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Attitudes to early formal learning of English as L3 in a bilingual community

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Abstract

This diploma paper analyses parents' attitudes to early language learning in schools in Istria, a bilingual county in Croatia. The aim of this paper was to observe whether parents demonstrated positive or negative attitudes to the acquisition of three languages from Grade 1 of primary school, since their attitudes and opinions could greatly influence children's success during the language learning process.

The paper presents the theoretical background to the study, focusing on the concepts such as early learning of multiple languages, interrelationships between each language, the role and influence of parents' attitudes and the linguistic context of Croatia and Istria. The second part of the paper involves the description of the study, its aim, participants and form, which is followed by the results and discussion. The results generally showed positive attitudes towards early language learning, language teaching, the choice of foreign languages, simultaneous acquisition of three languages and the interrelationship between the languages. Lastly, the conclusion brings a summary of the main concepts and findings presented in this paper.

Key words: bilingual community, early language learning, formal education, multilingual acquisition, parents' attitudes

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more children begin to acquire multiple languages at an early age. One of the reasons for an early start is the belief that younger age is more suitable for learning several languages. Other reasons include various historical, political and social circumstances. As a result, children's everyday lives become unimaginable without several languages.

The presence of different languages in communities prompted the development of bilingual and multilingual education, in which different languages of instruction served to promote the linguistic diversity. In addition to this, foreign language learning also gained prominence in the recent decades, becoming an essential component of education systems, especially in Europe. The most common foreign language learnt in European schools is English, mostly because of its widespread and diverse use all over the world.

It is also important to emphasize that the choice of foreign languages at school can be influenced by children's parents. Their attitudes and opinions about the target language can greatly shape children's initial attitudes towards the language. Moreover, they can have a major impact on the future development and the ultimate success in the target language.

Therefore, this paper will observe parents' attitudes and opinions towards the early learning of English as L3, which has become a compulsory subject from Grade 1 of the Italian-medium primary school in Istria, Croatia. The specific linguistic situation in Istria gives the children an opportunity to learn Croatian and Italian before initiating their formal education. Once enrolling in Grade 1 of primary school, children start learning English, their first foreign language, and the third language in their linguistic repertoire. Other foreign languages are offered as elective subjects at later stages of primary education.

The theoretical part of the paper will involve the description of early language learning in formal and informal environments, which will be followed by the potential advantages and disadvantages of the early learning of multiple languages. The paper will also include the interrelationships between the languages, especially observing the influence of previously acquired languages. The following chapter of the theoretical framework will illustrate the role of parents' attitudes and how they may influence the development of children's attitudes towards language learning. This chapter will also include a short review of previous studies on parents' attitudes towards language learning. The theoretical overview will be concluded

with the historical and linguistic background of Croatia and Istria. The second part of the paper will present a study, which aims at observing parents' positive and negative attitudes towards different aspects of early language learning.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Early language learning

Language acquisition is one of the most remarkable and complex processes children overcome during the first couple of years of their life. When acquiring their first language (L1), children are confronted with a linguistic system and its set of rules for the first time. They gradually begin to understand and produce certain aspects of language, such as sounds, words and grammatical structures. By the age of four, children master the basic linguistic structures, “ask questions, give commands, report real events, and create stories” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 7-8).

The importance of language acquisition during childhood was further explained by Jensen (1962, p. 133). According to him, language acquisition

helps to satisfy the child's immediate physiological needs, it satisfies his curiosity about his environment, and it permits him to formulate and express his thoughts and feelings. It enables him to secure information and share experiences, to make educational progress, and to identify with and adjust to the people around him. (Jensen, 1962, p. 133)

A similar, but more complex process takes place when children learn two or more languages from their earliest days. Children who learn and use one additional language besides their first language (L1) could be described as bilinguals. Their command of both languages may range from minimal to near-native. (Bloomfield, 1935; Cook, 2002; as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013, p. 163) Since bilinguals are exposed to two languages, they may not receive equal amounts of input in each language, leading to differing levels of proficiency. What is more, bilinguals acquire and use their languages in different contexts, for different purposes and with different interlocutors, which may imply that “not all bilinguals have the opportunity to use both their languages on a regular basis” (Baker, 2006, p. 6).

Unlike their monolingual peers, bilingual children acquire two diverse linguistic systems, either from birth or soon afterwards. Depending on the age of acquisition of the two languages, child bilingualism can be divided in two categories: simultaneous and sequential bilingualism. Simultaneous bilingualism refers to children “whose dual language learning experiences began at birth or at least before the age of 3” (Paradis, 2007, p. 15). The examples of simultaneous bilingualism are numerous: children acquire two languages at home where

each parent speaks one language to the child; both parents freely use both languages with the child; children speak one language at home and the other in the wider community; etc. (Paradis, 2007, p. 15). On the other hand, sequential bilingualism occurs when “one language is introduced after the other language has become somewhat established, e.g., after the age of 3” (Paradis, 2007, p. 15). One of the examples of sequential bilingualism may occur when a child learns their first language (L1) at home and starts learning their second language (L2) at school.

Apart from differences in the age of acquisition, simultaneous and sequential bilinguals may also differ in the proficiency level between their two languages. In other words, sequential bilinguals may have a larger proficiency gap between their two languages at the early stages of acquisition. Also, sequential bilinguals may not reach the same level of native-speaker attainment as simultaneous bilinguals. However, Paradis (2007, p. 33) pointed out that “differences in abilities in both languages between simultaneous and sequential bilinguals may diminish by the end of elementary school if both languages are highly supported in the community and educational systems.”

However, child bilingualism is not the only linguistic phenomenon that is gaining prominence in the modern world. Many children not only become bilingual, but also multilingual. Mihaljević Djigunović (2013, p. 163) tried to roughly define multilingual speakers, as “learners and users of more than two (...) languages whose command of the languages may [have the same wide range as in bilinguals – from minimal to near-native].”

One of the phenomena involved under the umbrella term multilingualism is trilingualism, quantitatively determined as the acquisition of three languages. Even though bilingualism and trilingualism share many similarities – such as the amount of input, differing levels of proficiency, etc. – learning the third language significantly influences the learner’s linguistic system. “An additional language affects the overall linguistic system of the learner, while creating new links and relationships. The whole system is restructured and new skills and learning techniques arise from learners’ previous language-learning experience” (Safont Jordá, 2005, p. 14).

Furthermore, unlike bilingualism in which simultaneous and sequential acquisition represented the only two possibilities for dual language learning, third language acquisition could be divided into at least four possibilities: simultaneous acquisition of L1/L2/L3, sequential acquisition of L1, L2 and L3, simultaneous acquisition of L2/L3 after learning the

L1, and simultaneous acquisition of L1/L2 before learning the L3 (Cenoz, 2000, p. 40). The numerous possibilities for the acquisition of the third language could develop under certain social circumstances. For example, children who are brought up with two home languages that differ from the language spoken in the community, children whose home language is different from the two community languages, bilinguals who acquire a third language in school, bilinguals who have become trilingual through immigration, and members of trilingual communities (Hoffmann, 2001, p. 4).

