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PREGLEDNI

UDK: 81'243-053.4(497.5)

Primljen: 12. 4. 2024.

RAD

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22210/strjez/53-1/2>

Prihvaćen: 24. 6. 2024.

Early language learning in Croatia: Exploring foreign language representation and participation trends in kindergartens (2008/09 – 2022/23)

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This paper examines early language learning (ELL) in Croatia, drawing context from broader European policies, recommendations, and research. It explores Croatia's tradition, research, and practices in ELL within early childhood education and care institutions. The core analysis focuses on data from 2008 to 2023, examining foreign language programs in Croatian kindergartens (KGs). This includes the number of KGs offering programs, the languages available, and children's participation. The research reveals a growing interest in early language exposure throughout Croatia. By analyzing trends over 14 years, the paper establishes how program offerings and participation rates have evolved. These findings offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers in the field of ELL. Additionally, the research discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing effective early language learning programs in Croatia.

Keywords: *Croatia, Early Language Learning (ELL), participation rates, trends*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2002, the European Council called for further action in terms of improving the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age. In the ensuing Action Plan 2004–2006, titled Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity (Commission of the European Communities, 2003), the intent was to expand and develop the idea of early learning of one or more foreign or additional languages in each of the EU member states addressing lifelong language learning, better language teaching, and the building of a language-friendly environment. Early language learning (ELL) is defined as systematic awareness-raising or exposure to more than one language taking place in an early childhood education and care setting in a pre-primary school context (European Commission, 2011). It has continued to be a priority, as reflected in European policy recommendations that emphasize the importance of multilingualism and intercultural understanding (European Commission, 2011). In addition, the Policy Handbook (European Commission, 2011) states that the reason for a more significant demand for ELL is parents' understanding of how important it is for their children to acquire languages other than their mother tongue with respect to their children's future social and working lives. Therefore, it is no surprise that the main factor which has significantly impacted the trend of offering foreign languages in early childhood institutions is parental interest (Pokrivčáková, 2020), manifested as enthusiasm (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023), but also as pressure (Erk et al., 2022).

The growing interest in introducing foreign languages (FL) at a young age is reflected in a study by Enever (2011). According to this report, 13 European countries had been identified as mandating FL instruction to begin by age seven or even earlier. Croatia has been a leader in this movement, as in 2003, Croatian primary schools implemented a policy requiring foreign language instruction beginning in the first grade. Additionally, in response to the previously mentioned parental pressure and demand, many Croatian kindergartens also began offering foreign language programs. These initiatives, however, often involved outsourced language schools or early childhood education and care teachers with some knowledge of the target language delivering short, bi-weekly courses (Andraka & Bilić Štefan, 2015). This approach exposed a critical gap in the national education system: a structured program for training early childhood educators specifically in the field of ELL. It was only recently, in 2022, that a program of study in

early childhood and care and the English language¹ was approved by the Croatian Ministry of Education.

The continuation of this paper gives an overview of relevant European policies, recommendations, and research on ELL. The focus on Croatia will include its tradition, research, and practices in ELL within KGs. Following this context, the paper presents data on ELL programs offered in Croatian KGs from 2008 to 2023. This data is analyzed to understand how these programs have been implemented over time, focusing on the number of KGs offering programs, the languages available, and children's participation. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings.

2. POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Presidency Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (European Council, 2002) emphasized the importance of “teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” (p. 20). This initiative, known as the MT+2 policy, reflects the European Union's (EU's) vision of a unified and culturally aware Europe. By fostering multilingualism, the EU aims to enhance mobility and intercultural understanding amongst its citizens. Ján Figel, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, further reinforced this viewpoint as follows: “In an enlarged and multilingual Europe, learning foreign languages from a very young age allows us to discover other cultures and better prepare for occupational mobility” (European Commission, 2005). The Action Plan 2004–2006 (Commission of the European Communities, 2003) stated its intent to promote the development of the early learning of one or more foreign or additional languages in each of the EU member states. According to the New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (European Commission, 2005), early foreign language learning is identified as an important area of action. However, this document cautions that the advantages of ELL only accrue where teachers are trained specifically to teach languages to very young children, where class sizes are small enough, where appropriate training materials are available, and where enough curriculum time is devoted to languages. Edelenbos et al. (2006), further emphasize that the relevance of children's enjoyment, their openness towards other languages and cultures, and their linguistic development is not to be left to chance.

