

FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULA IN HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN EUROPE – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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***Summary** – The paper compares secondary school curricula of nine European countries with the aim of presenting how communicative competence is operationalized in the foreign language section. Particular emphasis is placed on the conformity with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the language policy of the Council of Europe. Results have shown that the CEFR, or a communicative approach to language teaching and the corresponding recommendations of the Council of Europe, have been used as a point of reference in most of the analysed foreign language curricula. In the current Croatian secondary school curriculum for English as a foreign language there are no indicators of systematic use of the CEFR, although there are elements of a communicative approach to language teaching and the language policy of the Council of Europe. The author recommends that the CEFR be used when designing the new Croatian foreign language curriculum for secondary schools, particularly in defining communicative competence and the levels of knowledge, and that special emphasis be placed on educating teachers, who will work according to that curriculum. The Slovenian model could provide a good example in designing the curriculum as it consistently implements the abovementioned elements.*

***Key words:** communicative competence, the communicative approach to learning*

INTRODUCTION

The seventies of the twentieth century saw a shift in the approach to language learning in Europe and the USA. According to Savignon (2002), the needs of the numerous immigrants and season workers to integrate in the host societies (Puzić, 2007) and to become familiar with the majority language have induced the Council of Europe to create a curriculum which would be based on the British linguistic tradition which emphasized the social context of language use. The curriculum would describe the level of language competence (*Threshold*), or what the user is able to do with language (Savignon, 2002; van Essen, 2002).

At the same time, the right to choose the way and the materials for foreign language learning began to be promoted in classrooms throughout Europe, which resulted in a fast development of materials for communicative language learning (Savignon, 2002). In the USA, Hymes introduced the term *communicative competence*, which refers to the ability to use language in the social context and to respect the sociolinguistic norms of appropriacy, adequacy and efficacy (Savignon, 2002; Ellis, 1994). Savignon used the term *communicative competence* to describe the ability of the learner to take part in interaction with other speakers rather than recite dialogues learned by heart or the knowledge of grammar without the context of its use (Savignon, 2002).

Over the years, various theoreticians presented their ideas of the concept of communicative competence, frequently changing its name, but most of them realizing that a competent language user does not possess only knowledge about language but also the ability to activate this knowledge in a communication act (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007).

It is important to mention that the communicative approach places the learner in the centre, i. e. the communicative needs of the learners provide a framework for creating and elaborating the objectives of the program (Savignon, 2002). The aims of the program are defined in terms of what the learner, or the user, is able to do, i.e. know, say and understand, and the way how to achieve the aims is not prescribed by a single methodology. In the communicative approach there is a risk of neglecting the teaching and learning of grammar and one should be careful not to omit grammatical accuracy altogether. This was not the intention of the proponents and the original supporters of this approach, hence a renewed emphasis on the importance of grammar (Chalker & Weiner, 1998). As a consequence, the subject curricula for foreign languages should not omit grammar and grammatical accuracy from the list of learning outcomes.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DESIGNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULA IN EUROPE

The importance of multilingualism has emerged due to a relatively high number of European countries with different official languages. Integrating European countries in a functional community presupposes successful communication among speakers whose mother tongues are different. The **Treaties of Rome, signed in 1957**, gave equal importance to the official languages of every member country of the EU (Truchot, 2004). Consequently, the Council of Europe placed considerable emphasis on learning and knowing modern foreign languages.

In order to achieve greater unity among the member countries, according to the Recommendation R (82) 18 of the Council of Europe, it is suggested that the member countries «use all available means» to improve foreign language instruction in their schools. It is recommended that at least one European language be learned at school which is not the national language, and the aim is to provide the

widest possible selection of languages that can be learned. It is recommended that upper secondary schools and higher education institutions provide opportunities for the continuation of language learning for all students.

As one of the steps that should make it easier for member countries to carry out the guidelines for foreign language learning one of the conclusions of the intergovernmental Symposium held in Switzerland in 1991 on 'Transparency and

Coherence in Language Learning in Europe: Objectives, Evaluation, Certification' was that it was necessary to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) which should, among other things, "assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-ordinate their efforts" (CEFR, p. 5).

The practical value of the CEFR for the certification of speakers' language skills has been recognized and (more or less successfully) put to practice for some international foreign language exams (Relating language examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment). Foreign language curriculum designers and designers of tests at the national level have been using the CEFR as one of the fundamental documents for curriculum and test design.

THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)

The CEFR has been defined by its authors as a "common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (CEFR, p. 1).

It is intended to overcome differences in educational systems of individual countries and thus become a common language for professionals working in the field of modern languages regardless of the context they come from. "It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis" (CEFR, p.1). Describing language competences in a unique and consistent way helps professionals in the field of modern languages to create and understand the outcomes of language learning.

The CEFR "views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action (CEFR, p. 9). Such a comprehensive approach is very complex and takes into consideration not only language-related competences, but everything affecting a speaker as he/she uses a language. The CEFR has divided

these elements into smaller parts and they are further analysed and defined in the document. According to the CEFR “language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various **conditions** and under various **constraints** to engage in **language activities** involving **language processes** to produce and/or receive **texts** in relation to **themes** in specific **domains**, activating those **strategies** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the **tasks** to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences” (CEFR, p. 9). The foreign language curriculum should take into consideration all of the aforementioned elements if it expects from the learners to learn and use a language. General competences are based on “the user’s ‘knowledge, skills and existential competence and also their ability to learn’” (CEFR, p. 11). They are not necessarily used exclusively for language activity, as opposed to communicative language competences “which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means” (CEFR, p. 9), and consist of linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic constituents/elements. Language activities, on the other hand, include reception, production, interaction and mediation, whereas the domains are categorised into public, personal, educational and occupational.

The CEFR also provides guidelines to enable users to develop elements which constitute language activities, i.e. to learn and teach languages. However, they represent only guidelines, not a dogma according to which every teacher should work.

Since one of the purposes of the CEFR is to serve as a basis to design curricula, the Framework has dedicated a whole chapter to curricular design. This chapter emphasizes that “(i)t is generally the case that language teaching in schools has to a large extent tended to stress objectives concerned with either the individual’s *general competence* (especially at primary school level) or *communicative language competence* (particularly for those aged between 11 and 16), while courses for adults (students or people already working) formulate objectives in terms of specific *language activities* or functional ability in a particular *domain* (CEFR, p. 168).

This work is an attempt to show how the principles of the Council of Europe and of the CEFR have been implemented in secondary school core and subject curricula for foreign languages. It is based on the results of a comparative analysis of foreign language national curricula in some European countries.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research was to find out how communicative competence has been operationalized in the area of foreign language instruction in national curricula in Europe. The results present a comparative analysis of national curricula and subject curricula for general secondary education (or curricula for upper secondary

education¹ in countries, where this distinction exists), carried out on a sample of 9 countries (Croatia, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Finland, Norway, England and Scotland). Subject curricula (and core curricula when possible) for the first foreign language or for English as a foreign language were analysed. The texts of the subject curricula were retrieved from the web sites cited in the references. As some countries do not have separate curricular documents for upper secondary education, the countries in this paper are classified according to whether they have a foreign language curriculum or its function is fulfilled by another document.

Particular attention was paid to the Slovenian subject curriculum for English, since Slovenia and Croatia were part of similar educational contexts for over forty years. Thus the Slovenian model could have great potential for application in the Croatian context.

The structure of the subject curricula for foreign languages has been analysed in the cases where its structure permitted it. Moreover, the aims and goals of foreign language instruction, the outcomes, the methods of teaching and learning as well as assessment were studied.

COUNTRIES WITHOUT A SEPARATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

As secondary or upper secondary education is not compulsory in most countries, some of the countries do not have a core curriculum or subject curricula prescribed on the national level. Their function has been taken over by exam catalogues which specify the outcomes relevant for the examinations that ought to be taken at the end of secondary education. This analysis has shown that this practice has been carried out in England, Scotland and the Netherlands. In England and Scotland, all the subjects at this level of education, including foreign languages, are elective, whereas in the Netherlands there are a number of compulsory subjects, including English.

COUNTRIES WITH A SEPARATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Finland

Finland does not have a separate subject curriculum for each subject, but *Foreign languages*, as well as other subjects, are part of the core curriculum. The part of the curriculum dealing with foreign languages comprises several units: objectives (and outcomes) of instruction, assessment, courses and themes.

