

# Linguistic environment - incentive or obstacle for learning Croatian

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## Abstract

The processes of acquiring and learning a language are intertwined in the course of early childhood, first it is a spontaneous process and then the process of learning linguistic rules starts: grammar, writing, orthography and vocabulary. Practically it means development of language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Through the language and communication, a child learns about the world. Extralinguistic factors are also important: linguistic environment, level of parent's education, time spent in the kindergarten etc. In this research, it is our goal to examine parents' and pupils' attitudes (N=42) towards learning Croatian as the language of the environment in international American International School of Zagreb (Croatia). Also, we examined pupils' language competences in Croatian. (N=15).

Keywords: acquiring language, learning language, Croatian language, attitudes, language competence.

## Introduction

The process of language acquisition starts already in the prenatal period when a child, listening to the sounds in its environment, absorbs the first sounds and starts learning his/her mother tongue. This acquisition period is characterised by spontaneous learning that transpires in a child's environment and the manner of communication with the child.

The process of language learning starts with the beginning of school education which is about the age of six/seven in the Croatian education system. Starting school, a child begins acquisition of the Croatian language rules whereby the focus is on the communicative language competence, i. e. use of language, and then the focus shifts to fostering linguistic language competence, i. e. theoretical knowledge of the Croatian language. Precondition for a child's successful mother tongue acquisition is acquiring sociolinguistic competence which implies the influence of the social environment or wider community (*non linguistic context*) on language acquisition and communication development (*linguistic context*) (Pavličević-Franić 2011).

Language learning is a process that includes three types of learning: learning about language, learning a language and learning through language (Halliday 2003 according to Aladrović Slovaček and Čosić 2017). A child acquires rules

of orthography, grammar and morphology as well as rules about word accent and sentence intonation. All these rules are learned through listening, speaking, reading and writing, developing each language activity in an equal measure. Acquiring a language, a child learns about the world, history of his/her nation and language and changes that have occurred but language is also an element of his/her identity, primarily as local speech, then as a dialect, and eventually as standard language. Further on, most of the examiners use language biographies to identify one's language background or identity (Barth 2004 according to Abramac 2016), hence Abramac (2016) states that language biography. Every learned word expands his vision and perception of the world and life. Numerous factors will shape this process, some of which are: parents' education, propensity to read, computer literacy, time spent in a kindergarten, attitude towards learning, media content consumption and others.

### Research methodology

38 parents of students attending the American International School of Zagreb participated in the first part of the research. This convenience sample was collected by means of an *online* questionnaire that was created for the purpose of conducting the Master's Degree thesis and this research (Kovač 2021). 76,3 % (f = 29) of the participants were women, i.e. mothers and 23,7 % (f = 9) were men, i. e. fathers. The participants were different with regard to their level of education. Most of them, 52,3 % (f = 21) have a Master's degree, and then come participants with a Bachelor's degree, 23,7 % (f = 9), whereas the same number of participants have finished a high school and have a PhD (10,5 %, f = 4). Parents who participated in the research have 5 to 18-year-old children. They also differ when we consider the years spent living in the Republic of Croatia. Almost the same number of participants, 23,7 % (f = 9), are found in the categories: *from birth*, 2 - 3 years, 4 - 5 years and more than 10 years (18,4 %, f = 7), and fewer have lived in Croatia up to one year (10,5 %, f = 4), whereas the percent of those who have been living in Croatia 5 - 10 years is the lowest (5,3 %, f = 2). Most of them state that Croatian is their mother tongue - 36,8 % (f = 14) of the mothers and 21,1 % (f = 13) of the fathers, whereas 10,5 % of the mothers (f = 4) and 21,1 % of the fathers (f = 8) say that their mother tongue is English. Apart from Croatian and English, most other participants (the same number of mothers and fathers) claim Czech to be their mother tongue (21,1 %, f = 8).