¹ The graduate program Early Childhood and Preschool Education: English Language Teaching was accredited in 2022 and is being carried out by the University of Zagreb Faculty of Teacher Education.

Along with policy documents, the EU provides recommendations for effective ELL practices. In 2006, the European Commission published a report (Edelenbos et al., 2006) synthesizing the most important research-based pedagogical principles of teaching languages to very young learners. These principles are further elaborated in the Policy Handbook - Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level: Making It Efficient and Sustainable, which emphasizes the creation of a stimulating environment where children engage with languages through games and everyday activities (European Commission, 2011). Furthermore, the Policy Handbook advocates for natural language exposure in meaningful and authentic settings, steering away from overly formal learning approaches. Aligning with principles of early childhood development, the EU promotes a play-based approach, as highlighted by UNICEF (2018). Authentic materials, such as nursery rhymes, songs, stories, and fairytales, are highly encouraged for their engaging and developmentally appropriate qualities (Lugossy, 2007; Bland, 2013). Additionally, the EU supports the use of appropriate teaching methods such as Task-Based Learning (TBL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Total Physical Response (TPR) (Bland, 2015; Er, 2013).

For effective ELL, well-qualified early childhood educators are crucial. The Council of the EU and the European Commission in their Education & Training 2010 report (2004) advocate for measures that enhance the attractiveness of this profession, aiming to attract and retain talented individuals. Both the EU and the OECD (2006) emphasize the importance of qualifications, highlighting strong language competence and appropriate teaching methodologies for early childhood educators. This recognition extends to investment in early childhood professionals, as they are considered key to delivering high-quality early childhood education and care (OECD, 2006; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2009).

The above-mentioned policies and recommendations have been informed by research which has indicated the benefit of early exposure to foreign languages. Based on such research, Brumen et al. (2017) list some relevant findings when comparing children who have learnt a foreign language in comparison to those who have not. According to the research, children who have learnt a foreign language, because of their natural language learning ability, excel in native-like pronunciation (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall 2005; Uylings 2006) and show greater cognitive ability in areas of mental flexibility, creativity, and divergent thinking (Stewart, 2005). Also, children who have learnt a foreign language reinforce vocabulary and con-

cepts already known in the first language (King & Mackey 2007). Alexiou (2020) asserts that “the advantages of learning languages early do not relate to merely language learning and future success but to other pedagogical and cognitive skills that accompany it” (p. 66). For instance, affective aspects such as increase of motivation and self-confidence, positive attitudes to other languages, and a sense of pride can be achieved (Wu, 2003; Brumen et al., 2017; Ioannou-Georgiou, 2015; Chen et al., 2020). Socio-cultural benefits, such as the development of children’s awareness of cultural diversity, greater multilingual and intercultural awareness, an increase in socialization, have also been observed (Brumen et al., 2017; Alexiou & Kokla, 2019). Finally, various forms of cognitive development, such as improving strategies and language awareness, as well as gaining greater mental flexibility, creativity, and divergent thinking (Lourenço & Andrade, 2015; Brumen et al., 2017; Alexiou & Kokla, 2019), are cultivated and can facilitate and impact positively on EFL.

Furthermore, according to Muñoz (2003), FL proficiency can only be achieved if children absorb a foreign language through regular input and exposure. Examples of this are integrative (pre-school) FL instruction programs (Genesee, 1994; Coyle et al., 2010), which focus on attaining the language as a medium for communication and understanding the content matter in everyday pre-school activities (Kersten et al., 2010), taught by FL teachers who have mastered the language well.

