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LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND CROATIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Summary - *This paper was written as part of the project "English in Croatia" and deals with the place of English listening comprehension in total competence. It is shown that in primary school girls are better at this component than boys, whereas in secondary school the sex of pupils makes no difference in this respect. The intensity of English - learning in primary school is related to achievement in listening comprehension, but is not decisive. In secondary school sample no correlation has been found between the intensity of learning and achievement in this component of the test. Length of learning has also been found to be non-significantly related with achievement in listening comprehension. City pupils turn out to be more successful than pupils from small towns in this component of the test. In her discussion of results the author puts special emphasis on the role of exposure to English in out-of-school everyday life.*

Key words*: CEFR, competence, English, listening comprehension*

Although listening comprehension is the most often used language skill, having a key role in communication and is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for the development of other language skills, it has been somewhat neglected in glottodidactic studies. It was believed that this skill should not be taught, seeing that all pupils can listen using their experience in their first language. Contemporary research (e.g. Anderson 1985; Rubin 1994; Field 2000), however, has shown that listening comprehension is a very complex language skill and the approach to its teaching should be based on the understanding of the process under consideration. Like the other receptive skills, such as reading, listening is based on very complex processes of understanding. In a foreign language, listening is often a more demanding language skill than in the mother tongue and is often considered to be qualitatively different. As a result of his limited knowledge of the foreign language, the pupil has to pay conscious attention to the linguistic and

other information on all linguistic levels. A common starting point in the contemporary literature is Anderson's (1985) three-part model of information processing and understanding. According to this model, understanding is reached through three steps mutually linked within a linear framework (perception -grammatical analysis - usage). Some others (e.g. Lynch, 2002), however, subscribe to the view that understanding involves processing within a parallel-distribution framework. The proponents of yet another approach (e.g., Barsalou, 1999) point to the drawbacks of the above approaches and look at listening from the point of view of evolution, believing that the purpose of understanding is preparation for real language activity, rather than the storage of information. During the complex process of understanding, the listener has to process the input to which he is exposed on the phonological and phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. On each of these levels problems causing difficulties in understanding are possible, including, notably, interference of the mother tongue and native culture. Being a mental process not directly accessible to direct observation, the process of listening comprehension represents an extremely difficult subject-matter of research. Research methods thus mainly rely on self-reports. The studies carried out so far (e.g., Goh, 1997; Ros, 1997) suggest that the strategies of processing during listening are related to the level of linguistic competence.

There are a number of factors affecting the process of information processing during listening, and these are considered to be important for listening in both the first and the foreign language. The ones most commonly dealt with in the literature are: the text, speaker, task, listener, and process. Lynch (1991) stressed the importance of the intrinsic cognitive complexity of the text used for listening comprehension in a foreign language. Authors who focus on the listener factor (Jensen and Hansen, 1995) point out that apart from the capability of phonological decoding, a specially important role is played by the listener's acquaintance with the topic.

Studies on listening comprehension have also been aimed at establishing whether listening comprehension as a monolithic or heterogeneous ability. Currently the most widely accepted view is that held by Rost (1990), according to which listening involves three hierarchically organized groups of sub-skills (e.g., decoding, inference, interpretation) linked with perception, interpretation and enacting. A great deal of attention is also devoted to the strategies of listening. Most of the time, metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies of listening are identified. Using metacognitive strategies, the listener plans and regulates the process of listening. By means of cognitive strategies, he makes inferences on the content of a given part of the message based on the context. Social and affective strategies are those by which the listener tries to facilitate the processing by relying on the help of others or by encouraging himself in various ways. A series of works during the late 1990s has led to some very important insights. Thus Goh (197) established the correlation of achievement in listening with the conscious and effective use of listening strategies, and Vandergrift (1997) showed that the