¹ Upper secondary education refers to the final stage of secondary education. (so called ISCED 3 according to the UNESCO international standardized classification of education)

Instruction in foreign language, as stated in the curriculum, develops students' intercultural communication skills with special emphasis on European identity and European multilingualism and multiculturalism. Language instruction will provide students with capabilities for independent study of languages.

English can be learned as language A (when students started learning English in the first grade of primary school), B1 or B2 (when it is introduced from grade 7 of primary school) or B3 (when students begin learning it in upper secondary education). Students are expected to have reached a certain level in listening comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension and writing skills according to a language proficiency scale which was developed and modified according to the CEFR levels of reference². Students learning English are expected to achieve a higher level than students learning other foreign languages (level B2 according to the CEFR as the aim for English when learned as the first foreign language whereas level B1 is the expected aim for other foreign languages).

Students are also expected to learn how to learn a foreign language, or, in other words, to know how to communicate in a manner characteristic of the target language and its culture, to be able to assess their language skills in relation to the objectives, to be familiar with their own strengths and development needs as communicators and language learners, to know how to develop their language skills through strategies that are appropriate to their development needs and tasks.

Assessment

Assessment is planned in all areas of language knowledge, i.e. equal importance is given to all the language skills.

The Themes

The themes are dealt with from the perspectives of Finland, the cultural area of the language being studied and, also from a broader perspective, so as to provide students with opportunities to make comparisons. Cross-curricular themes are also included.

Every theme contains information relating the language skills it develops in particular, its connection with the broader context of the curriculum and how it will be taught. For example, the theme *Young people and their world* is described as one which links language instruction in general upper secondary education with basic education and will reinforce students' command of vocabulary and basic structures. Themes and situations are related to everyday life, personal interaction and human relations and language will be colloquial and informal.

The (compulsory) themes for the first foreign language (language A) are:

² According to the CEFR six basic reference levels can be distinguished: A1 (Breakthrough), which is regarded to be the lowest level of language productive use, A2 (Waystage), B1 (Threshold), B2 (Vantage), C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) and C2 (Mastery).

1. Young people and their world (the cross-curricular theme *Safety and well-being*)
2. Communication and leisure (the themes *Safety and well-being* and *Communication and media competence*)
3. Study and work (the theme *Active citizenship and entrepreneurship*)
4. Society and the surrounding world (the theme *Active citizenship and entrepreneurship*)
5. Culture (the themes *Cultural identity and knowledge of cultures* and *Communication and media competence*)
6. Science, economy and technology (the theme *Technology and society*)

Norway

The Curriculum emphasizes the importance of the English language for international intercultural communication. Although there is a national core curriculum, this article analyses only the subject curriculum for English as it contains information necessary for the analysis. The subject curriculum for English consists of several units: the objectives of the subject, main subject areas, teaching hours according to the year of learning, basic skills, competence aims for every subject area and assessment.

The English language enjoys a special status among foreign languages as it is compulsory from grade 1 of primary school until the first grade of „upper secondary“ school. In primary school it is taught for 328 60-minute periods a year, whereas at upper-secondary level it is taught for 140 60-minute periods per year.

The mastery of the English language is defined as developing vocabulary and skills in using the phonology, grammar and text structuring. The student needs to use all four language skills and to adapt language to a variety of topics, areas of interest and communication situations and distinguish various styles. Cultural norms and conventions should also be taken into consideration.

The Curriculum also stresses the importance of students' awareness of the strategies they use to learn a foreign language (also providing an insight into the mother tongue). Foreign language learning also includes getting to know society and culture and contributes insight not only into English-speaking cultures but culture and society in general. That is why learning English is seen as a contribution to the all-round personal development and to fostering democratic commitment and a better understanding of responsible citizenship.

In secondary education, there are three main areas of learning with their corresponding competence aims which are to be achieved after the first year in the programmes for general studies or after the second year of vocational education programmes.

The main areas comprise:

1. Language learning
2. Communication
3. Culture, society and literature

The competences are not described according to the CEFR, but independent descriptors are used instead (Table 1).

