ENGLISH IN CROATIA – FROM NEEDS TO ACHIEVEMENTS

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Summary - *The paper focuses on the aims and research methodology of the Croatian national project English in Croatia. The authors, one of whom headed the research team, point out that reasons for such a project are connected with the need to conceptualise FL education policies on the basis of research-based insights instead of what has been common practice up to now – on unverified individual intuitions. The authors also explain at length the choice of measuring instruments used in the project. They stress that the Hungarian battery of tests used represent measures validated in a similar socio-educational context, that they make possible comparative studies of the same phenomena and that the communicative tests in the battery, aiming at the CEFR A2 and B1 levels, coincide with the language communicative competence set out by the Creational national curriculum. The paper offers a detailed description of the piloting of all the instruments used.*

Besides the new insights about the status of English in Croatia, the authors also draw attention to some additional project results concerning development of new research competences in the field of FL education investigations.

Key words: CEFR levels, assessment of affective learner characteristics, assessment of communicative competence, pre-testing of instruments

The main reason for starting the Croatian national project *English in Croatia*[1] was the fact that English language education policy in Croatia has been shaped mostly by unverified individual intuitions and assumptions.

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[1] The project English in Croatia is a project of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Due to inefficient educational strategies in English language education it is unfortunately common for adult professionals to invest substantial amounts of money (very often even government money), time and effort to achieve the level of competence in English required by their profession. In designing the project we assumed that, based on systematic research results, we could change the overall English learning policy implemented in the national educational system and, thus, achieve the levels of competence in English comparable with EU standards.

The need for such a research project was also imposed by the fact that English is the language of international communication and that its status and importance should make it the first foreign language in Croatia, learned together with another world language. It is not necessary to stress how important this is for the profile of the future citizen of Europe, who should, according to the standards of the European Union, speak two foreign languages in addition to their own language.

The overall aim of the project was to investigate the status of the English language in Croatia. By *status* we mean English language needs of Croatian people in their everyday private and professional life, and the level of communicative competence generally acquired at the end of primary and secondary school education. In order to get a wider perspective on the status of English in Croatia, parallel investigations were conducted on another world language taught in Croatia - the German language. We assumed that the comparison of results in the two languages would, on one hand, shed more light on the status of the English language and, on the other, generate useful insights into learning and teaching other foreign languages in the Croatian socio-educational context.

It is expected that project results will be applicable to the Croatian educational system as a whole, and that they will substantially contribute to the improvement of future English language teacher education at the national level.

Research methodology

Sample

Eighth grade elementary school learners (age 13-14) and fourth grade secondary school learners (age 17-18) participated in the project. A sample of adults participated in the study on foreign language needs. The sample used in the study was a convenience sample. The elementary school sample included 1,481

participants from 66 schools. The following criterion was used in choosing the schools: each geographical region of Croatia was represented by 10 classes - five from five urban, and five from five rural schools. The final sample included more schools than first planned since some schools had very small classes. The secondary school sample consisted of 656 participants from 30 secondary schools. In choosing the secondary school sample we divided schools into three groups: grammar schools as the first, catering, economics and medical secondary schools as the second, and electrical engineering, building construction, mechanical engineering and vocational-art secondary schools as the third group. This sample included all Croatian geographical regions as well. Characteristics of both sub-samples are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for primary school sample

Gender	M	46.9 %
	F	53.1 %
Number of English lessons per week	3	93.5 %
	more than 3	6.5 %
	fewer	39.7 %
Length of learning	5 years	53.8 %
	fewer than 5	46.2 %
Out-of-class English language learning	yes	8.2 %
	no	91.8 %
Learning other foreign language	yes	20.2 %
	no	79.8 %
Use of the Internet	no	34.0 %
	rarely	29.7 %
	often	36.3 %

As can be seen from the table above, the primary school sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender. A great majority had three English language class periods per week, and one half started learning English in the fourth grade. A small number of participants learned English out of school, and only one fifth of the participants learned another foreign language. One third did not use the Internet, and roughly one third used it very often.

