the inadequacy of a particular strategy, they adapt by choosing a new strategy. Poor readers, the so-called *poor comprehension readers* (Čudina-Obradović, 2014) use a small number of reading strategies, mostly always the same regardless of the reading conditions and the type of text (Nikčević-Milković & Brđanin, 2017).

It is in this component of the school subject that the communication direction comes to the fore (Bjedov, 2019).<sup>38</sup>

Among language activities and achievements, written expression is the most demanding, so it is developed through practice from the first grade. Visinko (2010) holds that, in teaching writing, the teacher should not start only from the reception level and teach a certain form of expression based on selected written patterns. It is possible to start the other way around, from the pupil's linguistic expression to the literary text, thus encouraging linguistic and literary abilities and skills. Pupil's creative texts can also be found in textbooks.

Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) believe that an individual can improve his expression using the model of self-regulated writing. In order to achieve certain literary goals, the pupil should include self-directed thoughts, feelings, actions, and context in three phases during: a) the preparation for writing, b) while writing, and c) immediately after the text is written.

**Table 2** *Socio-cognitive model of self-regulated writing* (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997; Source: Nikčević-Milković, 2014, p. 97.)

Phase before writing	goal setting task analysis self-motivational beliefs
Phase during writing	voluntary performance control (includes self-control and self-motivation)
Phase after writing	self-reflection (self-assessment of one's own reaction)

Gifted pupils can very successfully realize their creativity in the field of language expression. They like to search for new methods and procedures of writing, to create new words to improve their poetic or prose expression. Creative thinking is expressed in lexical games in which pupils play with word descriptions, colors, emotions, and the pace of expression, and the freedom of choice is also manifested in playing with punctuation. Activities can be realized individually or in pairs. Pupils, for example, can prepare a presentation of a literary text in PowerPoint or interesting and innovative verbal recitals. Recitation is an effective method for practicing oral expression. A pupil talented in reading and reciting should be allowed to choose a poem, a lyrical excerpt from a novel, or a dialogue from a play, which he will eloquently perform in front of other pupils in the class. Pupils in the classroom like to stage adapt a literary text by writing a screenplay themselves and preparing a dramatization of the text. The teacher only needs to supervise the process of creating a stage play and intervene if the need arises. Whenever possible, pupils should be given the opportunity to act

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<sup>38</sup> Bjedov underscores different types of teaching conversation (chain, discussion, star, network) and social forms of work and methodological procedures that encourage pupil-centered teaching, such as puzzles and interviews.

out a dramatic scene from a literary piece they are interpreting in the literature class.

If we expect pupils to be creative in the domain of written expression, for example, then they must practice writing essays at home as well. Homework is an integral part of the teaching process. Tasks encourage pupils to learn independently outside of school, in their own environment. They are a good opportunity to repeat the material heard in class.<sup>39</sup> Functional teaching of language expression requires a purposefulness of methods and forms of work; therefore, tasks are not an end in themselves, they are “a part of the learning process that reveals the subject content from a new perspective” (Musa et al., 2015, p. 123). The task is very necessary in the teaching of the mother tongue, especially at the initial level of primary education, in all areas of Croatian language teaching. It can also be used to test knowledge – the teacher determines whether the pupil has completed the task independently. In order to determine the grade, the teacher can ask an individual pupil an additional question (Kadum Bošnjak, 2010).

Creativity is expressed in an open, free, and democratic environment. The teacher should respect the ideas of his pupils, support them, and show how valuable and interesting they are. Children should be allowed to realize their ideas without hindrance, and then their creativity in oral and written language creation will come to full expression.