3. ELL IN CROATIA – FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

The previous section highlighted the EU’s policies and recommendations and research on ELL. Croatia, as a member state of the EU, reflects these policy directives in its National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Pre-school Education (Ministry of Science and Education, 2014). The curriculum aligns with EU recommendations, encouraging a stimulating environment and play-based learning for language acquisition. It positions foreign language learning not just as a skill, but as a tool for communication and fostering cultural awareness in young learners:

Children of early and preschool age learn a foreign language in a stimulating language context, through play and other activities that are meaningful to them. The most appropriate approach for this is the situational approach to learning, which allows the child to become familiar with, understand, and use the foreign language

meaningfully in a variety of activities and situations. The development of this competence is also enhanced by encouraging intercultural understanding and communication between children and other subjects in the ECEC institution, as well as with those outside it. (MZOS, 2015)²

The Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (Ministry of Science and Education, 2017) emphasizes the necessity of acquiring a foreign language from the earliest age, i.e., early childhood and preschool age. However, even at the European level, despite the policy push, the European Commission (2011) acknowledged a lack of standardized approaches and achievement measures across member states. Thus, ELL implementation varies greatly between regions. This, for instance, creates a challenge when a curriculum is developed for early childhood foreign language educators. In order to address such issues, three factors should be considered: local traditions of early foreign language learning, an overview of research in the field, and the present-day situation (Cindrić & Mikulec, 2022). The following sub-section will present the tradition and research findings of early foreign language learning in Croatia, while the present-day situation, i.e., actual practice, will be addressed as part of the research.

3.1. The beginnings of ELL in Croatia

In terms of tradition, records show a long, although sporadic, tradition of pre-primary foreign language teaching (Petrović, 2004; Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023). There is a record of German kindergartens being in operation in the city of Osijek prior to World War II.

The first records of teaching English in the pre-primary context extend as far back as 1969, when the Saponia company sponsored the introduction of English in all kindergartens in Osijek. The lessons were taught by final-year English-major students and English language teachers (Petrović, 2004).

Another notable attempt at introducing English through ELL was the five-year experimental project which included 14 kindergartens in the city

² „Dijete rane i predškolske dobi strani jezik uči u poticajnome jezičnome kontekstu, u igri, i drugim za njega svrhovitim aktivnostima. Za to je najprimjereniji situacijski pristup učenju, koji djetetu omogućuje upoznavanje, razumijevanje i smisleno korištenje stranoga jezika u nizu različitih aktivnosti i situacija. Poučavanje stranoga jezika ne provodi se posebno oblikovanim metodičkim postupcima, nego je strani jezik utkan u svakidašnje odgojno obrazovne aktivnosti vrtića. Razvoju ove kompetencije pridonosi i poticanje međukulturnoga razumijevanja i komunikacije djece s drugim subjektima u odgojno-obrazovnoj ustanovi kao i s onima izvan nje.“ (MZOS, 2015)

of Zagreb in 1991 (Silić, 2007a). This project demonstrated the feasibility of ELL among young children and emphasized the need for a national curriculum framework.

3.2. Overview of research on ELL in Croatia

Most research on early foreign language learning and teaching in Croatia has focused on primary schools (grades 1–4, ages 6/7–10/11). The “Zagreb project” was a pioneer, exploring optimal age for starting English as a foreign language and introducing it as early as the second grade (Prebeg-Vilke, 1991; Vilke, 1999). This project highlighted the importance of small class sizes (15 students), frequent daily exposure, and a learning process that encourages children to express themselves intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

The Croatian national early language learning projects (1991–2001) further explored early foreign language learning by introducing English, German, French, and Italian into the first grade with daily lessons and small class sizes similar to the Zagreb project. However, this project struggled to maintain these ideal conditions throughout primary school, with lesson frequency decreasing and class sizes increasing in later grades. Despite this, valuable resources were produced, including textbooks and teaching materials promoting content-based teaching and storytelling in the early years (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993; Mihaljević Djigunović & Medved Krajnović, 2015).