Table 2: Descpriptive statistics for secondary school sample

Gender	M	44.1 %
	F	55.9 %
Number of English lessons per week	two	29.1 %
	three	60.1 %
	four	10.8 %
Length of learning	9 years	51.3 %
	Fewer than 9 years	31.2 %
	More than 9 years	17.5 %
Out-of-class English language learning	yes	3.4 %
	no	96.6 %
Learning other foreign language	yes	62..4 %
	no	37.6 %
Use of the Internet	no	0.2 %
	rarely	14.9 %
	often	84.9 %

The secondary school sample was also relatively balanced in terms of gender, with the exception that there was a higher percentage of female learners than in the primary school sample. More than a half of secondary school learners had three English class periods per week, and almost a third had only two. A half of the participants had learned English for nine years, roughly a third for fewer than nine years, and a minority for more than nine years. A great majority did not learn English out of school. Most secondary school learners learned other foreign languages besides English. In contrast to primary school learners, a very small number of secondary school learners did not use the Internet, while a great majority used it very often.

There were also two sub-samples in the part of the study where we analysed foreign language needs. The first sub-sample participated in designing the needs analysis questionnaire and it consisted of 388 adult participants. The second sub-sample (250 adult participants) participated in the second phase of investigating foreign language needs (for details on the adult sub-sample see S. Narančić Kovač and I. Cindrić, this issue).

INSTRUMENTS

Since the project was the first attempt (at the national level) to investigate the communicative competence, rather than just the knowledge of a language (for details on this key concept of the project see V. Bagarić and J. Mihaljević Djigunović, this issue), we used a battery of instruments which consisted of communicative tests. Besides these tests, a questionnaire investigating learner affective characteristics was used as well[2].

In order to measure the communicative competence of Croatian learners of English and German we used Hungarian-made communicative tests. Those tests were designed and validated by a team of Hungarian experts as a part of their project on school-leaving examination reform (Fekete, Major and Nikolov, 1999; Alderson, Nagy and Öveges, 2000). We decided to use these tests for the following reasons: there were no appropriate validated tests of communicative competence in Croatia, and we did not find the existing foreign tests, commercially used in Croatia, appropriate for our educational context and aims; the levels thar Hungarian tests tapped corresponded to the levels set by the Croatian national curriculum for primary and secondary schools; the socio-educational contexts in Hungary and Croatia were judged to be similar enough to assume that the Hungarian tests would be suitable for the Croatian context; using the same tests would allow for relevant comparisons with learners from the wider European social and educational context that Croatia belongs to.

The communicative competence test battery used in the project consisted of tests measuring competence through four language skills**:** listening comprehen-

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[2] For details on instrumets used see other articles in this issue.

sion, reading comprehension, speaking and writing. Even though they are called language skills tests, they were actually testing contextual knowledge and abilities needed for efficient language use while performing communicative activities (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

The tests were aimed at levels defined in the document of the Council of Europe - *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (2001)*.

The tests used for measuring competence of the primary school sample aimed at the A2 level, while those for the secondary school sample aimed at the B1 level. The main categories of knowledge and the abilities learners should possess at these levels are described in Table 3.

Table 3: DESCRIPTION OF LANGUAGE CATEGORIES AT REFERENCE LEVELS A2 AND B1 (Source: Framework, 2001:26)

		A2	**B1**
UNDERSTANDING	**Listening**	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point on many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear
	Reading	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
SPEAKING	**Spoken Interaction**	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
	Spoken Production	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.
WRITING	**Writing**	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

The tests measured the following components of communicative competence: language[3] and strategic competence. Language competence was investigated through the following sub-components: grammatical competence (Gram), textual competence (Tex), functional competence (Func) and sociolinguistic competence (Solin).