Thus, the linguistic environment in which children encounter the language plays a crucial role in the early language learning. Children's exposure to language can take place in two different sorts of linguistic environments: natural or informal environments, and artificial or formal environments (Krashen, 1976, p. 157). On the one hand, in natural or informal environments, children are "surrounded by the language for many hours each day" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 111), either when they simply overhear the language or when their parents, relatives or caregivers speak to them. Therefore, children are exposed to a very high amount of input in the target language at home, in the street, on the playground, etc. What is more, the language is not presented one step at the time, but children encounter a wide variety of linguistic structures at once. Even their errors are rarely corrected, especially if they do not interfere with the meaning of the utterance and the interlocutors understand what children have tried to say (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 110-111).

On the other hand, the artificial or formal environments usually include language learning in the classroom. Unlike informal environments, language "learning [in formal environments] is often limited to a few hours a week" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 112). Thus, children spend less time in contact with the target language, experiencing a far smaller range of different language discourse types. Moreover, teachers often employ children's native language to give instructions or keep discipline in classroom, which also contributes to the reduced exposure to the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 112). Apart from the limited contact with the language, children learn and practice one linguistic item at a time, following specific sequences previously determined by the curriculum, textbooks or teachers. In order to accurately master the linguistic items, children's errors in speech and writing are frequently corrected, which is not common in informal environments.

In certain formal environments, the learning of two or more languages may be encouraged, resulting in bilingual or multilingual education. "The term bilingual education refers to the use of two (or more) languages of instruction at some point in [children's] school

career. The languages are used to teach subject matter content rather than just the language itself” (Cummins, 2007, as cited in Cenoz, 2009, p. 31). Thus, using two or more languages to teach both the language and the subject content creates a rich academic context, in which children get the opportunity to develop both languages. However, not all bilingual schools use both languages to the same extent. Baker (2006, pp. 215-216) divided bilingual education on strong and weak forms, taking into account the language background of the child, the language of the classroom, and the societal, educational and linguistic aims. In his classification, strong forms of bilingual education tend to give equal importance to both languages, which supports bilingualism and develops biliteracy. On the contrary, weak forms of bilingual education put the emphasis on one language while decreasing the use of the other language. This type of education eventually limits the development of bilingualism.

Alongside bilingual education, “multilingual education is becoming more widespread due to the recent trends to foster multilingualism, either through the introduction of a foreign language at an early age – in most cases English, or one or two second foreign languages in secondary schools” (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 122). The former example, introducing a foreign language as a third language at an early age, takes place in schools where several other languages are already used as languages of instruction so the foreign language is only introduced as a subject. Nevertheless, an increasing number of children are learning three or more languages during their primary education.

Regardless of the number of languages in primary school, the teaching methods, activities and materials may greatly influence the acquisition of additional languages. Several studies (Vilke 1995; Vilke 1999; Enever 2011) have shown that language learning at an early age should include games, songs, rhymes, pictures, cards, etc. These activities and materials introduce the element of fun, which facilitates learning and develops children’s motivation, imagination and creativity.

2.1.1. Benefits of early foreign language learning

When observing foreign language learning, “there is the popular idea that children pick up languages more easily than adults and that *the earlier the better* is the right strategy for language learning” (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 127). Many researchers have tried to determine the optimal age for learning a foreign language. The most popular hypothesis that

focused on the optimal age for language learning is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). This hypothesis proposed that humans acquired certain knowledge and skills during a ‘critical period’ in their lives, when the innate biological structures contributed to the language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 17). Even though there is little agreement on the exact beginning and end of the critical period, it is often claimed that the critical period ended around puberty. Beyond this critical period,

learners may depend on more general learning abilities – the same ones they might use to learn other kinds of skills and information. It is argued that these general learning abilities are not as effective for language learning as the more specific, innate capacities that are available to the young child. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 68)

Therefore, taking into account the supposed time span of the critical period, it has been suggested to start foreign language learning at primary school age (usually the age of 6-7) (Vilke, 1999). It is assumed, and often confirmed in various studies, that children who begin to learn a foreign language in primary school and continue throughout their schooling achieve native-like pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). At that age, children imitate the pronunciation of the foreign language and eventually sound like native speakers. Older learners have more difficulties with acquiring the native-like pronunciation, so they mostly retain a noticeable foreign accent (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 69). Also, another argument for the early start of foreign language learning is the length of exposure. The longer exposure to the language gives children more opportunities to hear and use the language in different contexts. Baker (2006, p. 128) pointed out that “children who learn [an additional] language in childhood do tend to achieve higher levels of proficiency than those who begin after childhood.” Moreover, at primary school age, children are not preoccupied with other obligations, so they have more time to devote to learning an additional language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 68). In addition to this, Medved Krajnović and Letica (2009, p. 601) summarized several studies and emphasized that young children generally had more positive attitudes towards learning an additional language, which might increase willingness to continue learning the language.

2.2. Multiple language learning at an early age

Historically, children's ability to learn more than one language in their early years was closely associated with numerous developmental, educational and linguistic problems. There was a widespread concern that children could encounter difficulties when coping with two or more languages. These alleged difficulties included confusion, unequal proficiency in each language, linguistic, cognitive and academic delay, etc. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 25) Thus, learning multiple languages was perceived as an additional burden for children.

One of the common 'problems' associated with bilingualism and multilingualism is language delay, which "occurs when a child is (...) late in learning to talk or lags (...) behind peers in language development" (Baker, 2000, p. 126). Learning more than one linguistic system at an early age may result in an initial silent period in bilingual and multilingual children, so they may start speaking later than their monolingual peers. However, some researchers (e.g. Baker 2000; Lightbown & Spada 2006) suggested that language delay was more often caused by partial hearing, deafness, articulatory problems, dyslexia and many other unknown reasons. Thus, "raising children bilingually [or multilingually] neither increases nor reduces the chance of language disorder or delay" (Baker, 2000, p. 127).

It was also believed that bilingual and multilingual children would encounter problems in their future language development. For example, they will develop a smaller active and passive vocabulary because they "will be occupied learning two terms for one referent. Even the total number of terms is likely to be less than the total number for the monolingual" (Jensen, 1962, p. 135). Nevertheless, when the vocabularies of each language are considered together, they will be larger than the monolingual vocabulary.

Still, the most frequent concern regarding multiple language learning was related to language mixing. This phenomenon "occurs when items from another language are introduced into the base language" (Baker, 2000, p. 31). In other words, children used words or grammatical structures from one language in utterances in another language. Thus, language mixing was often perceived as a deficit, an inadequate mastery of both languages, the result of laziness and poor language habits (Baker, 2006, p. 109). Throughout the history, early studies mostly identified detrimental effects of language mixing and supported the widespread concerns. For example, Jensen (1962, p. 135) pointed out that if children tended "to think in one language and speak in another, [they] may become mentally uncertain and

confused”. This may also indicate that children could not distinguish between the languages in their repertoire. However, in recent decades, many studies (Lightbown & Spada 2006; De Angelis 2007; Paradis 2007, etc.) have refuted these concerns.