The Acquisition of English from an Early Age project (2007–2011) investigated EFL learning processes in children aged 6–14, focusing on affective characteristics, pronunciation, language development, vocabulary acquisition, and EFL development from a dynamic systems perspective (Mihaljević Djigunović & Medved Krajnović, 2015). The ELiE transnational project (2007–2010) compared early language learning across England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Croatia (Enever, 2011). This research confirmed similarities in learning processes across the participating countries, including Croatia (Mihaljević Djigunović & Medved Krajnović, 2015).

Despite this substantial body of research on learning foreign languages in primary school, research on foreign language learning in early childhood and preschool education in Croatia is relatively scarce. The exception is the investigation conducted by Silić (2007a, 2007b) regarding English language teaching in urban kindergartens. This experimental project was conducted in 14 kindergartens in the city of Zagreb from 1991 until 1994 and included

323 children in 10- and 5-hour daily programs of FL learning. The results confirmed that children of pre-primary age can successfully acquire foreign languages, and the analysis anticipated work on a foreign language early childhood education and care curriculum framework. This study also emphasized the importance of a stimulating environment, the situational approach, teacher and peer interaction, and age-appropriate activities (games, real-life activities, stories, songs, rhymes) for facilitating natural language acquisition in early childhood (Cindrić & Mikulec, 2022). Additional research in the Croatian early childhood education context have addressed early English acquisition (Erk & Ručević, 2021); problems in the transition from preschool to primary school in the domains of FL policies, school and curriculum, classroom, teacher, parents and young learners themselves (Letica Krevelj & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2021; Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj, 2021); early learning of English from the perspective of parents of children in early childhood education and care (Erk et. al, 2022); and teacher education and teacher competences in ELL (Erk & Ručević, 2021; Cindrić & Mikulec, 2022). Other studies, primarily undergraduate and graduate theses, explore various areas, including teaching methods in ELL (Štefanac, 2023), teaching strategies (Frković, 2018; Klobučar, 2021) teacher competences (Čosić, 2018; Furjan, 2022), and language acquisition (Polenus, 2022), to name a few. However, no comprehensive examination of the FL programs in Croatian kindergartens (KGs) has yet been conducted. Therefore, this analysis of statistical reports should provide relevant information regarding the number of KGs offering FL programs and children's participation over time, more precisely from 2008 to 2023.

4. METHOD

To establish the trend in foreign language learning in early childhood education in Croatia, a document analysis method was used. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is defined as a “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic material (computer-based and internet-transmitted). Furthermore, as in other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis is a process that requires the examination and interpretation of data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009).

4.1. Research corpus

The primary source of information considered for this review article comprised fourteen statistical reports published by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics between 2008/09 and 2022/23. Data on the number of KGs offering foreign language programs and children's participation became consistently available online starting in the 2008/09 academic year. Therefore, 2008 was selected as the starting point to ensure a comprehensive and consistent dataset for analysis. All of the reports are titled *Basic Schools and Kindergartens and Other Legal Entities Implementing Preschool Education Programmes*. This document analysis focused on the number of KGs in total, the number of KGs offering short language programs, the number of children attending such programs and the distribution among the foreign languages offered. Additionally, the Zagreb City Council provided data on ELL programs within the city of Zagreb, which were also analyzed.

4.2. Context

Early childhood education and care in Croatia is optional, and children aged six months to six or seven years of age can attend a preschool institution. The pre-primary class (the year before formal primary school commences) is compulsory for all children. Early childhood education and care in Croatia is governed by the Act on Preschool Education and accompanying legislation. It includes education and care for preschool children and is realized through programs of education, healthcare, nutrition, and social care for children from the age of six months to school age. In 2014, the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education was adopted.