increase in total language competence goes along with the use of metacognitive strategies. The testing of listening comprehension is also a topic commonly dealt with by numerous researchers. This extremely complex language skill requires the control of numerous variables, and there are also a lot of factors influencing the pupil's performance on the listening test. Brindley (1998a) gives an outstanding survey of these factors. The particularly important ones include the following: the characteristics of the input (e.g., the rate of speech, the amount of redundancy), the characteristics of the task (e.g., the clarity of the instructions, contextualisation) and the learner features, such as motivation and previous knowledge. Examining the results of a listening test and pupils' retrospection, Wu (1998) established that the linguistic processing is basic for foreign language learners, because it makes possible the activation of non-linguistic processing. Tsui and Fullilove (1998) studied foreign language learners with varied levels of achievement in listening and came to the conclusion that learners differ among themselves by the extent to which they employ the bottom-up or, respectively, top-down strategies. Thanks to the studies mentioned above, as well as to many others, today it is widely believed that the processing which takes place at the linguistic level matters more than the strategic behaviour of the listener for successful understanding. However, it is no longer questionable that listening comprehension in a foreign language is an extremely complex multi-dimensional language skill and activity. It is expected that with the further development of new technologies, the methodology of research into listening comprehension in a foreign language will make great progress.

The aims and methods of research

The research presented in the present paper was above all aimed at establishing the level of achievement in the language skill of listening comprehension with Croatian learners of English as a foreign language at the end of primary and secondary education, as well as to establish the place of this language skill in their total competence.[1] In order for the achievement in listening comprehension to be understood and described as insightfully as possible, we wanted to establish which other relevant variables it is related to. We were particularly interested in the correlation of success in listening with the sex, length and intensity of English learning, knowledge of other foreign languages, the use of the Internet, and the place of residence (city *vs.* small town). The subjects were 1414 eight-form primary- school pupils and 656 forth-form secondary-school pupils. The number of subjects in individual analyses varies, depending on the number of subjects involved at particular stages of testing. The primary-school test measuring the achievement in the listening comprehension skill (abbreviated as 'listen') consisted of two communication tasks at the level of A2, which is the expected level defined by the Croatian curriculum (Vican and Milanović Litre, 2006). In the first

[1] The research was done within the framework of the scientific project *English in Croatia.*

task the subjects did a multiple-choice test measuring their understanding of a dialogue in which the speakers talk about a picture. In the second multiple-choice task, the subjects had to show their understanding of ten different short dialogues. The maximum overall score on the listening test was 20. The secondary-school test consisted of 16 multiple-choice questions based on a lengthy dialogue. Each question was answered after listening to the corresponding excerpt. The maximum score on the test was 16.

Results and discussion

The achievement of Croatian pupils in English on the level of listening comprehension at the end of primary and secondary education is visible from the results of 'listen' tests in Figure (1).

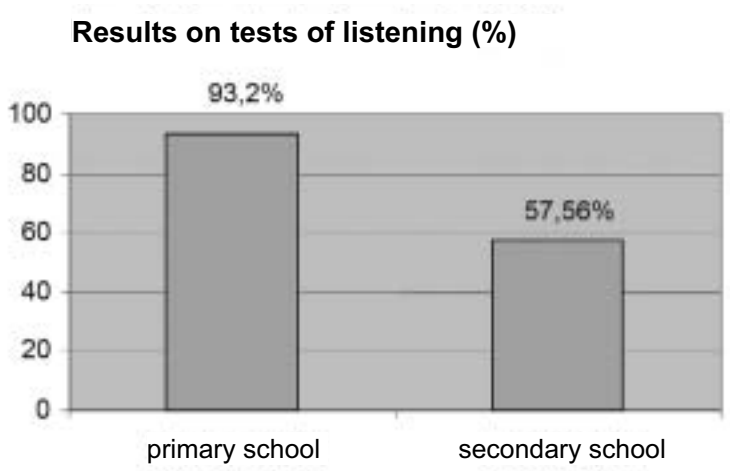

Figure 1: Results on tests of listening with primary- and secondary-school pupils