Despite the alleged difficulties, researchers have found much more advantages regarding the early bilingualism and multilingualism. In the first place, learning multiple languages creates the opportunities to speak to a wider community. Many children have to use several languages within the immediate and extended family, for example, when their parents speak two different languages at home, or when the grandparents and the rest of the extended family speak a different language from the child (Baker, 2000, p. 12). As a result, children develop a closer and more intimate relationship with their parents when communicating in the parents’ first language. “At the same time, both parents are passing part of their past, their heritage, to that child” (Baker, 2000, p. 12). The same relationships may evolve with the extended family. Bilingual and multilingual children bridge the linguistic gap between the generations, which can make them feel as a full member of the family. Alongside communication within the family, bilingual and multilingual children can use the diverse languages from their repertoire for communication with people all over the world, for travelling to other countries or for speaking to tourists in their own country (Baker, 2000, p. 13). Using the interlocutors’ native language facilitates mutual comprehension and develops a closer and more open relationship.

Baker (2000, p. 14) also emphasized the importance of literacy in each language children learned. According to him, literacy in each language provides access to different literatures, traditions, ideas and ways of thinking, “doubles the pleasures of reading novels or magazines, of writing to friends”, etc. But most importantly, developing literacy in multiple languages improves children’s writing skills, which may be beneficial for their future education and employment.

Also, learning two or more languages can positively influence children’s cognitive development. One of the most frequently mentioned cognitive concepts is metalinguistic awareness – “the ability to think of language (...), the ability to separate meanings and forms, (...) and understand the use of grammatical forms and structures” (De Angelis, 2007, p. 121). In other words, bilinguals and multilinguals become more conscious of the ideas, content and meaning that one language conveys, rather than just noticing words, form and symbols. Alongside metalinguistic awareness, children’s creative and flexible thinking abilities tend to improve with the presence of multiple languages. Baker (2000, p. 70) further explained that

bilinguals and multilinguals had “two or more words for a single object or idea, two or more ways of referring to the same content area, concept, idea or information.” Thus, bilingual and multilingual children may demonstrate more freedom and richness during the process of thinking.

The early learning of several languages could also have cultural advantages. Language learning not only implies mastering the linguistic system, but also includes learning about the culture, its traditions, sayings and rituals. Children who learn different languages have the opportunity to experience various cultures. They develop a better understanding of people of other nationalities and ethnic groups, which eventually leads to “broader enculturation, deeper multiculturalism, (...) greater tolerance [of cultural difference] and less racism” (Baker, 2000, p. 12).

Moreover, bilinguals and multilinguals may have certain economic advantages in their native country and abroad, as a result of globalization, global markets and international trade. More precisely, learning more languages widens the choice of potential careers and jobs in the future, for example, in “tourism, international transport, public relations, banking and accountancy, information technology, marketing and sales, the law, teaching,” etc. (Baker, 2000, p. 14). These and many other jobs may require the knowledge of more than one language, which gives a considerable advantage to bilingual and multilingual individuals.

As a result of numerous positive factors in multiple language learning, and other political, social, technological and economic circumstances, foreign languages – languages learnt in communities which have another native language (Vilke, 1999, p. 22) – gained importance in the modern world. In Europe, where diverse languages coexist, foreign languages have become an inevitable part of primary and secondary education. When observing the possible options for foreign languages in European primary and secondary schools, English has become the most common choice. As a consequence, “about 90 % of (...) students from non-English-speaking countries are learning English [as a foreign language]” (Cenoz, 2009, p. 12). The high percentage of learners indicates the importance and prestige of English, which still continues to flourish, especially in the area of education, technology, business and tourism. Therefore, it is no wonder that English is frequently recognized as a global language, which provides access to higher education, facilitates international and intercultural communication, and improves economic and employment opportunities (Baker, 2006, pp. 87-88).

Since English is the most widespread foreign language in European schools, it often becomes the third language at school, especially in “situations where there is a minority language, a national language and English as a language of international communication” (Cenoz, 2009, p. 110). In such specific cases, English is learned as a third language (L3) in a bilingual community.

One of the best examples of such linguistic diversity can be found in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) in Spain. Basque, a minority language in Spain, was introduced alongside Spanish, the national and majority language, as an obligatory language of instruction in the Basque education system (Cenoz, 2009). As a result, bilingual education in the BAC offers three possibilities: Spanish as a language of instruction and Basque as a subject (Model A), both Spanish and Basque as languages of instruction (Model B) or Basque as a language of instruction and Spanish as a subject (Model D) (Cenoz, 2009).

In addition to these two languages, English is learned as the first foreign language, most frequently introduced at the age of four. “The increasing role of English in Europe (...) has developed a growing interest in learning English which is reflected in demands for more English instruction and better quality English instruction in schools” (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p.128). This early introduction of English into the Basque education system was greatly supported by parents, who recognized the increasing role of English in the modern world.

According to a study conducted by the Basque Institute of Educational Evaluation and Research, parents believe that it is important for their children to learn several languages and they think that English will be useful for travelling and for getting to know people and countries as well as for their future jobs. (Cenoz, 2009, p.115)

Alongside the Basque Autonomous Community, another example of linguistic diversity can be found in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol, located in northern Italy. The two main languages used in South Tyrol are Italian, the national language, and German, the minority language which is officially recognized as the second language (Jessner, 2006, p. 6). Despite the presence of diverse languages, there is a strict segregation of linguistic groups in South Tyrol. Thus, children may attend Italian-medium schools, where Italian is the medium of instruction and German is taught as the second language, or German-medium schools, where German is the medium of instruction and Italian is taught as the second language. However, in the recent decades, there have been several attempts to increase

L2 teaching hours and develop bilingual and trilingual education programs (Hofer, 2015, p. 139).

Alongside Italian and German, English has become the third language (L3) and the first foreign language in South Tyrolean schools. The introduction of the third language could especially be noted in the curriculum for the Italian-medium schools. “English, which for a long time had only been taught in some institutions – from the age of 14 in high school (...) and later from grade 3 in secondary school (...) onwards – is now learnt by all from Grade 1” (Jessner, 2006, p.7). As a result, English is taught for 2 or 3 hours per week in Italian-medium schools. On the other hand, in German-medium schools, English is still taught from Grade 4 for 2 hours per week. (Hofer, 2015) Nevertheless, the early introduction of English as L3 in bilingual schools in Basque and South Tyrol demonstrates the tendency to improve knowledge of diverse languages, which will be crucial for children’s successful future.

2.3. The interrelationship between L1, L2 and L3

When facing a new language, learners tend to rely on any kind of data that would facilitate the process of language acquisition. “The most relevant piece of information (...) is likely to be the knowledge of other languages already in the mind” (De Angelis, 2007, p. 109). Therefore, prior language knowledge may influence the acquisition, development and use of a target language, resulting in a phenomenon called cross-linguistic influence (CLI).