Learning a foreign language in Croatian KGs is not compulsory, nor is it offered by all KGs. However, KGs offering foreign language (FL) programs typically follow one of three models: a full-day program (total immersion), a half-day program (partial immersion); or a short program (two hours per week). These models generally align with Enever's (2018) models of pre-primary language learning. For the former two models, the foreign language is part of the pre-primary curriculum (state or private) and is taught by regular staff of the preschool institution. The latter is not part of the pre-primary curriculum but is offered as an extra-curricular provision at the preschool institution (state or private) and taught by externally hired staff and usually paid for by parents additionally.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSES

The data presented in Table 1 show the total numbers of KGs in Croatia and the total number of children enrolled in them. This is followed by the number of KGs offering short foreign language (FL) programs and the corresponding number of children participating in these programs as a percentage of the total number. Short language programs are typically offered as an extra-curricular provision at the preschool institution and taught by externally hired staff twice a week in sessions lasting 30 to 45 minutes. The following is a summary of the data obtained from the years 2008/09 to 2022/23.

In 2008/09, there were 1,325 KGs with 116,382 children, out of which 614 KGs offered FL programs with 10,215 children participating (8.8%). Since 2008, the number of KGs and children enrolled has been increasing steadily over the year. The percentage of children participating in short FL programs has generally followed the growing trend with slight fluctuations, reaching a peak of 11% in 2014/15. The slight drop in the number of KGs offering FL programs in 2021/22 and in the percentage of children attending (6.6%) can likely be attributed to COVID-19 precautions. Overall, it can be observed that roughly half of the total number of KGs in Croatia offer the possibility for children to attend short FL learning programs.

The percentage of children attending short language programs over the last 14 years has ranged between 9% and 11% of the total number of children enrolled in early childhood education and care. We emphasize that such programs are extra-curricular. In countries where English is compulsory in pre-primary education (e.g., Cyprus, Spain, and Poland), the exposure time does not differ much from that of short programs in Croatia (two to three times per week). However, the main difference is that English is not taught separately but integrated into the pre-primary curriculum. The methodology is based on oral approaches, communicative tasks, and play-like activities. It is also clear that whoever is responsible for the classes needs to have both a strong pedagogical background and a high level of English proficiency (Alexiou, 2020).

Table 1

Participation in short foreign language programs in Croatian KGs (2008/09 – 2022/23)

Tablica 1.

Uključenost djece u kraći program stranoga jezika u vrtićima u Republici Hrvatskoj (2008./09. – 2022./23.)

Year	KGs	Children in KGs	KGs with FL prog.	Children in FL programs
	N	N	N	N (% of the total number)
2008/9	1,325	116,382	614	10,215 (8.8%)
2009/10	1,444	121,433	684	10,898 (8.9%)
2010/11	1,513	125,166	743	11,990 (9.5%)
2011/12	1,513	127,018	736	11,808 (9.3%)
2012/13	1,534	128,046	750	11,874 (9.2%)
2013/14	1,562	131,037	741	12,775 (10.2%)
2014/15	1,590	133,764	754	12,196 (11%)
2015/16	1,602	134,573	745	11,335 (8.4%)
2016/17	1,727	143,878	799	13,162 (9.1%)
2017/18	1,715	139,228	782	12,370 (8.9%)
2018/19	1,710	139,378	779	12,425 (8.9%)
2019/20	1,699	139,682	768	12,431 (8.9%)
2021/22	1,708	142,440	570	9,392 (6.6%)
2022/23	1,727	147,888	688	11,072 (7.5%)