As follows from Figure 1, the listening comprehension skill with primary-school pupils is at a higher level than the expected one (A2), proscribed by the national curriculum. The secondary-school subjects, however, have reached but not exceeded the expected level of B1. A recent comparative study on the communicative competence of Croatian and Hungarian primary-school pupils based on this test (Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov and Otto, forthcoming) shows a statistically significant difference in the listening skill in favour of Croatian pupils ($t = `2.809$, $p < .005$). The presence of English in every-day life in Croatia (films, music, the Internet and the like) leads to an enormous degree of exposure of Croatian pupils to this language, especially with younger population. We assume that this is the reason why the listening - comprehension ability in the initial stages of learning develops faster than other linguistic skills. It is also assumed that in later stages, exposure to the language itself is not sufficient for a rapid progress, but probably

has a favourable impact on the development of this skill. Of course, the quality of teaching certainly plays an important role, too. Almost all recent teaching materials are accompanied by audio recordings, and an increasing number of materials encourage systematic work on the development of listening comprehension. What really accounts for the outstanding results of primary-school pupils and the satisfactory results of secondary-school learners should be found out by a separate piece of research, which would adequately include the measurement of out-of-school exposure to English and the quality of teaching.

The rest of the data analysis is aimed at showing the correlation between the overall achievement on the communication tests (which are discussed in more detail in the paper on the methodology of research in this issue) and the 'listen' test. The coefficients of correlation between these results have been worked out (Table 1). The statistical analysis of this data, however, entails certain difficulties concerning the partial interrelation of results, as the results in this test in about one quarter form the overall result in the test. Thus in the interpretation of the data it must be taken into account that the statistical correlation in such cases is in reality overrated. Taking into consideration the nature of these somewhat overrated correlations the following can be established: for primary schools this correlation is $r = 0.63$ ($p < 0.05$) and it represents significant real correlation between the overall result and the result of the 'listen' test. This means that the increase in the score on the test goes along with the increase in the overall score and vice versa. In other words, a poorer score on the test goes along with a poorer overall score. This interpretation clearly shows the role of the 'listen' test in the overall result. Therefore we worked out the correlation between the test and the entire task excluding the 'listen' test. As follows from Table 1, this correlation is $r = 0.54$ ($p<0.05$), and respectively, $r = 0.59$ ($p< 0.05$). However, this interpretation would also be oversimplified if we did not take into account yet another consideration, that is, the small number of subjects who were tested using the 'oral' -test (for details on 'oral' test see M. Medved Krajnović this issue). As there were only 154 of them, the listening component can be safely observed only in terms of its correlation with two components: writing and reading, with the sufficient number of subjects ($N = 1110$). By contrast, conclusions about the correlation of listening with all the other components together can be based only on a small number of subjects ($N = 154$). Still, it is interesting to note that the correlations range between 0.5 and 0.6 and in any case represent significant and real relations. This, after all, has been expected, as all of them measure competence in the English language.

Table 1 also shows that the correlations applying to primary schools also apply to secondary schools, except that those for the secondary schools are somewhat lower, bordering on weak and real correlation, but still significant. The small number of subjects stands out even more for secondary schools when the 'oral' component is included. In short, as shown in Table 1, listening comprehension represents an important aspect of competence in the English language on both levels observed and, generally speaking, it is to be expected that the level of de-

velopment of this skill is correlated with the competence levels in the remaining three areas of linguistic and communicative performance (speaking, reading, listening).

Table 1: Correlation of the results of the 'listen' test with the overall results on tests and overall result without the test

		overall result (writing, reading, listening)	overall result (writing, reading) without listening	overall result (writing , reading, speaking) without listening
'listen' PRIM.	Pearson Correlation r N	0,63* 1110	0,54* 1110	0,59* 154
'listen' SEC.	Pearson Correlation r N	0,51* 409	0,38* 409	0,49* 56

*p<,05

After establishing the general role of the listening comprehension skill in English with our subjects, we proceeded with establishing the differences between the groups with respect to the learner's sex, intensity and length of learning, and the use of the Internet. For each of these factors or variables we wanted to establish in what way and to what extent it is important for success in English learning.