Table 1. Competence aims after the first year of programmes for general study

Language learning	Communication	Culture, society and literature
The student can:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – use various situations, work methods and strategies to learn English – identify important linguistic similarities and differences between English and other foreign languages – use relevant and precise terminology – describe and assess his/her own work in learning English – use a variety of digital and other aids independently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – master a wide vocabulary – understand extended written and oral presentations – express himself/herself in writing and orally – select appropriate listening, speaking, reading and writing strategies adapted to the purpose, situation and genre – take initiatives to start, finish and keep a conversation going – select and use content from different sources independently, critically and responsibly – produce texts with complex content using digital media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – discuss social conditions and values in various cultures in a number of English-speaking countries – present and discuss international news and current events – analyse and discuss a film and a representative selection of literary texts in English – prepare and assess his or her own written or oral texts inspired by literature and art

The Curriculum states the basic skills that contribute to the further development of competence in English, and they include the ability of written and oral expression and reading in English, mathematical skills and the ability to use digital tools in English.

Assessment

At the end of an education cycle every student gets a general grade, but some students may be selected for written examinations which are prepared and graded centrally (at state level) or for an oral examination. Oral examinations are prepared and graded locally. Assessment has been regulated by the Norwegian Education Act.

Austria

The Austrian curriculum covers all foreign languages in one subject curriculum for foreign languages. Foreign language learning (first and second foreign language) is compulsory in the grammar school program and students can choose from a variety of languages. The difference between first and second foreign language is in the number of years of learning – the first foreign language is learned for a total of eight years whereas the second foreign language is learned for four

or six years. The foreign language curriculum consists of several units: objectives, connection to general teaching objectives, teaching guidelines, outcomes based on the communicative language competences according to the CEFR.

The objective of foreign language instruction is to fulfil the basic communicative requirements of life in society. Emphasis is placed on the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in personal, professional and other situations, Foreign language instruction should also develop other competences (content, social, personal, teaching competence, and others). Intercultural competence has a particular place in the curriculum as well as the ability of life-long foreign language learning.

Foreign language teaching is linked to the following general-education areas: language and communication, man and society, nature and technology, creativity and design, health and movement.

The teaching principles underlying lesson planning are: the communicative approach to language learning and teaching, equal attention is dedicated to all four language skills, vocabulary and grammar are learned in context, a variety of teaching methods is used, students are observed and assessed individually, etc.

The document takes into consideration the CEFR in defining the levels of knowledge. According to the curriculum, at the end of their secondary education students are expected to have achieved B2 level in the first foreign language in all four language skills

Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia)

Germany has compulsory standards for the majority of subjects which are prescribed by the Ministry at national level and each state is in charge of the development and implementation of its own curriculum. In this article the curriculum of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will be analysed.

North Rhine-Westphalia

There is no core curriculum for upper secondary education, but only subject curricula which deal with general teaching principles in some of their parts and thus compensate for the non-existence of a core curriculum. Consequently, the curriculum for English consists of its general part (general information and principles, objectives and outcomes of general secondary education) and its specific part (concerning the school subject of English and specifying the aims and objectives of the subject, areas and themes, the organization of the teaching process, assessment, the final examination – *Matura*, and instructions for using the subject curriculum).

The subject curricula are mostly general and the teachers have the freedom in their implementation to the teaching practice. The curriculum is seen as a set of guidelines regarding the objectives, the content and the methods of teaching. Only the teacher can decide how to apply the curriculum with his/her students.

The subjects are distributed in three areas called: *Languages, Literature and Art, Social Sciences and Mathematics* and *Natural Sciences and Technology*. Foreign languages are part of the *Languages, Literature and Art* section. The German language, foreign languages and mathematics are compulsory subjects of upper secondary education and the final results achieved in these subjects are taken into consideration when students enrol in universities. The subjects can be learned at two levels: basic (Ger. *Grundkurse*) or higher (Ger. *Leistungskurse*). The basic level usually comprises three hours per week, whereas the higher level comprises five or six hours per week which serves as the basis for the further academic learning of these subjects.

English has a special role as a foreign language used as a *lingua franca* around the world. By learning it students also learn about the cultures in which the language is used. Moreover, languages cross curricular borders by using topics from other subjects or, sometimes, contents learned in English language classes are integrated into other subjects.

In describing the outcomes students should reach on completing their secondary education the curriculum /program makes use of descriptors from the CEFR, i.e. students are expected to have achieved level B2 in all the language skills if they have learned English according to the “basic” program, or C1 if they have learned it at the “higher” level. A lot of space is dedicated to instructions for teachers, which should help them prepare and plan their teaching in such a way that it meets the needs of their students, having in mind the standards set by the curriculum and tested in the *Matura*.