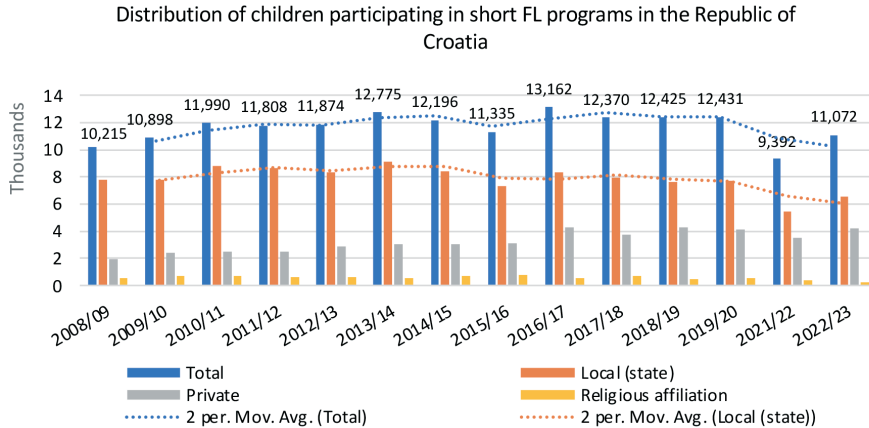
The data shown in Figure 1 below refers to the number of children involved in short FL learning programs within the same time frame (i.e., from 2008/09 to 2022/23). More precisely, the data shows the distribution of children attending such programs with respect to the type of kindergarten, that is, local (state) kindergartens, private kindergartens, and religiously affiliated kindergartens. According to the distribution, it is evident that the number of children attending short foreign language programs was relatively steady and positive over the 14-year period regardless of the type of kindergarten. The lowest number of children attending short foreign language programs was following the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected early childhood education and care institutions in the sense that only the basic program was offered for reasons of precaution. The 2-year moving average for the total number of participants and children participating in local KGs smooths out year-to-year fluctuations in the number of children participating in short FL programs, providing a clearer view of underlying trends.

Figure 1

Distribution of children participating in short FL programs according to type of KG

Slika 1.

Distribucija djece u kraćim programima stranoga jezika prema vrsti vrtića



The dataset shown in Table 2 was obtained from the reports of the Croatian Statistics Bureau shows the distribution of children in short FL programs with respect to the language being learned, specifically English, German, Italian, Spanish, and other.³ The data spans from the year 2008/09 to 2022/23 and focuses on the distribution of children learning different languages in early childhood and preschool education programs.

English is consistently the most popular parental choice for their children's language learning, which is reflected in the great number of children enrolled in English FL programs each year. The high percentage of children enrolled in English short FL programs (from 89% to 95% of children attending) possibly relates to the fact that English is a mandatory foreign language in 21 education systems at the primary and/or lower secondary level (European Commission/EACA/Eurydice, 2023). Along these lines, Rixon (2013) established that English language is an obligatory part of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) curriculum in Armenia, Georgia, Sweden, and Northern Cyprus, while in private ECEC institutions it is available in Greece, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Turkey, Kosovo, Finland, Poland, and Russia. This, however, should be observed with caution, as early childhood and preschool education does not encompass the same age span in all of these countries. For instance, in the Netherlands, children commence primary school at the age of 4, while primary education is obligatory from the

³ The reports of the Croatian Statistics Bureau do not specify languages included under the heading „Other“.

age of 5. Some countries require mandatory preschool from one to two years prior to primary school (e.g., Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Greece, where all children must attend two years of preschool) (Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023). In a more recent report titled *Key data on teaching languages at schools in Europe* (European Commission, 2023), the first foreign language is introduced before the age of 6 years in six educational systems: at the age of 3 years in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Luxembourg and Poland, at the age of 4 years in Greece, and at the age of 5 years in Cyprus and Malta. The requirement to learn the first foreign language starts in pre-primary education and applies to all children at this education level.

According to the overview of publications by Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023), in most contexts,

early FL learning, overwhelmingly English, was offered following parental interest and pressure (e.g., in 16 European countries and Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, and USA: Nikolov & Curtain, 2000; in Portugal: Mourão, 2019). This trend energized “English fever” (in Indonesia: Kiaer et al., 2021) and “Englishization” (in the Netherlands: Keydeniers et al., 2021)” (p.455). The authors report that in South America, and on other continents, early English learning is perceived as a means of “opening doors”. (Sayer, 2018)

Therefore, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović maintain that a key issue in language policies concerns the dominance of English and the lack of emphasis on other modern languages – apart from those learned in English-speaking countries. Evidence of this is seen in data on the number of children attending German, Italian, French, and Spanish language programs, which are also offered in Croatian kindergartens, but with significantly lower enrollment numbers compared to English.