This phenomenon can be determined by various factors, such as typology, L2 status, and proficiency level, which can be used to determine the source language and the amount of transferred material (Cenoz, 2001, p. 8). Among these factors, typology plays an important role, especially in the choice of the source language. In other words, speakers tend to use words from the language that is typologically closer to the target language. For example, Romance languages display relatedness and similarity as a group of the same language family, so Romance L2 can easily transfer different aspects into Romance L3. Alongside typology, the L2 status factor refers to a general tendency of the language learner to activate other non-native languages, rather than the L1, when using a third language (Falk & Bardel, 2010, p. 195). Therefore, different linguistic aspects of the L2, such as vocabulary and syntax, may have an impact on the production of the L3. Another factor, the level of proficiency, may indicate the degree and manner of the CLI. Both high and low proficiency in the background

languages might have some influence on the L3. More precisely, less proficient L3 learners will use a low-proficiency L1 or L2, while more proficient L3 learners will activate a high-proficiency background language. (Falk and Bardel, 2010)

[Therefore,] any language can exert influence on any other language in the multilingual system, that is, crosslinguistic interaction can be found between the L1 and the L2, between the L1 and the L3, and finally between the L2 and the L3. It is important to note here that the influence is known to be reciprocal between all the language combinations. (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 125)

These possible interactions between the languages can be particularly important when observing the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition (TLA). Numerous studies, conducted in bilingual communities such as the Basque Country and Catalonia, have attempted to analyse the effects of bilingualism on TLA (Cenoz 1991; Cenoz & Valencia 1994; Sanz 1997; Lasagabaster 1997; Muñoz 2000; Sagasta 2003, etc.). These studies concluded that bilinguals performed better than monolinguals in the acquisition of additional languages. For example, Lasagabaster (2001, as cited in De Angelis, 2007, p. 118) emphasized that bilingual learners might transfer the knowledge of their prior languages to an additional language, which might influence the speed, rate and route of acquisition. In addition to this, prior language knowledge could enable bilingual speakers to code-switch between the languages, inserting words, phrases and sentences from one language to another in order to convey thoughts and ideas, express certain meaning, etc. (Falk & Bardel, 2010; Baker 2006). Furthermore, when compared to monolinguals, bilinguals might show a higher level of metalinguistic awareness and cognitive abilities (Cenoz & Valencia 1994; Baker 2001; Jessner, 2006; etc.). Also, metalinguistic awareness plays a crucial role in the development of language learning strategies in bilinguals and multilinguals. Since bilinguals and multilinguals already have some experience in language learning, they use different learning strategies to facilitate the process of acquiring an additional language (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 127). Moreover, Kemp (2001, as cited in Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 127) demonstrated that multilinguals acquired the grammar of an additional language faster because they used more grammar learning strategies. Baker (2001, as cited in Jessner, 2006, p. 38) pointed out that bilinguals displayed more creative, imaginative, elastic, open ended and free thinking styles. All in all, in relation to these findings, Cenoz and Jessner (2009, p. 126) pointed out that bilingualism could positively influence and facilitate the acquisition of

the L3, as a result of learners' metalinguistic awareness, language learning strategies, experience in language learning, communicative ability, etc.

2.4. Parents' attitudes to multilingual education

Children's progress and success in learning a foreign language could be largely affected by their parents and the community in general. In other words, positive attitudes towards the language, the culture and its speakers are likely to contribute to success in foreign language learning, while negative attitudes are presumably going to have the opposite effect.

When observing young learners, Mihaljević Djigunović (1999, p. 32) pointed out that children aged 6 or 7 were open and interested in any kind of new information in their surroundings, which could be noted in their positive attitudes towards foreign language learning. However, children's initial attitudes often reflected the attitudes expressed by their parents or other significant relatives, such as grandparents, siblings, etc. Thus, parents' attitudes and opinions can play a crucial role in the development of their children's positive attitudes and motivation towards foreign language learning.

As a result of this, the parental influence on the formation of children's language attitudes can be summarized in two roles: the active and the passive role (Gardner, 1985, p. 110). On the one hand, the active role mainly revolves around the interaction between parents and children regarding the language learning process. More precisely, parents openly influence their children's development in the language learning process. Thus, the active role can be further classified as positive or negative.

A positive active role would involve parents monitoring their child's progress in language learning, showing interest and encouraging/rewarding success. A negative active role would involve a range of discouraging behaviours, from openly belittling the importance of language learning to favouring other areas of learning over languages. (Bartram, 2006, pp. 212-213)

On the other hand, the passive role is manifested in parents' attitudes towards the community of the speakers of the language being learned (Gardner, 1985, p. 110). In other words, parents' attitudes are not consciously taught, but are evident in their statements and behaviour towards the speakers of the foreign language. Thus, even though parents do not

directly interfere in the language learning process, their attitudes still determine children's motivation to learn a foreign language.

Taking into account the crucial role and influence of parents' attitudes and opinions, numerous studies have been conducted on this topic (e.g. Mihaljević Djigunović 1993; Medved Krajnović & Letica 2009; Griva & Chouvarda 2012; Knežević & Šenjug Golub 2015). All of these studies observed parents' attitudes towards the early foreign language learning. The participants' children attended Grades 1 to 4 of primary school and began learning a foreign language at an early age. The results showed that the majority of parents expressed positive attitudes towards the early foreign language learning, agreed that foreign language learning should start as early as possible – in preschool or at the beginning of primary school, and recognized the importance of English as the first foreign language. Moreover, Medved Krajnović & Letica (2009, pp. 602-606) listed some reasons why parents supported the early foreign language learning. According to their study, parents claimed that children easily acquired a foreign language through games, quickly remembered new information and showed interest in learning a foreign language. Some parents even stated that the early foreign language learning provided a firm basis for learning other foreign languages at a later age. Also, parents believed that English was the most useful and the most frequent foreign language, and could only be an advantage in the area of education, employment and travel. Furthermore, Knežević & Šenjug Golub (2015, pp. 156-164) concluded that parents perceived foreign language learning as a positive influence on the overall development of the child, especially on the future development of their mother tongue.

2.5. The Croatian context

The long tradition of learning foreign languages in Croatia has been shaped by various geographical, cultural and political circumstances. Throughout the history, Croatia has been a part of various kingdoms, empires and unions due to its geographical position. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Croatia has shared borders with countries such as Austria, Hungary and Italy, which resulted in the significant presence and use of different languages on the Croatian territory.

“In the nineteenth century, as in many other parts of Europe, French was considered as a language of prestige” (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013, p. 164). As a result of that, the

curriculum of Croatian secondary schools included French as a foreign language. Alongside French, secondary school students could also learn German and Latin. However, at that time, foreign language learning was not possible in primary schools. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, English was introduced to the Croatian education system, but only as a university major (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013, p. 164). During World War II, the most prominent foreign languages taught at schools were German and Italian. The latter was only present at schools until the surrender of Italy in World War II (Vilke, 1999, p. 17). However, the choice of foreign languages at schools completely changed after the war. Russian became compulsory as the first foreign language at all levels of the education system. Thus, children began to learn Russian from Grade 5 of primary school (age 10-11). Other foreign languages – German, French and English – could only be chosen as second foreign languages at secondary school (age 14-15) (Vilke, 1999, p. 17). “It was only after Yugoslavia (which Croatia was part of at the time) had broken with the Soviet Union [in 1948] that students could choose English, German, French or Russian as the first foreign language to be learned at school” (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013, p. 164). The ability to choose the first foreign language had gradually turned English into the most popular foreign language at Croatian schools. In the course of time, foreign language learning was moved to Grade 4 of primary school (age 10).