13 girls and 13 boys aged 11 to 14 attending the American International School of Zagreb participated in the second part of the research. The participants were in Middle School (sixth, seventh and eighth grade) at the time of conducting the research.

For the purposes of the first part of the research an *online* questionnaire was created in order to collect as much relevant information as possible about the participants' language biography. The *online* questionnaire consisted of open and

closed type of questions in order to collect as much data as possible that describe the reality about both the students' and parents' linguistic background.

In the second part of the research a picture test of the Croatian language was used, based on 31 picture showing different objects, animals, people, that students are expected to recognise and select the correct answer out of the four given answers. Apart from the picture test, the students were supposed to name as many animals and body parts as they can in a minute and the collected data provided insight into the examinees' lexical competence in the Croatian language.

### **Research results, discussion and conclusion**

The first research goal was to examine the parents' motivation for enrolling their children in the American International School of Zagreb and their attitudes towards the Croatian language as the language of their environment. In the conducted research it was found that *acquiring and learning English* motivated the examinees the most, 16,1 % of them, for enrolling their children in AISZ.

The second research goal was to examine lexical competence of children attending the American International School of Zagreb and whether it differs if we consider students' gender and their attitudes towards the Croatian language. The students were shown 31 picture that they had to name, and they made 3 (3,8 % examinees) to 20 (3,8 % examinees) mistakes. On average they made 10 mistakes. Most examinees, 19,2 %, made 6 mistakes on average.

If we consider the picture test as a whole, the examinees successfully did 65 % of the test on average, i. e. 34 % is the worst test score whereas 90 % is the best test score. It is interesting that 15,4 % of the examinees successfully did 70 % of the test, i. e. 74 % of the test.

In one minute examinees named from zero to 28 animals, i. e. 12,93 animals on average. 11,5 % of the examinees named 12 or 14 animals in a minute. It is interesting that the examinees named from zero to 23 body parts in a minute, i. e. 12,33 on average. 19,2 % of the examinees named 19 body parts, i. e. 15,4 % of the examinees named zero body parts, i. e. 15,4 % of the examinees each named 16 body parts. The examinees were also asked to assess their attitude towards Croatian and English on a scale from 1 to 5. They mostly described their attitude towards the Croatian language using mark 3 (neither love nor do not love, AS = 3,3), and their attitude towards English language with 4 (love, AS 4,0). Mann Whitney U test shows no statistically significant difference in answers if we consider examinees' gender ( $p < 0,01$ ) although girls have somewhat better results than boys in all categories, and Kruskal Wallis test reveals no statistically significant difference in a lexical knowledge test regarding students' attitude towards Croatian as the language of the environment and towards English ( $p < 0,01$ ).

The third research goal was to examine if parents' attitudes towards Croatian as the language of the environment were related to their language biography. Using Pearson correlation coefficient the following correlations were established: correlation between the participants' mother tongue and the importance of learning Croatian is positive ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which indicates that there is a connection between the parents' mother tongue and how much it is important for them that their child is learning Croatian.

The research showed that attitudes towards the language of the environment in which a child is growing up significantly influence the perception of the importance of learning that language, but also that these attitudes are transferred from parents to children. What is conclusive of a child's attitude towards Croatian as the language of the environment is parents' language biography, a child's mother tongue, knowledge of other languages and Croatian language competence as the language of the environment. On the one hand, the motivation for children attending the named school is based on them not knowing the language of the environment and on the other hand their motivation to become better at English (*lingua franca*) is even stronger since it is the language of communication and learning in that school. The results of testing vocabulary knowledge also indicate that there are significant differences in Croatian language knowledge among the examinees so it is necessary to encourage motivation for learning Croatian as the language of the environment since being more competent in using the language of the environment is crucial for being successfully integrated in the society and developing better social and emotional connections, thus having a happier childhood in accordance with all the principles of interculturality and the goal to foster multilingualism as ground values of the European Union.

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