German short language programs typically rank as second, followed by Italian and French, with much lower enrollment figures. Over the years, fluctuations in the number of children learning each language can be observed, with some languages experiencing drops in enrollment in certain years. An interesting observation is the rise of Italian in 2022/23 (6.07%), surpassing German (2.75%) for the first time in the data set. Enrollment in French short language programs remained consistently low throughout the analyzed period, with figures barely coming close to 1% of the population. The number of children in Spanish programs is even lower, with sporadic appearances in the data.

The data indicates a general stability in the total number of children attending language programs, with variations in the distribution among different languages each year. Such low numbers could potentially be attributed to the availability of qualified early childhood education teachers who also have the language competence at the B2 level. Availability of materials for these languages might also be lower compared to materials for English language learning. Very often, the lack of resources makes teaching a foreign language to very young learners rather challenging (Rixon, 2013). This analysis provides insights into the trends of language learning among children in early education programs over the specified years and shows that the number of children attending short foreign language programs has remained relatively stable over the 14-year period, with variations in the distribution among different languages each year.

Table 2

Distribution of children participating in short foreign language programs by language learned

Tablica 2.

Distribucija djece polaznika kraćih programa stranoga jezika prema jeziku koji uče

Year	English n (%)	German n (%)	Italian n (%)	French n (%)	Spanish n (%)	Other n (%)	Total N
2008/09	9343 (88.94%)	655 (6.24%)	426 (4.06%)	39 (0.37%)	42 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	10,505
2009/10	10,014 (88.36%)	760 (6.71%)	482 (4.25%)	31 (0.27%)	0 (0%)	46 (0.41%)	11,333
2010/11	10,035 (88.99%)	757 (6.71%)	365 (3.24%)	71 (0.63%)	0 (0%)	49 (0.43%)	11,277
2011/12	10,720 (88.87%)	745 (6.18%)	461 (3.82%)	67 (0.56%)	24 (0.2%)	45 (0.37%)	12,062
2012/13	11,085 (90.69%)	588 (4.81%)	339 (2.77%)	62 (0.51%)	31 (0.25%)	118 (0.97%)	12,223
2013/14	11,860 (89.98%)	709 (5.38%)	451 (3.42%)	116 (0.88%)	4 (0.03%)	41 (0.31%)	13,181
2014/15	11,251 (90.13%)	529 (4.24%)	582 (4.66%)	84 (0.67%)	8 (0.06%)	29 (0.23%)	12,483
2015/16	10,659 (91.32%)	600 (5.14%)	288 (2.47%)	43 (0.37%)	9 (0.08%)	73 (0.63%)	11,672
2016/17	12,330 (91.17%)	798 (5.9%)	321 (2.37%)	54 (0.4%)	7 (0.05%)	14 (0.1%)	13,524
2017/18	11,751 (94.25%)	567 (4.55%)	144 (1.15%)	6 (0.05%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12,468
2018/19	11,892 (94.33%)	604 (4.79%)	109 (0.86%)	1 (0.01%)	1 (0.01%)	0 (0%)	12,607
2019/20	11,958 (94.88%)	457 (3.63%)	173 (1.37%)	15 (0.12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12,603
2021/22	9,083 (94.77%)	297 (3.1%)	177 (1.85%)	22 (0.23%)	5 (0.05%)	0 (0%)	9,584
2022/23	10,094 (91.17%)	305 (2.75%)	672 (6.07%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.01%)	11,072

Finally, at the local level, specifically the city of Zagreb, data was obtained from the City Office for Education, Sport and Youth, Department for early childhood and preschool education (personal communication, 8 November 2023). According to the data presented in Table 3, we can observe that, in addition to short language programs, KGs in the city of Zagreb also offer whole-day programs (full immersion) and half-day programs (partial immersion) for language learning.

The languages which are offered are English, German, Italian, French, and Hungarian (for Hungarian national minority children). For the English language, the data shows that all three models of language learning are offered: full-day immersion programs (attended by 2,381 children), short English language programs (700 children), and half-day immersion programs (545 children). Similar to the distribution of results regarding short language programs, enrollment in English language programs is dominant.