Since 2003, the Ministry of Science and Education of Republic of Croatia has decided to introduce one foreign language as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 of primary school (age 6-7). A second foreign language can be chosen as an elective subject from Grade 4 (age 10). In Grades 1 to 4 of primary school, children have two lessons per week, while in Grades 5 to 8 they have three lessons per week. As far as the choice of foreign languages is concerned, English has become the most popular foreign language in Croatian schools, since 85-90 % of children start learning English from the first year of their formal education (Medved Krajnović & Letica, 2009, p. 601). Other most popular foreign languages, listed by their occurrence in primary schools, include German, Italian, French and Spanish. Despite the variety of choices, English is the only obligatory foreign language in Croatian primary schools. More precisely, if the first foreign language in Grade 1 is not English, pupils have to take English from Grade 4 as a second foreign language. (Medved Krajnović & Letica, 2009; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013)

Therefore, all children have to learn English during their 8-year primary education, whether as the first or the second foreign language. What is more, foreign language learning

continues throughout one's entire education. In secondary school, the students get the opportunity to learn the second or the third foreign language. As far as tertiary education is concerned, colleges and universities offer foreign languages, either as a compulsory subject for at least one or two years or as an elective subject.

2.5.1. Languages in Istria

The Croatian linguistic diversity could particularly be noted in the region of Istria. Geographically speaking, Istria is a peninsula divided between Croatia, Italy and Slovenia, with Croatia occupying the largest part of the territory. As for the linguistic composition of the peninsula, the official languages of the three countries and their regional idioms are not confined by the borders between the countries. Thus, Istria, as a region and county of Croatia, stands as a prime example of multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Just like the rest of Croatia, Istria has historically represented an area of coexistence for different people, cultures and countries. The first major cultural and linguistic changes occurred during the Roman Empire, when the indigenous people faced the imposition of Roman traditions and Latin as an official language (Jernej Pulić, 2016, p. 8). During that period, the first Slavic tribes appeared in Istria, thus introducing Slavic languages which would be used alongside Latin (Jernej Pulić, 2016, p. 8). From the 10th century onwards, the Republic of Venice continued the efforts of the Roman Empire, slowly introducing Italian instead of Latin. From the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Istria was governed by Germanic speaking authorities – first the Habsburg Monarchy, and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire. German became the official language in the institutional contexts, but Italian preserved its dominance, especially in the economic and cultural contexts (Banovac, 1996, p. 269). However, after World War I, Istria was allocated to Italy, which resulted in the Italianization of the Croatian population – the use of the Slavic languages was banned, Croatian and Slovene schools, societies and newspapers were shut down, etc. (Banovac, 1996, p. 271). The end of World War II represented a decisive shift in the linguistic structure of the peninsula. Istria was ceded to Yugoslavia, so Croatian became the language of the majority, while Italian gained the status of the minority language.

Nowadays, according to the 2001 and 2011 censuses, Italians are the third largest national minority in Croatia, most of them living in the Istria County (Jernej Pulić, 2016, p. 19). As a national minority, their rights are guaranteed by international, national, regional and local acts and agreements, such as the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and the Statute of the Istria County. The aforementioned documents allow them to use their language and script in private and public life, education, media and administration, to participate in regional and local self-government, to nurture national and cultural identity, etc. (Jernej Pulić, 2016; Skelin Horvat & Muhvić Dimanovski, 2012). As a result, the Italian language became recognized as the second official language in the Istria County, thus creating opportunities for bilingualism at social and institutional level. The opportunities to learn Italian arise from the earliest age, not only due to the exposure to the language in the bilingual environment, but also in the Italian-medium kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. The Croatian-medium schools also offer Italian as an elective subject from the second or the fourth grade in order to support the bilingualism in the Istria County (Jernej Pulić, 2016, p. 12). Therefore, it is no wonder that both Croatian and Italian communities in Istria perceive knowledge of Italian as an advantage for the future, particularly in the area of education, business and tourism.

Alongside Italian, other languages also have an important role in Istria. More precisely, foreign languages – such as English, German, Spanish, French, etc. – have become more valuable in the Istrian community, mostly because of tourism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, English turned into the most popular foreign language in Croatia, and the same happened in Istria. The unique position of English in the society could be related to its growing presence in “the public domains of the media (TV, radio, the Internet, e-mail), popular entertainment, youth culture, advertising, etc.” (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2002, p. 337). Therefore, it is no wonder that English is perceived “as a passport to a better career, a better position in society and to a better life in general” (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2002, p. 337).

3. The study

3.1. Aim

The present study aimed at examining how parents perceived their children's early formal acquisition of languages in Istria County, a bilingual region in Croatia. More precisely, the emphasis of the study was on parents' attitudes related to the acquisition of English, a language which their children learned as the first foreign language, but which also appeared to be the third language (L3) in their linguistic repertoire. As far as the other two languages are concerned, the majority of children were exposed to both Croatian and Italian since birth, due to historical, cultural and linguistic traditions passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, owing to the significant presence of three languages in children's linguistic repertoire, the study has attempted to analyse whether parents display positive or negative attitudes towards the early formal acquisition of several languages. Also, due to the increased presence of English in everyday life, the study has attempted to examine the role of English in the bilingual community as well as its developing relationship with Croatian and Italian.

3.2. Participants and the school context

The participants in the study were parents of children who simultaneously learn three languages (Croatian, Italian and English) from Grade 1 of primary school. The parents were recruited from the Italian-medium primary school in Pula and its satellite schools in the nearby villages Galožana and Šišan. The participant sample involved a total of 45 parents, of whom 34 (75.6 %) were female and 11 (24.4 %) male. When grouped according to their age, 26 (57.8 %) participants were over 40, 17 (37.8 %) participants were between 30 and 40, while only 2 (4.4 %) participants were below 30. As far as their place of birth is concerned, the majority of participants, 78 % (n=35), were born in Pula while the remaining 22 % (n=10) were born in several other cities in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Italy. When observing the participants' level of education, the majority of participants gained a degree at one of the institutions of higher education. More precisely, out of the total number of

participants, 40 % (n=18) graduated from university and 22.2 % (n=10) finished community college. The remaining 37.8 % (n=17) of participants graduated from secondary school.

Furthermore, when the participants' linguistic background is observed, all of them acquired at least two languages, either since birth or through formal education. The two most frequently learnt languages were Croatian, acquired by all participants, and Italian, acquired by 95.6 % (n=43) of participants. The aforementioned high percentages could be attributed to the specific bilingual situation in Istria County where both Croatian and Italian were recognized as official languages. Alongside these two languages, the third most common language present in participants' linguistic background was English, which was acquired by 91.1 % (n=41) of participants. In addition to these three languages, 55.6 % (n=25) of participants listed several other languages like German, Latin, French, Spanish, Czech, Russian, Slovene, Swedish, Chinese, Old Greek and Old Slavonic.