The differences according to the **sex** in the results of the 'listen' sub - test were looked at separately for primary and secondary school. These are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences between girls and boys in success on the 'listen' test

	sex	N	Mean	SD	t	p
'listen' (primary school)	m f	656 748	18,51 18,76	2,47 2,18	-2,00	<.05
'listen' (secondary school)	m f	285 361	9,02 9,53	4,46 4,22	-1,48	>.05

The data for the primary-school pupils show a significant difference ($t = 2.00$, $p<0.05$) between girls and boys in the results for the 'listen' component. The arithmetic mean values $M_m = 18.51$ and $M_f = 18.76$ lead to the conclusion that girls are somewhat better. This difference is not great, but can be considered as significant. This ties in with the findings of a comparative study involving Hungarian primary-school pupils (Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov and Otto, forthcoming), in which, by contrast with the Hungarian results, differences were

established in listening comprehension in favour of girls. As the level of difficulty of the task, the text and speaker characteristics were the same, it is assumed that the differences can be accounted for by the characteristics of the pupils-listeners. We have been led to this conclusion by the differences in the affective profile: the girls had a more positive profile for English learning (for more details on the affective aspects see J. Mihaljević Djigunović this issue).

It is interesting to note that with the population of secondary - school pupils there is no significant difference in the 'listening' component with respect to sex. This is how the 'listen' component differs from the other components involved. (see Geld and Stanojević; Mihaljević Djigunović; Zergollern – Miletić this issue). This leads to the conclusion that the significant difference in success in listening comprehension between girls and boys which was found for primary school at the level of secondary school is not to be expected. A possible explanation of this finding is that at higher levels of learning the role of the individual factors affecting the processing of information during listening is changed, so the significance of differences in the learner's affective profile decreases.

The next parameter which we looked at in connection with success in the 'listen' component was the **intensity** of English learning at school. The differences between pupils who had more English classes per week and those who had less are shown in Table 3 for primary school and in Table 4 for secondary school. For primary school only two extreme groups were taken into consideration: those who had four or more hours of English per week and those who had two hours or less. The majority of those who had three hours had to be taken out of account because of the differences in the group size, which would not allow for a fair comparison. In secondary schools three groups were observed: pupils who had two, three and four hours of English per week.

Table 3: Differences in success on the 'listen' test with respect to the intensity of learning (primary schools)

	hours per week	N	Mean	SD	t	p
'listen'	2 or less 4 or more	63 30	19,24 18,80	1,80 2,54	,96	> ,05

As follows from Table 4, on the face of it, for secondary schools the intensity of learning seems to be important for success in the 'listen' component. The three groups observed, on the whole, differ among themselves in achievement in listening comprehension: $F = 4.75$ ($p< 0.05$). However, after a post-hoc Scheffe test, no real differences were shown among the groups. The arithmetic mean values show that those who had two hours per week are indeed not as good as those with three or four hours, but this difference was not sufficient for the post-hoc test to be significant.

Table 4: Differences in success on the 'listen test with respect to the intensity of learning (secondary schools)

	hours per week	N	arithmetical mean values Scheffe (Alpha = ,05)			F	p
'listen'	2 hours 3 hours 4 hours	182 377 68	8,70 9,82 9,87			4,75	< ,05

We assumed that the intensity of English classes does not play a decisive role in competence at the level of the listening skill, because of the great out-of-school exposure to English, which plays a greater role than classes, at least at lower levels of learning.