## LITERATURE TEACHING

In order to avoid formalism in teaching, the teaching of literary content must be based on functional methodological principles. Every methodical procedure, form, and method of work in the interpretation of literary texts must have its own logical justification. The teacher must know why he decided to

<sup>39</sup> The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb – Center for Educational Research and Development, in cooperation with the County Professional Council of Primary School Teachers of the City of Zagreb, conducted a survey in 2014 on the habits of fourth and eighth graders in Zagreb primary schools. 2,417 fourth-grade pupils (48% girls and 51.8% boys) were surveyed, who filled out a questionnaire about their own school experiences and approaches to learning. This report offered answers to the questions: *Do fourth graders learn, how much, and what? Do they write homework and when?* When asked how much they prepare for school per day when a test has not been announced, worrying results were obtained: more than a quarter of fourth graders do not prepare at all or take up to 30 minutes to prepare, and only 10% of pupils prepare for classes every day. Girls are at the forefront of this and are much more prepared for school than boys. It is even more disheartening to realize when fourth-graders are learning. Almost 30% of pupils claim that they study only before an announced oral examination or before a written examination, in which boys are in the lead. This is a very negative finding that testifies to the poor learning habits in Croatian education.

apply a certain procedure in literary communication.<sup>40</sup> By knowing his pupils, the teacher will, for example, choose the type of motivation in accordance with their cognitive abilities, but also with the nature of the literary-artistic text.<sup>41</sup>

An open methodological system is highly suitable for active involvement in the interpretation of younger school-age pupils. It is functional for pupils' creative involvement in experiencing and learning about the artistic world. Velički and Turza-Bogdan (2015) cite numerous examples and strategies in an open system, depending on the genre and type of literary text, the desired goals, and learning outcomes.

The teacher can prepare in different ways for the creative interpretation of reading literary texts and for encouraging pupils' reading activity (Težak & Gabelica, 2017). He can design notes and questions for reading that deviate from standard text analysis. Based on the text plot, it is possible to design a game for the interpretation of that title, whereby pupils are assigned the roles of characters from the text. It is also a good way to check readability. Informal procedures for motivating pupils to read assigned titles are equally effective, such as: quizzes, pantomimes – guessing titles, preparing interviews with the protagonist, etc. Teachers are assisted with creative textbooks and reading guides, as well as collaboration with public and city libraries that hold literary events regularly.<sup>42</sup>

To understand the message, it is necessary to connect the information in the right way and interpret the read statement. Stating that weaker readers achieve poorer results in school, and not only in mother tongue teaching, Peti-Stantić (2018) also referred to the dominance of content in digital form, jokingly stating that phones are getting smarter and children stupider.

When it comes to the application of digital technology in the teaching of Croatian language in the lower grades of primary school, teachers should certainly be educated as much as possible to be able to maintain the pace of continuous progress of digital technology (Vlahović & Lazzarich, 2018). In doing so, they do not have to shy away from the use of computers in teaching, but rather simply “observe it as another technology in society or as paper

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<sup>40</sup> Bežen et al. (2012) believe that the success of practical work in teaching depends on the functionality of the implemented methodical procedures. In their methodical practicum What, how, why in teaching the Croatian language, they offered answers to the basic determinants of teaching literature and language expression – what should be done in a certain teaching phase in order to encourage research activism in pupils.

<sup>41</sup> The following creative procedures are very effective: pupils' creative interventions in prose and poetry, discussion, staging of the text, cross-curricular connections in the field of language and art (music and art expression), etc. The open methodical system is especially suitable for encouraging indirect learning through play.

<sup>42</sup> One of the most significant events that supports and encourages the culture of reading is Book Night, which is held every year on the occasion of World Book Day, April 22.

and pencil, that is, as a teaching aid, without excessive expectations and fear” (Nemeth-Jajić, 2018, p. 141).<sup>43</sup> Children’s upbringing is closely linked to digitalization and social networks, the impact of which does not have to be negative and it is worth considering how this can be used to promote the unquestionable potential of a good book (Miletić & Vidović Schreiber, 2019; Visinko, 2019).<sup>44</sup> Assigned reading, for example, can be interpreted very successfully with the help of digital tools.