Strategic competence (Strat) is defined in terms of possessing verbal communication strategies used for compensating inadequate competence in one or more components of communicative competence (e.g., paraphrasing, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance (words, structures, topics), guessing, changing register and style, adjusting a message etc.). From our definition of strategic competence it is obvious that this component of communicative competence is not fully investigated in our research. The reason partly lies in the fact that in investigating a speaker's foreign language communicative competence, as some theoreticians point out (e.g., Buck, 2001:105), it makes more sense to put a greater emphasis on investigating language competence, since it is the language competence that changes with the progress in language learning, that differentiates foreign language speakers, especially those whose cognitive abilities are already developed and stable.

The tables below show in a concise manner the competences and the types of tasks in the communicative tests used in the project.

Table 4: Structure of communicative competence tests for primary school sample (level A2)

Activity	Knowledge and abilities (competences)	Type of exercise
Reading	Identifying terms; understanding meaning (Gram)	Matching definitions with terms
	Identifying definitions; understanding meaning (Gram,Tex)	Matching definitions with meaning
	Identifying suitable answers to the questions asked in an interview; searching for specific information (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Matching answers with questions
	Identifying a text with a correct answer to a question; searching for specific information (Gram, Tex, Func)	Matching answers with questions
	Identifying a text /main idea in a text; differentiating between important and unimportant information in a text (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Matching text with its title
	Identifying the main gist in a text; recognising cohesive elements and text structure (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Matching words, phrases and sentences with the gaps in a text

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[3] For definitions of language and strategic sompetences see V. Bagarić and J. Mihaljević Djigunović, this issue.

Listening	Making logical conclusions on who the people in the pictures are; understanding meaning (Gram, Tex)	Matching person's name with the number they represent
	Identifying specific information in text which matches or refers to answers to the questions (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Multiple choice
Writing	- language use in description/presentation of picture content - use of cohesive resources - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - use of spelling rules (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Guided picture description
Speaking	- use of general conversational language in interaction - fluency; use of communication strategies - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Guided interview
	- use of language in picture description and comparison - fluency; use of communication strategies - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Narrative-type exercise (picture description and comparison)
	- use of language in assigned communication context; ability to initiate, maintain and direct communication - fluency; use of communication strategies use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Role play

(Bagarić, 2007, pp 160-161)

Table 5: Structure of communicative competence tests for secondary school sample (level B1)

Activity	Knowledge and abilities (competences)	Type of exercise
Reading	Identifying topic/main idea expressed in a text; differentiating between important and unimportant information in a text (Gram, Tex, Func)	Matching book title with its summary
	Identifying key ideas in a text; differentiating between important and unimportant information in a text (Gram, Tex, Func)	Matching thoughts with person's statement
	Identifying gist; recognising cohesive elements and text structure (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Matching words, phrases and sentences with gaps in the text
	Identifying sequence of events; understanding texts structure, recognising cohesive links in a text (Gram,Tex)	Rearranging sentences in the text
	Identifying part of sentence in a text referring to an answer to a question; finding specific information (Gram, Tex)	Multiple choice
	Identifying suitable answers to the questions asked in the interview; ; finding specific information (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Matching questions with answers
	Identifying text containing correct answer to the question asked; finding specific information (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	matching questions with answers
	finding specific information; making conclusions about meaning implied in the text (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Multiple choice
Listening	Finding explicit or implicit information in the text which provides answer to the question asked (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Multiple choice
Writing	- use of language in interaction, narration and making argument - use of cohesive resources and resources for achieving text coherence - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - use of spelling rules (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Guided letter writing

Speaking	- use of general conversational language in interaction - fluency; use of communication strategies - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Guided interview
	- use of language in picture description and comparison - fluency; use of communication strategies - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Narrative-type exercise (picture description, comparing picture with real life situation, story telling)
	- use of language in argument discussion - fluency; use of communication strategies - use of vocabulary - use of grammatical forms and structures - correct pronunciation (Gram, Tex, Func, Solin)	Discussion on the assigned topic

(Bagarić, 2007, pp.163-164)

Depending on the testing method, these competences are traced and investigated either separately or in relation to other competences. For example, in receptive language use, i.e., in listening and writing activities, several competences were usually investigated at the same time, whereas in productive use, i.e. in writing and speaking, they were investigated separately. It is particularly demanding and difficult to organise and conduct research in which individual components of communicative competence would be investigated separately, especially in the case of receptive activities.