The next factor which was observed in connection with success in listening comprehension was the **use of the Internet**, which is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Differences among groups in the 'listen' component with respect to the use of the Internet

Using the Internet		N	arithm. mean values - homog. test: Scheffe (Alpha = .05)		F	p
PRIM.	no	452	17,97	18,82 19,15	34,66	<,05
	rarely	408				
	often	489				
SEC.	no	82	8,27	9,6 10,5	14,09	<,05
	rarely	193				
	often	274				

As follows from the above table, there is a difference between those subjects who use the Internet and those who do not, both in primary and secondary schools. As expected, those who do not use it are not as good in listening comprehension as those who do. However, the interpretation of these data requires caution, as the real background of such differences is not known. So, for example, the answer may lie in a lower social and economic status of pupils who do not have access to the Internet, which then implies fewer chances of learning English outside school in any form. Thus attributing the causes of the difference at hand should be left for a separate experimental study. At this point we shall stay content with a conclusion about a general significant correlation of the use of the Internet and achievement in English. The correlation between the overall **length of English learning** (expressed in years) and success in listening comprehension was established by means of the Pearson correlation test. For primary schools the correlation was $r = 0.18$ ($p < 0.05$), as shown in Table 6:

Table 6: Correlation of the length of learning with success in the 'listen' component

Level of Education	N	Pearson r
primary schools	1330	,10*
secondary schools	552	,18*

*p<,05

It is interesting to note that for both primary and secondary schools the correlation found for 'listen' is significant, but very weak, which leads to the conclusion that the length of learning is not particularly important for achievement in this component. In other words, over time, one can expect pupils to reach a certain plateau in the development of this skill, at which point further learning will not lead to significant progress in this area.

As for the difference between pupils from **cities** and those from **small towns** concerning achievement in the 'listen' component, it was established by the t-test only for primary school and is shown in Table 7:

Table 7: Difference between urban and rural pupils in success in the 'listen' component (primary schools)

urban-rural	N	Mean	SD	t	p
urban	802	18,78	2,24	2,59	< ,05
rural	605	18,46	2,40		

The results of the analysis ($t = 1.48$; $p < 0.05$) show that pupils from urban schools are somewhat better in the component under consideration.

As concerns the differences between **primary** and **secondary** schools with respect to achievement in listening and understanding, it is hardly possible to make any statistical conclusion, as the tests employed in the research were of different types and it would not be legitimate to make any direct comparisons between their results. Therefore no direct conclusions can be made about progress in listening comprehension in secondary school as opposed to primary school. Generalizations in this sense can thus be summarized along the lines of the above conclusion about the overall length of learning: it does not significantly affect the general success in this component.

Conclusion

Listening comprehension represents an important aspect of competence in the English language, and, generally speaking, it can be said that the development of this skill is correlated with the levels of competence on the remaining three areas covered by the present project research. It has been found that primary

school girls are somewhat better than boys in this component, whereas for secondary schools there are no differences in this respect. As for the intensity of English learning at school, it can be observed that at the level of primary schools it correlates with achievement in the understanding of what has been heard, but is not decisive in this sense, whereas for secondary schools no correlation has been found between the intensity of learning and success in this test component. The length of learning has also proved to slightly correlate with success in listening comprehension. Generally speaking, pupils from cities turn out to be better at listening comprehension than those from small towns.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our results have shown that Croatian learners of English as a foreign language are very successful in the listening comprehension of English discourse. This particularly applies to eight-form pupils of primary school, whose results are above those proscribed by the national curriculum. If their success is related to the great exposure to the English language in everyday life in Croatia, it turns out that this exposure has a particularly great impact at lower levels of learning (A2). By contrast, its direct influence is reduced at a higher level (B1), when the process of listening comprehension becomes more complex due to greater demands on the learner-listener and the related cognitive complexity of the tasks. Apart from the necessary work on raising the level of language competence to facilitate the process of listening, what should also be done is to encourage pupils to make conscious use of listening strategies, particularly the metacognitive ones.

It would be very interesting if future research took two directions. On the one hand, it would be extremely important to gather some reliable data on out-of-school exposure to the English language. Such data could throw light on the real nature of the correlation of exposure to English with achievement in listening comprehension. On the other hand, the analysis of the process of listening itself, e.g., through retrospective reports on the strategies of listening, could reveal the real nature of the listening process. It is only when the process of listening and the factors influencing it at different levels of learning are understood, that significant improvements in teaching this important language skill will be made.

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