We will give an example of interpretation the assigned book *The Adventures of Arn and Đidi (Pustolovine Arna i Đidija)*, by the contemporary Croatian writer Nada Mihelčić, which can be read in the fourth grade (Čančar & Lazzarich, 2020). After experiential-cognitive motivation, localization of the text, and interpretive reading of a selected excerpt from the novel and sharing of impressions, the teacher can divide pupils into four groups by giving each group a different activity aimed at different segments of the work. The first group can deal with flip books.<sup>45</sup> The second group can create *interactive character maps*. Pupils should arrange sheets of paper of different lengths in a small notebook, sorting them by size.<sup>46</sup> The third group can work on a *narrative path* that will be created on a poster paper,<sup>47</sup> while the fourth group will be given a task called *story windows*.<sup>48</sup> Work on the computer follows in the last two teaching

<sup>43</sup> At the same time, the “traditional” media used in the mother tongue learning are increasingly neglected until the advent of multimedia devices. Ljubešić (2019) believes that it is possible to revitalize the old media and include them in the teaching of the mother tongue, especially according to the principle of updating access to local and intercultural topics.

<sup>44</sup> There are many online tools that teachers can use to create teaching materials because they are easily accessible and can be used by pupils and their parents. Mateljan et al. (2009) give a proposal of a tool based on forms that is very suitable for making worksheets that can be used to check the knowledge and understanding of teaching contents or reading of an assigned text: *Qedoc Quiz Maker. Hot potatoes* are an example of educational software that can be used online or offline. It is also free as well as the beforementioned tools and can be applied in all subjects – printed on paper or via an LCD projector (Milinović & Nemeth-Jajić, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> With the offered material for making a mobile booklet, pupils first join the papers and glue them in the shape of a notebook. On the first page, they draw the fields: time and place of the action, characters, plot, theme, and literary genre. Pupils then cut out the papers so that each field becomes a separate flip book.

<sup>46</sup> Pupils write a special category at the bottom of each sheet: the external description of the character, his speech, behavior, details and interesting facts about the character. They make interactive maps of the characters Arn and Đidi.

<sup>47</sup> Pupils draw a path on a piece of poster paper that represents the course of action in the story, incorporating events or concepts that remind them of a particular part of the story.

<sup>48</sup> This activity includes an interactive map containing six questions located on the inside of the triangle. Pupils answer questions by rolling the dice.

stages.<sup>49</sup> In the teaching stage of creative expression, pupils can create a comic in *ToonDoo* or *StoryboardThat*, contemporizing the episode or chapter from the novel they liked best.

During literary communication, various procedures should be included to encourage the pupils' individual approach to the literary text, such as the principle of regionality and communication teaching (Saksida, 2011).<sup>50</sup> Respecting aesthetic and developmental psychological criteria in teaching literature, regionality is an important element of literary education. Texts in the native idiom are close to little recipients and can positively influence their literary upbringing and education.<sup>51</sup> As teaching practice should be harmonized with contemporary requirements, the communication-methodical system is fully justified because it arises from the conceptual world of young people who spontaneously engage in dialogue with the text, actively participating in the process of creating meaning with their own understanding (Bakota, 2013; Bežen, 2008; Bjedov, 2019; Budinski, 2019; Nemeth-Jajić, 2018; Visinko, 2020).

## CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTION OF EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

We mentioned that integrated teaching is highly effective because it allows for a more thorough study of the educational topic. The Croatian language as a complex subject is ideal for connecting educational learning contents. Literature, language, media culture and language expression form a unique methodological field that enables the practical implementation of integrated teaching. For example, to learn and practice a certain type of word, it is good to use a literary text as a starting point, because that is how the principle of functionality comes to the fore. When learning adjectives, the teacher can choose

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<sup>49</sup> In the synthesis, the pupils repeat the most important elements from the novel *The Adventures of Arn and Didi*. They stay in groups to work in the *Hot potatoes* program. Each group is given different tasks related to repeating the most important elements from a children's novel. One group may complete a crossword puzzle in the *JCross* tool, another may use the *JQuiz* tool, answering questions by selecting one or more correct answers. Pupils can also fill in the blanks in search of answers in the *JCloze* tool, and can form sentences in the *JMix* tool from the given words.

<sup>50</sup> In relation to traditional literature teaching (with a given list of texts, the central role of teachers as transmitters of knowledge and students who accept data on literature provided by the subject curriculum), communication teaching actively involves students in the interpretation of a literary work. An individual approach to work comes to the fore in communication teaching. During the interpretation, students participate in the process of creating meaning, expressing their own impressions and insights by establishing a dialogue with a literary template.