Taking into account the diverse linguistic background and the possibility to acquire both Croatian and Italian simultaneously, the majority of participants, 73.3 % (n=33), stated that they were bilingual speakers. Most participants associated bilingualism with family history and tradition. In other words, the participants (n=24) had learnt Italian from their parents and other relatives who were members of the Italian minority in Istria. On the other hand, they acquired Croatian as a national language in kindergarten, through their primary education or after graduation. The remaining participants (n=9) had Croatian as their L1 and they acquired other languages through their formal education. Furthermore, many participants decided to maintain the bilingual tradition in Istria by enrolling their children at the Italian-medium primary school. Apart from the family tradition, many participants (n=13) linked bilingualism with the frequent use of language, either in oral or written form. They believed that bilingual speakers should use both languages on a daily basis. Lastly, some participants (n=7) pointed out that they only used two languages as a part of their previous education or at their current job. On the contrary, 12 participants (26.7 %) did not feel like bilingual speakers. The participants often associated bilingualism with the rare use of their second language. Several participants further explained that they only spoke Croatian in their everyday life. On the contrary, one participant mostly spoke Italian on a daily basis, due to the late acquisition of Croatian, which contributed to the limited knowledge of the language, sufficient only for basic comprehension and communication. Lastly, several participants stated that they only spoke other languages – Italian, English, German, Spanish, etc. – in very specific situations at work.

As far as participants' children are concerned, they attended Grades 1 to 4 at the Italian-medium school. Thus, their age ranged from 7 to 10, with the majority of children being 9 and 10 years old. Most children, 72.7 % (n=32), began the acquisition of both Croatian and Italian in the first three years of their life, either at home or in kindergarten. The remaining 27.3 % of children acquired either only Croatian (n=10) or only Italian (n=2) before entering the primary school. Once they initiated their formal education at the Italian-medium primary school, all children started learning Croatian, Italian and English. Therefore, as a result of the significant presence of different languages in children's linguistic repertoire, 93.2 % (n=41) of participants believed their children were bilingual while only 6.8 % (n=3) believed otherwise.

Even though children learnt diverse languages at the Italian-medium primary school, Italian was the predominant language, used both as a subject and a medium of instruction for other subjects. In Grades 1 to 4, the Italian language was taught for 5 hours per week. As for the other two languages, the Croatian language was taught for 4 hours per week, while the English language was taught for 2 hours per week. Thus, taking into account the use and presence of each language, the Italian-medium school could be classified as a weak form of bilingual education (Baker, 2006). In accordance with Baker's classification (2006), the emphasis is put on one language, in this case Italian, the language of the Italian national minority. The other two languages were used to a lesser extent.

3.3. Instruments and procedure

In order to collect data, the questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part involved the basic data about parents and their children. First, the participants had to fill in questions about the socio-demographic background, age, gender, place of birth and level of education. The next set of questions referred to the language learning history. The participants had to list all the languages they had learned and provide the age at which the learning began. In addition to this, the participants were asked to determine and explain whether they perceived themselves and their children as bilingual speakers. The second part of the questionnaire included open-ended questions, which gave the participants the opportunity to elaborate further on their answers. Thus, the participants were asked to express their opinions about the following questions: the importance of the acquisition of several languages, the

possible advantages and disadvantages of the early acquisition of two or more languages, language teaching at primary school, the formal acquisition of English at an early age, the selection of foreign languages at primary school, the possible advantages and disadvantages of the simultaneous acquisition of three languages at an early age, the positive and negative influence of the previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English and the effect of English on the development of previously acquired languages.

The study was distributed by the primary school teachers. They handed out the questionnaire to children at school. Children's parents filled out the questionnaire at home. The participants were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous and that their answers would only be used for the purposes of this study.

3.4. Results and discussion

3.4.1. The acquisition of two or more languages

When asked about the importance of learning several languages, 44 participants (95.7 %) expressed positive opinions. One participant, (2.2 %), out of 44 participants who gave positive opinions, also pointed out a potential disadvantage of the acquisition of several languages. One participant (2.2 %) did not provide an answer (see Table 1).

Table 1 Do you think that learning several languages is important?

The importance of learning several languages	Number	Percentage
Positive opinions	44	95.7
Negative opinions	1	2.2
Not answered	1	2.2

In order to support their beliefs, the participants gave a variety of explanations (see Table 2). One third of participants (n=15) often explained that knowledge of several languages facilitated communication, especially with people from other countries whose linguistic background was different. Some participants (n=4) further connected easier communication with tourism, claiming that languages were necessary in a tourism-oriented country like Croatia. In addition to this, several other participants (n=5) suggested that

languages were an important asset for a successful trip abroad since “language is like a passport to another world” (Participant 2). Some participants (n=5) further explained that not only did languages facilitate communication in a foreign country, but they also opened up the opportunities for a better understanding of a foreign culture and its people. Furthermore, a few participants (n=5) mentioned a saying – *Koliko jezika znaš, toliko vrijediš* – which they used to explain how knowledge of several languages could have a major influence on individuals’ private and professional development. Many participants (n=14) related the saying with professional development, stating that languages offered more opportunities for education and employment in Croatia and abroad. Several participants (n=3) even mentioned globalization, which, according to them, required knowledge of English and at least one more foreign language. In relation to this, few participants (n=2) stated that knowledge of languages provided access to new information which was available via the modern technology, the media, etc. Other than business and educational opportunities, some participants (n=3) emphasized the positive influence of languages on individual development, especially on characteristics like open-mindedness, tolerance, respect and acceptance.

However, one participant pointed out a negative side of the acquisition of several languages. According to Participant 20, growing up in a multilingual environment like Istria could be quite demanding and overwhelming for an individual since one might never completely learn all languages present in one’s environment.

Table 2 Reasons why learning several languages is important

Why is it important to learn several languages?	Number	Percentage
Easier communication	15	33.3
Necessary for tourism	4	8.9
Travelling abroad	5	11.1
A better understanding of a foreign culture	5	11.1
<i>Koliko jezika znaš, toliko vrijediš.</i>	5	11.1
Education and employment	14	31.1
Globalization	3	6.7
Access to new information	2	4.4
Individual development	3	6.7

In addition to this, the participants had to express their agreement or disagreement with the importance of acquiring two or more languages at an early age. Out of the total number of participants, the great majority, 40 participants (88.9 %), agreed that it was important to start with the acquisition of languages at an early age. On the contrary, 4 participants (8.9 %) disagreed with the above mentioned statement, while 1 participant (2.2%) failed to provide an answer. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Do you think that the acquisition of two or more languages at an early age is important?

The importance of the early acquisition of two or more languages	Number	Percentage
Agree	40	88.9
Disagree	4	8.9
Not answered	1	2.2

In order to gain a better insight into the background of their replies, the participants were also inquired to list and explain possible advantages and disadvantages of the early acquisition of two or more languages.

As far as the advantages are concerned, 43 participants (95.6 %) offered explanations for their opinions on the potential advantages, while 2 participants (4.4 %) did not answer the question. Their answers are presented in Table 4. Most participants (n=20) believed that the acquisition of two or more languages at an early age was quicker and easier. Some participants (n=5) further added that children were able to pick up native-like accent and remember new vocabulary and grammar without much difficulty. Few participants (n=3) even claimed that children easily acquired structures of another language since their brain was still developing. Also, several participants (n=6) emphasized that children were curious, interested and open-minded towards learning new languages, mostly because they had a lot of free time and were not burdened with other obligations. Some participants (n=4) related the advantages of the early language acquisition to teaching methods in formal education. In other words, the participants emphasized that languages were presented through games and songs, which made the early language acquisition fun, spontaneous and interesting. Moreover, several participants (n=5) listed some positive effects the early acquisition of two or more languages could have on children. They believed that the early language acquisition could strengthen

and improve concentration and cognitive abilities of the child. Furthermore, they pointed out that it could help children to develop self-esteem and creativity, but also to become more tolerant towards other cultures and the world. Lastly, the participants (n=9) emphasized that the early acquisition of two or more languages was important for children's future. More precisely, they believed that it could provide a firm basis for the acquisition of other languages later in life. Other than that, they pointed out that the early acquisition of languages offered additional advantages in travelling, tourism, education and business.