Piloting of tests

Even though the Hungarian tests were standardised and underwent the usual psychometric

pre-testing**,** due to possible differences between Hungarian and Croatian educational contexts in the area of FL teaching and learning, we pretested (piloted) two (*Reading comprehension and Listening comprehension*) out of four groups of tests in order to measure their reliability.

The piloting was conducted in 2002. Listening comprehension and Reading comprehension tests for English were piloted in Zagreb. The A2 level sample comprised 89 primary school learners and the B1 level sample consisted of 54 secondary school learners. The same tests in the German language were piloted in Osijek, on a sample of 57 primary school learners and 63 secondary school lear-

ners. The descriptive statistics for the tests and test tasks is presented in the tables below.

Table 6: Arithmetic mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and alpha coefficient (α) for Listening comprehension and Reading comprehension tests at level A2 for English (N=89) and German (N=57)

TEST	ENGLISH (level A2)				GERMAN (level A2)			
	No. of questions	M	SD	α	No. of questions	M	SD	α
Reading com-prehension (RC))	46	34.910	8.820	.940	42	21.983	11.748	.956
Exercise 1	10	8.674	2.499	.910	8	4.44	3.05	.909
Exercise 2	10	8.034	2.618	.890	9	6.77	2.71	.891
Exercise 3	9	8.000	1.462	.716[1]	7	2.79	2.31	.805
Exercise 4	8	6.483	2.413	.904	9	4.30	3.44	.915
Exercise 5	9	3.719	2.426	.777	9	3.68	2.97	.885
Listening com-prehension (RS)	20	19.483	1.603	.852	19	14.930	3.474	.831
Exercise 1	10	10.000	-	-	10	8.39	2.21	.827
Exercise 2	10	9.483	1.603	.900	9	6.51	1.76	.660

[1] *Only for 8 questions, since one question has 0 variance.*

Table 7: Arithmetic mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and alpha coefficient (α) for Listening comprehension and Reading comprehension tests at B1 level for English (N=54) and German (N=63)

TEST	ENGLISH (level A2)				GERMAN (level A2)			
	No. of questions	M	SD	α	No. of questions	M	SD	α
Reading com-prehension (RČ)	47	36.093	7.534	.901	42	21.524	9.250	.910
Exercise 1	10	8.09	2.10	.754	8	3.98	2.70	.853
Exercise 2	9	6.83	2.26	.828	6	3.11	2.16	.830
Exercise 3	9	5.98	2.19	.709	8	3.79	2.19	.705
Exercise 4	10	9.06	1.87	.842	12	6.75	3.33	.838
Exercise 5	9	6.13	2.16	.819[1]	8	3.89	2.82	.875
Listening com-prehension (RS)	16	12.426	2.589	.674	16	8.873	3.329	.707

[1] *Only for 8 questions, since one question has 0 variance*.

As can be seen form the tables above, reliability indices (alpha coefficients or Cronbach alpha) of the reading comprehension tests in English and German

were, at the piloting stage, relatively high - ranging from α =.901 to α=.956. A slightly lower, but still acceptable is the reliability of listening comprehension tests in German at both reference levels: reliability indices were .831, and .707 for A2 and B1 tests respectively. Further, relatively acceptable is the reliability of the same test in English at the B1 level (α=.674). However, the listening comprehension test for English at the A2 level was found unreliable. The first task in the test was done with 100% accuracy. Cronbach alpha for the second task was .900. Considering possible reasons for the facility value, we concluded that it is very likely that the supervision of participants was neglected during the pre-testing. As opposed to reading comprehension test, which was administered in two versions, the listening comprehension test had only one version so the participants sitting close to each other could have easily worked together during the test. Other possible reasons refer to the sample population included in the pilot study. Based on the results obtained from the same pilot test for German in Osijek, we assumed that participants from other parts of Croatia would have different test results than those in Zagreb. It is for these reasons that we decided not to change the listening comprehension test for English at the A2 level but to use it in its original form in further investigations.