Special emphasis is placed on linking English with other subjects of the curriculum. This connection can be realized through themes and contents that are taught and through methods used in learning.

The themes of English language teaching are distributed into four areas:

1. language
2. texts and media
3. learning about cultures, socio-cultural themes and contents
4. methods and ways of independent work

Each of these areas is analysed and described in detail, and the teachers are provided with detailed instructions on how to teach these areas. Teaching is organized according to the principles of teaching methodology and didactics which are reflected in the document itself:

1. student-centred teaching
2. content-centred teaching
3. focusing on teaching and learning strategies

Also, a major part of the document is dedicated to the description of the final (*Matura*) exam. The exam is both written and oral, and thus gives equal importance to all language skills.

Slovenia

The analysis was carried out on the subject curriculum for English. First, the subject curriculum from 1998 was analysed and subsequently the most recent curriculum for English from 2008 was also analysed. The differences between the two documents are significant and can serve as guidelines when modernizing the Croatian foreign language curriculum.

The 1998 Curriculum

English is a separate subject in the Slovenian curriculum. There is no core curriculum for secondary education. The subject curriculum for English consists of several elements: the part dedicated to the importance of the English language in education, the part which “catalogues” the knowledge of English and, consequently, defines the objectives of the subject (both general and operational), the contents and standards of knowledge, the recommendations concerning cross-curricular links and assessment.

Besides the Slovenian language, mathematics and physical education, the first and second foreign language is compulsory in four-year general secondary education. English can be learned as the first or second foreign language. In both cases it has a schedule of a minimum of three hours per week during four years.

The role of the English language is to develop holistic abilities for intercultural and interlingual communication. The English language also has a general-educational relevance as knowledge and language skills that students develop through the learning of English are important for their direct usability in further higher education. Through the teaching process the students are also prepared for the final exam in English before leaving secondary school (*the matura*).

It is emphasized that by learning the English language students should also develop intercultural communicative competence and raise the awareness about their own cultural and national identity while at the same time getting to know and respecting the culture of others.

The general objectives of the teaching of English are explained in a separate chapter. They include developing all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students also become acquainted with linguistic and pragmatic patterns of the English language and should be able to compare them with those in their mother tongue. They also learn to know cultures and the literature of the English-speaking world.

In order to achieve these aims, students acquire and develop language skills and various competences, such as, sociolinguistic, discursive and strategic competences as well as socio-cultural competence and strategies for independent learning.

The outcomes are presented in four groups which are divided according to language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). The outcomes are stated for

each language skill separately and are expressed as a competence that a student possesses. Then, examples of texts are given which can be connected to the particular skill and, finally, examples of activities for developing the particular skill are given. Since the document was designed before the CEFR was published, it cannot refer to it and it cannot be specified whether the required level for secondary school students is equivalent to the levels in the CEFR. For example, the listening skill has been dealt with in the following way:

Table 2. Some outcomes for listening skills

Students can:	Text examples:	Examples of listening-related activities:
understand the relevance of the listening passage	dialog, interview, conversation involving more people, news	multiple choice tasks
pick out and understand specific information	weather forecast, radio news	alternative choice tasks
understand details in a text	description of a journey, activities(journeys, holidays, sports), messages	matching tasks

The curriculum states the standards of knowledge that students should meet in order to show they have mastered the program of English for general secondary schools. The standards are expressed as competences based on the previously mentioned outcomes in such a way that the student's competence to accomplish an outcome is attached to that particular outcome.

The themes that ought to be covered are described as realistic, everyday, intercultural and cross-curricular. Students are included in their selection, and it is recommended that teachers of English coordinate their themes with teachers of other subjects. However, there are no clear instructions about how this should be done and in which areas. The themes for English are presented in the exam catalogue for the state final school leaving exam (matura).

In their English classes, students are expected to read literary works in English. This is considered to be a preparation and motivation for independent reading of literature in English.

Instructions/guidelines for teachers

Teachers are encouraged to focus their teaching on students. During their first contact with students it is important that they diagnose the students' level of knowledge and build on it afterwards. A communicative approach to teaching is encouraged, with the students taking active part in pair work, group work, role-play, etc. Students are also encouraged to become independent learners. The importance of linking English language teaching with other subjects is also pointed out.