Table 4 Reasons in favour of the early acquisition of two or more languages

What are the advantages of the early acquisition of two or more languages?	Number	Percentage
Quicker and easier acquisition	20	44.4
Easier to learn the accent, vocabulary and grammar	5	11.1
The brain is still developing	3	6.7
Children are curious, interested and open-minded	6	13.3
No other obligations	6	13.3
Teaching methods and activities (games, songs, etc.)	4	8.9
Individual development	5	11.1
Important for children's future	9	20

When asked about the disadvantages of the early acquisition of two or more languages, 39 participants (86.7 %) further elaborated on their opinions on potential disadvantages, while 6 participants (13.3 %) did not provide an answer. Their answers are presented in Table 5. Most participants (n=18) stated that the disadvantages did not exist. However, two participants pointed out that children might start speaking later due to the early acquisition of languages. Also, several participants (n=7) stated that children who acquired two or more languages at an early age tended to mix the languages, either in oral or written form. For example, the participants claimed that children used words from two different languages in their sentences, omitted or added letters in writing, etc. Some participants (n=3) stated that the early acquisition of several languages could lead to partial acquisition and smaller vocabulary size for each language. Furthermore, few participants (n=4) believed that two or more languages could result in confusion, additional pressure and overload for the child's brain. Some participants (n=5) even pointed out that children quickly lost interest and

motivation for learning new languages, usually because the expectations were too high. Lastly, several participants (n=6) related the disadvantages of the early language acquisition with formal education. According to them, the school curriculum was not adapted to children's age; foreign language classes lacked interaction and games; grammar was perceived as tiresome and incomprehensible; children were stressed out with grades, written and oral exams, etc.

Table 5 Reasons against the early acquisition of two or more languages

What are the disadvantages of the early acquisition of two or more languages?	Number	Percentage
No disadvantages	18	40
Children may start speaking later	2	4.4
Mixing the languages	7	15.6
Partial acquisition and smaller vocabulary	3	6.7
Confusion, additional pressure and overload for the child	4	8.9
Children lose interest and motivation in language learning	5	11.1
Certain aspects of formal education	6	13.3

Based on the presented results, the participants recognized both positive and negative aspects of the acquisition of two or more languages. As far as positive aspects are concerned, the participants shared the belief that children's age and language learning aptitude facilitated the acquisition of two or more languages. These results were in line with findings from several papers mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis (e.g. Cenoz & Jessner 2009; Lightbown & Spada 2006, etc.), which pointed out the importance of an early start when acquiring several languages. Moreover, teaching methods and activities in formal education were also seen as a decisive factor in the acquisition of several languages. In other words, diverse and interesting activities contributed to easier acquisition, which was also confirmed in Vilke's (1995, 1999) and Enever's (2011) studies. What is more, knowledge of different languages was perceived as a valuable asset in the domain of tourism, travelling, education, working and searching employment, media and modern technology. The participants also believed that learning different languages had a major influence on individuals, not only in terms of expansion of their knowledge of the world, other cultures and its people, but also in terms of the potential effect on individual characteristics, opinions, attitudes, linguistic and

cognitive development. As it was already mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, Baker (2000) reached similar conclusions, explaining how the knowledge of several languages influenced individual's personal and professional development.

However, the results pointed out that some participants recognized the negative aspects of the acquisition of two or more languages. They believed that the early acquisition of two or more languages could slow down and disrupt children's linguistic and cognitive development and negatively affect the ultimate attainment of each language. These results reflected the findings of earlier studies (e.g. Jensen, 1962), which frequently identified detrimental effects of the acquisition of two or more languages. Lastly, several participants perceived the formal education as stressful and unsuitable for children's needs.

3.4.2. Language teaching in primary school

After giving their opinions on early acquisition of several languages, the participants were asked to express their satisfaction with language teaching in primary school. The majority of participants, 67.9 % (n=36), were satisfied with the way languages were taught in primary school. However, the remaining minority (n=15; 28.3 %) expressed their dissatisfaction with language teaching in primary school. Two participants (3.8 %) did not answer the question (see Table 6). In relation to this, it is important to emphasize that 18 % of participants (n=8) expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, so their answers were included in both groups in the table. Their explanations would be presented in the following section.

Table 6 Are you satisfied with the way languages are taught in primary school?

Satisfaction with language teaching	Number	Percentage
Satisfied	36	67.9
Not satisfied	15	28.3
Not answered	2	3.8

On the one hand, the participants believed that languages were given considerable attention in primary school. Most participants (n=7) supported the fact that their children learnt three languages. For example, participant 6 was satisfied because children

simultaneously learnt same words in different languages. Many participants (n=7) praised the primary school teachers. According to them, the teachers followed the curriculum, tried hard to transmit as much knowledge as possible to children, motivated the children using various methods and materials, had a very clear approach to teaching languages, did their job very thoroughly, etc. Alongside the role of teachers, the participants (n=3) believed that the teaching methods and activities, for example diverse games, were appropriate for children's age and really aided their language learning process. Several participants (n=3) also pointed out that their children notably progressed in the acquisition of languages. For example, participant 20 pointed out that her child did not know Italian before enrolling in Grade 1 of the Italian-medium primary school, but still managed to acquire it very quickly thanks to motivated teachers and their teaching methods. Furthermore, few participants (n=2) emphasized that children seemed satisfied with their language classes. Also, one participant stated that her child already had good knowledge of English, mostly because it watched cartoons and movies in English. Another participant even pointed out that her child was enrolled in a private foreign language school in order to improve its language skills. Their explanations can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7 Reasons in favour of the way languages are taught in primary school

Why are you satisfied with language teaching?	Number	Percentage
Children learn three languages simultaneously	7	15.6
Primary school teachers are excellent	7	15.6
Teaching methods (games, songs, etc.) are appropriate for children's age	3	6.7
Children progress in language acquisition	3	6.7
Children are satisfied with language classes	2	4.4
Good knowledge of English	1	2.2
Additional language lessons	1	2.2

On the other hand, some participants (n=2) maintained that children began too early with the simultaneous acquisition of languages because they demonstrated spelling errors when using different languages. Also, the participants (n=5) thought that languages were not explained adequately so children still had to learn languages by heart. Few participants (n=2) pointed out that the number of language classes per week was insufficient. Several

participants (n=8) were not satisfied with English classes in primary school. They stated that some English textbooks were poorly organized which often caused confusion. They were not satisfied with low levels of literacy and the amount of interaction in the foreign language. Others were not pleased with the teaching methods used by the English teacher, emphasizing that not enough games were used for the easier acquisition of the foreign language. Also, one participant believed that the foreign language in primary school was taught in a complicated way, as if children were at university or college. Their answers can be seen in Table 8.