Measuring affective learner characteristics

The instrument for measuring affective learner characteristics was also designed and validated in Hungary, and for our purposes translated into Croatian. It consisted of three parts. The first part included a 14-statement questionnaire. The participant expressed their attitudes towards the statements by circling corresponding numbers on a five-point scale (1= not at all true, 2= mostly not true, 3=I'm not sure, 4= mostly true, 5= absolutely true)**.** In the second part of the instrument the participants were supposed to assess the level of their general foreign language knowledge and declare the knowledge level that would be satisfactory for both them and their parents. The final part consisted of two open questions which required a more elaborate answer on good and bad aspects of English /German language classes.

The instrument measuring affective learner characteristics was also tested in the pilot study on a 120-learner primary and secondary sample. Internal consistency alpha coefficient of the scale in the first part of the instrument was .86.

PROCEDURE

The testing was conducted during regular foreign language classes on three separate occasions. On the first occasion participants did listening and writing tests, on the second occasion they did the reading test and the questionnaire on affective learner characteristics, while on the third occasion individual speaking te-

sts were conducted with six randomly selected participants from each class. On the third occasion learners' oral productions were audio-taped.

Prior to testing, examiners were trained in the procedures of test administration.

Test evaluation was conducted in two ways. Reading and listening tests were evaluated against the test key. The speaking and writing tests, however, were subjected to a qualitative analysis, and using analytic grading scales the results were turned into quantitative data. A number of evaluators were first trained for this complex procedure. Evaluator groups were formed for each level and individual test since such evaluation training should be done on an actual tasks.

DATA ANALYSIS

Statistical analyses of results were conducted using the *SPSS* programme package for Windows 11.2, and the following statistical procedures were used: descriptive statistics, reliability analysis**,** paired t-test**,** correlation analysis and regressive analysis.[4]

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research conducted within the project *English in Croatia* provided us with new insights into the status of the English language in Croatia. Since these findings and insights are elaborated in other articles in this issue, we will not go into them here. We will, however, consider here the aspects of research project work somewhat rarely mentioned in research literature. Our project generated results to three additional and extremely important levels. The first level refers to the development of international research cooperation: the use of the instruments designed by Hungarian scientists allowed for comparative analyses of English language status in two European contexts. Paraphrasing Robert Gardner (1985:5) we can point out once again that 'it is only with repeated investigation that the complexities of an area can be truly appreciated'. The second level refers to the establishment of an interdisciplinary research team: each member of the project team contributed to the quality of the project in their own unique way. Therefore, the same research questions and problems were considered from linguistic, applied linguistic, glottodidactic and second language acquisition perspectives. And last but not least, we would like to point out direct application of new insights and experiences in educating future English language teachers. The application came about totally unexpectedly during the work on the project. Since the financial resources and the size of the project team were disproportionately low with respect to research demands, a possible solution to the problem was seen in including undergraduate

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[4] Team members would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance given to them by Toni Babarović in carrying out elabotare statistical analyses.

students of English to participate in the work on the project. It turned out to be an excellent move since a greater number of exceptionally interested students were given a chance to participate in research activities during their undergraduate studies. With their enthusiasm and interest, talent and ability to conduct parts of the project research, these students acquired valuable initial research competences every future expert needs in the field of glottodidactics.

We are hoping that new scientific insights and results generated by the project *English in Croatia* will contribute to a better understanding of the field of FL teaching and learning.

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