<sup>51</sup> In this context, the reception of the regional literature component in primary school textbooks should be considered. Majdenić (2019) studied the way in which the mutual conditions of the production of texts, their reception, and the associated literary-cultural contextualization are recognized.

a poem that the pupils have not read and prepare a template of verses without adjectives, and pupils have the task of filling in the blanks in the verses with appropriate words. In this way, pupils learn through play (Lazzarich, 2017).

In order to gain a more complete view of the work content, pupils can look at the same topic or concept through different subjects. In this way, learning gains in dynamism. However, although the importance of cross-curricular connections between educational content and the active role of pupils is emphasized in the modern school, it seems that even today, in many schools, the declarative knowledge of pupils remains in the foreground. The research by Aladrović Slovaček (2012) shows that integration and correlation in the teaching of the Croatian language are insufficiently used and that the declarative knowledge of pupils is greater than the procedural one. Cross-curricular connection of the contents of different subject areas contributes to the economy and dynamism of teaching and functionally integrates the contents of different subjects (Vrkić Dimić & Vidić, 2015). Educational contents from language and literature can harmoniously correlate with related artistic fields – music and painting, but also with the contents of other subjects.

When it comes to integrated teaching, we will provide two practical examples of cross-curricular correlation. In the third grade, two teaching units from the subject Music can be connected in two hours: singing the song *Spring at Heart (Proljeće u srcu)* by Marija Matanović and the Croatian Language: creative writing – writing a short composition with encouragement (Jović, 2019). The correlation begins with the Music class where pupils will get acquainted with Marija Matanović's song *Spring at Heart*.<sup>52</sup> This is followed by the Croatian language class. In order to encourage pupils to think about the coming season, the teacher reads the poem by Nada Iveljić *Recipe for a Delicious Spring Day (Recept za ukusan proljetni dan)* from the textbook *Škrinjica slova i riječi 3*,<sup>53</sup> and announces the writing of a short composition on Spring in my region. Before the pupils start writing the composition, the teacher provides them with basic instructions on the work and duration of this activity (40 minutes). If

<sup>52</sup> In the introductory part, the teacher can organize a game of associations in which the pupils will guess the term “spring.” After providing the correct answer, the topic is announced – the learning of a new song by the composer Marija Matanović called *Spring at Heart*. The teacher first reads the text aloud and interprets the poem briefly with the pupils. He then demonstrates the song musically with instrumental accompaniment. The pupils first adopt the song by repeating one verse after the teacher – the echo game. They then sing the song in its entirety several times to make it well adopted and memorized. In the final part of the lesson, pupils can listen to a composition by Camille Saint Saens, a march from the *Animal Carnival* symphony, and determine the rhythm and tempo of the composition.

<sup>53</sup> After sharing the impressions and a short interpretation of the text, we can talk about the characteristics of spring that pupils had previously adopted in the Nature and Society class, which will be useful in the preparation of their written composition.

they manage to finish their work, pupils can read their composition, and if they have not finished writing, they can complete it at home.

The following example relates to linking content from Mathematics and the mother tongue.<sup>54</sup> Correlation with literature is particularly effective.<sup>55</sup> In the fourth grade, pupils read the children's novel *Emil and Detectives* by the German writer Erich Kästner, so the contents of literature and mathematics can be combined in the Croatian language class (Jović, 2019). The contents from the Croatian language (children's novel, novel features) and Mathematics (circumference of a triangle, circumference of a square and a rectangle, area of a square and a rectangle, and units of area measurement) are thematically connected. The introductory part of the lesson<sup>56</sup> is followed by a conversation about the book and the main character Emil. The teacher focuses on the introductory part of the novel and uses a projector with a picture showing the graphic scheme of the novel's composition. By analyzing the episode in which Emil runs out of money on the train, the pupils take on the role of a detective in solving several math problems.<sup>57</sup> If the teacher does not manage to carry out these activities in 45 minutes, this linguistic-mathematical correlation can be extended to two hours.