Assessment

Assessment should be in accordance with the teaching objectives. It can be divided into diagnostic and formative, and it is important that the aims and standards of assessment should be clear both to the teacher and to the students. The teacher should assess what students know and not what they do not know. Secondary school students can choose English as a compulsory or elective subject for the final school-leaving exam.

The 2008 Curriculum

The subject curriculum for English is intended for general-program, classics-program and vocational secondary schools with a total schedule of 420 hours. It consists of several parts: the importance of the subject (in life and in teaching), general objectives (or competences), aims and contents, expected outcomes (or results), cross-curricular links, teaching guidelines and assessment. First, the social conditions in which knowing the English language is important are analysed. In comparison with other languages English is more widespread around the world.

The general objectives are focused on what the student gets by learning the English language. The focus is on the holistic development of the personality and not only on the development of language competences. During the ELT process students should develop general knowledge and abilities, key competences for lifelong learning and communicative competence (the ability to communicate among cultures and languages).

The key competences for lifelong learning are further enumerated and described in general and in their relation to learning and using the English language.

General knowledge and skills are described in brief (for example, knowledge of the world that students gain through their personal experience, knowing different cultures, values, viewpoints, etc.), and the aim of English language teaching is to expand and deepen them. Communicative competence comprises linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (in accordance with the CEFR). These competences are developed through the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

The aims and contents are the abilities that enable successful communication in English. They are categorized (according to the CEFR) into listening with understanding, speaking, writing and mediating. For each of the categories, outcomes are stated which describe what a student should be able to do. It is important to learn literature in order to enable students for reading and interpretation of works of art in English and to make students better acquainted with the culture of the English-speaking area.

The contents (themes) represent an expansion of the themes presented in the CEFR (the personal, educational, public and professional domains). The themes are presented in the form of headwords and their connection to other curricular areas is emphasized.

The expected level, or the results that students should achieve are formulated according to the CEFR. Students are expected to have achieved level B1 in all language skills at the end of the second year of general secondary school and B2 on completing their secondary education (at the end of the fourth year).

There is a close cross-curricular connection between English and other subjects, particularly with relation to mother tongue instruction (Slovenian) and other foreign languages. Also, themes which are not primarily linked to one particular subject are connected with English, such as library information technology skills, learning about professions, ecology, health education, traffic, chemical safety, consumer education, education for media and ICT.

Teachers are advised to adapt their teaching to the students and use a communicative approach to teaching and assessing students. Reproducing grammar rules should be replaced by communication.

Croatia

In Croatia, great importance is placed on foreign language learning. General-program secondary schools include a two-year compulsory course in Latin as well as compulsory learning of two modern foreign languages. Since 2003 the learning one foreign language has become compulsory from the first grade of primary education. According to the Croatian National Educational Standards, pupils learn it for eight years in primary education and continue learning it until the end of their secondary education. It has been allocated three hours per week. The second foreign language is learned for five years in primary education and students can continue learning it in secondary education.

The importance of foreign language learning has been recognized for the development of several areas relevant for students' development and maturation: intellectual development, broadening perspectives about the cultures of numerous countries, developing linguistic thinking and shaping students' entire personality with particular reference to the culture of dialogue and communication. Foreign language teaching should enable students to understand, speak, read and write contents written in different styles of the foreign language, to apply their knowledge in communicative situations, to convey messages and translate them into the foreign language, to acquire norms of written and spoken communication in the foreign language and to express coherent content in writing.

According to the curriculum, teaching English as the first foreign language should meet a number of aims. Here are some of them:

Table 3. Aims of teaching

Aims:
acquiring solid pronunciation and intonation
developing language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) necessary for receptive and productive use of language with foreign speakers in spoken and written context
acquiring a specific linguistic and sociolinguistic inventory in the context of communication
participating in conversation or discussion on a given topic
understanding oral presentation
understanding written discourse
writing guided and free compositions, summaries, notes, messages and reports
translating shorter texts from English to Croatian and vice versa
reading literary works of renowned authors of the English language from various literary periods
understanding specific features of the grammar system within the contents specified in the curriculum
observing patterns of form and use of grammar structures; developing linguistic thinking
using different sources to search for information, organizing and applying obtained information
becoming acquainted with elements of culture and civilisation of the Anglo-Saxon world (as part of language skills) with the aim of understanding linguistic and cultural messages and developing tolerance among cultures
encouraging students to learn language independently
group or individual student exchange with schools from the Anglo-Saxon world

The heading *Contents* expounds the outcomes by grade and is further subdivided into *Language skills* and *Language contents*.