In the case of the German language, 233 children attend the full-day immersion program, while 85 children attend the short program. Children learning Italian are also distributed among the full-day immersion program (35 children) and short program (14 children). According to the data, French is offered through one type of program, which is a partial immersion program for 24 children. Lastly, the Hungarian language program is specifically designed for children of the Hungarian national minority community. There is one group of 18 children attending the full-day Hungarian language immersion program.

Table 3

Distribution of children according to programs and foreign languages in the City of Zagreb

Tablica 3.

Distribucija djece prema programima i stranim jezicima u Gradu Zagrebu

	Full-day immersion	Half-day immersion	Short ELL programs
	N (children)	N (children)	N (children)
English	2,381	545	700
German	233		85
Italian	35		14
French		24	
Hungarian	18		

6. CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper examined trends in foreign language learning within early childhood education and care programs in Croatia

from 2008/09 to 2022/23. The data analysis revealed several key findings and implications for educators, policymakers, researchers, and parents.

Firstly, nearly half the number of KGs in Croatia offer the possibility for children to participate in extra-curricular short FL programs. The number of children attending such programs has been relatively stable over the studied period of 14 years. This suggests that interest in ELL is constant and slowly but steadily increasing. In that respect, more initiative could be shown by educators to continue to develop and evaluate such programs, while policymakers might consider expanding them.

Secondly, the percentage of children participating in short FL programs has fluctuated slightly over the years, with an upward trend overall. In terms of the distribution of languages, English dominates as the preferred language for short FL programs, followed by German, Italian, and French. However, fluctuations in enrollment among these languages varies year-to-year. This dominance of English could encourage further investigation into parental choices and potential curriculum adjustments towards a more balanced approach to language exposure. Initiatives to promoting a wider range of languages in early childhood education and care could be launched.

Thirdly, the data from the city of Zagreb (2022/23) indicates that diverse models for FL programs are being offered, including full-day immersion, half-day immersion, and short programs. Such variety is relevant in terms of exploring curricula, achievement, teacher education, continuity, and transition. Furthermore, it allows for researchers to explore the effectiveness of different program models in fostering language acquisition.

Finally, while this study offers valuable insights into ELL within Croatian KGs, it is important to recognize its limitations. Firstly, the study's quantitative nature does not fully capture the challenges and experiences associated with the implementation of language programs. Additionally, the lack of detailed teacher-profiles for pre-primary ELL could limit the understanding of the teachers' qualifications, training, and experiences, which are crucial factors in shaping the effectiveness of language programs.

Since this study focused on quantitative data, future research could explore the qualitative dimension. Such qualitative studies could further explore the implementation of the programs themselves, including the experiences and perceptions of teachers, parents, and children regarding early language learning programs.

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Rano učenje stranih jezika u Hrvatskoj: Istraživa- nje trendova i provedbe u vrtićima od 2008./09. do 2022./23.

Ivana Cindrić

Ovaj se rad bavi ranim učenjem stranih jezika u Hrvatskoj, uzimajući u obzir šire europske politike, preporuke i istraživanja. Prikazuje jedinstvenu tradiciju, dosadašnja istraživanja i praksu učenja stranoga jezika u Hrvatskoj unutar ustanova za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje. Središnja analiza fokusira se na podatke od 2008. do 2023. godine, ispitujući provođenje kraćih programa stranih jezika u hrvatskim vrtićima. To uključuje broj vrtića koji nude programe, dostupne jezike i sudjelovanje djece. Istraživanje otkriva sve veće zanimanje za ranu izloženost stranim jezicima diljem Hrvatske. Analizirajući trendove tijekom 14 godina, utvrđena je postojanost programa, dominacija engleskoga jezika u odabiru jezika i stabilna stopa sudjelovanja djece u ovim programima. Ovi nalazi nude vrijedne spoznaje učiteljima u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju, tvorcima jezičnih politika te istraživačima u području vrlo ranoga i ranoga učenja stranih jezika.

Ključne riječi: *Hrvatska, rano učenje stranih jezika, stope sudjelovanja, trendovi*