These learning strategies and forms of teaching complement and permeate each other. Whether we are talking about active learning, integrated, collaborative, problem-based, or self-regulated learning, these strategies are not isolated activities. For class dynamics it is good to alternate different methods and forms of work. During the revision of the material, pupils solve tasks in writing and

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<sup>54</sup> Research confirms that a cross-curricular approach increases the motivation for processing mathematical content, reduces the level of stress during learning, and has a positive impact on the level of acquisition of knowledge and skills in Mathematics (Dražić & Jurašić, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> Texts that can be used in the teaching of Mathematics are divided into three categories: texts in which mathematics appears as part of a whole, short texts that are entirely mathematical topics, and extensive texts that deal entirely with mathematics. In addition to such texts, texts that do not have mathematical content can also be used to create interesting tasks for pupils (Beckmann, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> The introductory part of the lesson is dedicated to the game of musical chairs. Chairs are placed in a circle, and there are not enough of them for all the pupils in the class. The teacher plays an audio recording of an excerpt from the novel *Emil and the Detectives* as the pupils walk around the classroom at a slow pace. The moment the teacher randomly stops the music, the pupils must take their place as soon as possible. The pupil who is left without a chair drops out of the game, and the number of chairs decreases. The game lasts until the last pupils is left sitting alone in a chair.

<sup>57</sup> For example, to discover the exit through which Emil can escape the man with a hat, pupils must accurately calculate the perimeter of the front door (perimeter of a rectangle). To find out which hotel the target is in, they need to calculate the area of the hotel (area of a rectangle). To find the stolen banknotes, the pupils must select the correct elevator button in the shape of a triangle (triangle circumference), etc. The teacher writes the correct information on the board, and the pupils copy the text in their notebooks.

answer questions orally. They can exercise alone or in pairs. Pupils should be encouraged to become actively involved in the interpretation of literary texts or the processing of language content, using their own cognitive abilities and logical thinking to solve problems. It is very important that the teacher in the Croatian language class enables situations in which pupils become aware of their learning process and make decisions about how they will achieve the learning goals (Holcar Brauner et al., 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Learning is a dynamic process that depends on the environment, emotions, and motivation. Pupil-centered teaching involves the individualization of work. Individuality in teaching is most pronounced in working with pupils who show interest in a particular educational area, but the real challenge lies in pupils who show a lack of interest in work and learning. Finding functional methods of work and methodical procedures that will encourage pupils to work is a real challenge for every teacher. Lack of interest in the educational area of the mother tongue combined with an inappropriate approach to teaching can result in the loss of pupils' motivation to learn and their school failure. Successful learning is partly influenced by external factors, but the key element is quality teaching. Therefore, formalism in teaching should be avoided because the goals and learning outcomes should always be focused on the pupil's applied knowledge. Teachers' primary role in mother tongue teaching is to create a positive and stimulating atmosphere and to find the most effective ways to encourage pupils to read and express themselves linguistically.

In addition to reflecting on the relationship between the participants in this paper, we discussed functional strategies and forms of learning and creative teaching methods. Modern teaching focuses on knowledge that includes understanding, skills, and improving upon the already acquired knowledge, which is achieved through active learning. In addition to the active role of pupils, modern approaches to teaching require a high degree of independence in learning. In this context, collaborative, self-regulated, and exploratory learning experiences its affirmation.

Since one of the basic goals of teaching the Croatian language in primary school is the development of language-communication competence and functional literacy, teachers should teach language content in an interesting and creative way. In addition to adopting language rules and legality, pupils can use this approach to enhance their own creative potential. "In order to achieve creativity in language teaching, it is necessary to encourage it using interesting ways and sources of teaching, but also to do so in an unconventional and original way that will require pupils to be open-minded, curious, and critical-thinking" (Aladrović Slovaček et al. 2017, p.25). Without quality teaching, learning will

not be successful, so teachers should strive for functional forms of teaching, rather than the instrumentalization of learning aimed at narrowly understood educational goals.

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