There are five language skills that students should develop: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. It is interesting to point out that translation is one of the skills mentioned in the CEFR which is not given particular attention in the curricula of other countries. Some of the descriptors relating to language skills are too vague or inconsistent and it is difficult to determine the difference between actual levels. For example, the descriptor used for listening skills in the first grade of secondary school states that students should be able to “follow and understand spoken passages produced by native speakers of the language, live or through communication media (radio, TV, telephone, loudspeaker at the railway station)”, but it is not clear to what extent the students are expected to understand the passages and how long or complex a passage is. In the second grade the descriptors are more specific and clearer. For instance, “understand globally and extract relevant information from simple spoken passages, produced by native speakers at moderate speed”. In this case, the CEFR has helped considerably, as one of its functions is to better define the transition from lower to higher levels of education.

Also, some language skills descriptors in the document contain outcomes that are not mentioned in the CEFR, such as the one related to reading skills which

include „mastering correct pronunciation and intonation“, whereas the CEFR places exclusive emphasis on reception and understanding what is being read and not on reading aloud.

The heading *Language contents* cover the areas of culture and civilization, communicative patterns, phonology and orthography, vocabulary and grammar. Culture refers to general themes, such as cities and regions, school and learning, free time, sports, recreation, technology and others. Vocabulary is not determined according to the context but it is defined in general in such a way that „selecting and introducing new words depends on the presented material, the communication context, students' needs, frequency and conceptual contingency“. The grammar section contains the following categories: pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, prepositions and sentence structure. They should be revised, expanded and systematized, depending on the level at which language is learned.

The curriculum was developed in 1994 and it could not have taken into consideration the CEFR, which was published only in 2001. However, the national exams and the state school leaving exam (*matura*) were designed later, and they take into consideration the CEFR guidelines. Students are expected to have achieved B2 level on completing general secondary education. Since Croatia is in the process of curriculum reform, it can be expected that the new curriculum will refer greatly to the CEFR.

CONCLUSION

In many European countries foreign language teaching in upper secondary education leads to final school-leaving exams. That is why some countries do not have a separate foreign language curriculum, and its role is taken over by exam catalogues or documents which, according to their form and function, represent a combination of curriculum and exam catalogue, or, the curriculum is not an integral document and does not include an exam catalogue which would further define the curriculum guidelines.

At this level of education, most countries do not have a core curriculum. Every subject is analysed in a separate document or with a group of related subjects. Nevertheless, in some countries the English language is treated as a separate subject due to its global role and is given priority over other foreign languages.³

In foreign language learning great emphasis is placed on learning and understanding the culture of the target language. Also, students' awareness is raised regarding the process of language learning and developing learning strategies for independent learning. Students are encouraged to work in teams and in pairs, as these forms of work are natural when a communicative approach to teaching and

³ English is given priority in Croatian schools. For example, data obtained from the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education show that 86.6% of first-grade secondary students learn English as their first foreign language (presentation National Exams 2006).

learning is applied. In this way, they are also prepared for learning other subjects and for their future profession.

Because the subject has its specific features, special emphasis is placed on its cross-curricular aspect. Some curricula provide instructions for teachers encouraging them to cooperate with teachers of other subjects and to teach topics which can be taught in other subjects as well. For example, the new Slovenian curriculum elaborates the importance of developing general competences through foreign language teaching. Besides, it also provides a list of cross-curricular topics which can be covered within foreign language teaching. In such a way, various subjects are brought together meaningfully and become more coherent, despite the non-existence of a core curriculum.

The CEFR has been increasingly used in creating language curricula as it facilitates defining the levels that students are expected to acquire at the end of a particular education cycle. The scales used by the CEFR, although rather general themselves and lending themselves to interpretations, represent a more systematic and more concrete way of describing students' knowledge and skills than previous descriptions used by individual countries. Moreover, the CEFR offers a relatively consistent description of communicative language competence which is operationalized through specific language outcomes.

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(All links were active on 26 January 2009)

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