As a result of their dissatisfaction, some participants even offered suggestions about how to improve language teaching in primary school. In accordance with their suggestions, the number of language classes per week should be increased in order to result in better acquisition, the content should be explained more thoroughly, learning by heart should be avoided as much as possible, etc.

Table 8 Reasons against the way languages are taught in primary school

Why are you dissatisfied with language teaching?	Number	Percentage
The acquisition of languages begins too early	2	4.4
Spelling errors	2	4.4
Learning by heart	5	11.1
Insufficient number of lessons	2	4.4
Poorly organized textbooks	8	17.8
Low levels of literacy and insufficient interaction	8	17.8
Not enough games	8	17.8
The foreign language is taught in a complicated way	1	2.2

The answers given by the participants indicated the support for the formal acquisition of three languages. Moreover, the participants recognized the crucial role of teachers on the early formal acquisition of languages, children's linguistic and cognitive development. In addition to this, the participants recognized the importance of diverse teaching methods and activities, such as games, songs, etc., which introduced the element of fun and facilitated the language learning process (Vilke 1995; Vilke 1999; Enever 2011). Despite the general satisfaction with language teaching, some participants supported taking up extracurricular language classes.

However, several participants identified some disadvantages of language teaching, such as insufficient number of language classes, inadequate textbooks, unsuitable teaching methods, etc.

3.4.3. Foreign languages in primary school

As far as foreign languages in primary school are concerned, English is taught as the first foreign language from Grade 1 of primary school. Thus, the participants were asked to express their opinions on the early acquisition of English as the first foreign language and the L3. Most participants, 93.5 % (n=43), were satisfied that English was also one of the languages that their children learnt in primary school. Still, three participants (6.5 %) expressed their dissatisfaction with the early acquisition of English (see Table 9). Also, one participant expressed both positive and negative opinions, so that reply was included in both groups in the table.

Table 9 Are you satisfied that your child is also learning English at an early age in primary school?

Satisfaction with the early acquisition of English	Number	Percentage
Satisfied	43	93.5
Not satisfied	3	6.5

The participants were also asked to further elaborate on their opinions so their answers would be presented in Table 10. The majority of participants (n=19) were satisfied with the early acquisition of English in primary school because they believed that the knowledge of English was very important nowadays. In other words, they perceived English as a global language, which was used by numerous speakers all over the world. Also, the participants recognized English as a universal language that had a crucial role in globalization. They further emphasized that English was increasingly used in worldwide communication, business, industry, information technology, culture, etc. Furthermore, when it comes to the early start of the acquisition of English, some participants (n=9) advocated the following belief: the earlier children began learning a language, the better and easier they would acquire it. They stated that, due to the early start, the children would have more time to learn English

because they would be exposed to English for a longer period of time. Participant 9 even pointed out that her child was already more advanced in English than its parents, who began learning English after graduation. Moreover, many participants (n=9) believed that the acquisition of English was important for children's future. According to their replies, English was a language that could open all doors for children in the future, especially in the area of education and employment. One participant even pointed out that English had become a part of the general knowledge, while another believed that not knowing English could only cause difficulties later in life.

Table 10 Reasons in favour of learning English at an early age in primary school

Why are you satisfied with the early acquisition of English?	Number	Percentage
English is a global language	19	42.2
It has a crucial role in globalization	19	42.2
It is used in communication, business, industry, etc.	19	42.2
The earlier, the better	9	20
More time to learn the language	9	20
Important for children's future	9	20
English became a part of the general knowledge	1	2.2
Not knowing English can cause difficulties	1	2.2

As far as the three negative answers are concerned, the first participant stated that the acquisition of English could start a year or two later. The second participant pointed out that the two languages, Croatian and Italian, already represented a sufficient burden for the child. The third participant was not satisfied with the early introduction of English in primary school because her child quickly lost interest in English (see Table 11).

Table 11 Reasons against learning English at an early age in primary school

Why are you dissatisfied with the early acquisition of English?	Number	Percentage
The acquisition of English could start later	1	2.2
Two languages are a sufficient burden	1	2.2
Children lose interest in English	1	2.2

According to the participants' answers, English occupied the role of a global language used for worldwide communication, business and education. Thus, the participants shared the belief that the early acquisition of English would prove to be helpful in children's future, especially in the area of education and employment. These results confirmed the findings of Baker (2006) and Cenoz (2009), who pointed out the importance and prestige of English in the modern world. However, few participants showed their dissatisfaction with the early introduction of English, due to the sufficient number of languages in children's repertoire, children's lack of interest in learning a new language, etc.

When it comes to the selection of foreign languages in primary school, English was the most common foreign language chosen and learned in Croatian primary schools since foreign languages became the obligatory part of the Croatian curriculum. For this reason, the participants were asked if they would choose some other foreign language instead of English, provided that they were given a choice. Their answers were almost evenly divided. More precisely, 19 participants (42.2 %) stated that they would choose some other foreign language, while 25 participants (55.6 %) claimed otherwise. One participant (2.2 %) did not provide an answer (see Table 12).

Table 12 If you were given a choice, would you choose some other foreign language?

The selection of some other foreign language	Number	Percentage
Yes	19	42.2
No	25	55.6
Not answered	1	2.2

The participants also explained their choice and their answers would be presented as follows (see Table 13). If the participants could select a foreign language in primary school, they would choose one of the following languages: German, French, Spanish, Japanese or Chinese. The majority of participants (n=12) believed that it would be beneficial to learn German. They claimed that German was one of the foreign languages which were most commonly used in Istria County. Some participants pointed out that it would be useful to learn German because of the highly developed tourism in Istria. One participant also stated that German had an important role in Europe since it was one of the official languages used for communication in the European Union. Alongside business and cultural purposes, participant 20 pointed out a personal reason. In other words, she would select German for her child

because she also spoke that language and could help the child with the acquisition. The second most commonly mentioned language was French, which would be chosen by 3 participants. Only participant 14 offered the explanation for choosing French in primary school, emphasizing that the child was interested in learning French. As far as the remaining three languages are concerned, 2 participants would choose Spanish, one participant would select Japanese and one participant would opt for Chinese as the foreign language that should be taught in primary school. Only participant 37 further elaborated on the choice and pointed out that China had a major influence on world economy and trade so Chinese would eventually prove to be valuable.

Table 13 Reasons in favour of choosing some other foreign language

Which foreign language would you choose in primary school, provided you were given a choice? Why?	Number	Percentage
German (commonly used in Istria; useful for tourism; the official language in the EU, etc.)	12	26.7
French (the child is interested in the language)	3	6.7
Chinese (useful for world economy and trade)	1	2.2
Spanish	2	4.4
Japanese	1	2.2

On the other hand, 25 participants would not select some other foreign language in primary school (see Table 14). Some participants (n=3) stated that English was the most widespread language and thus represented a global language used for communication with speakers all over the world. Participant 6 pointed out that the children would need English throughout their entire life. Several participants (n=2) would only choose another foreign language if the child showed interest and abilities in learning a new language. Moreover, the participants (n=7) also believed that English was sufficient at the current stage of children's education and an additional language might cause confusion.

Table 14 Reasons against choosing some other foreign language

Why would you not choose some other foreign language?	Number	Percentage
English is the most widespread language	3	6.7
English will be useful throughout children's life	1	2.2
Children do not show interest in other languages	2	4.4
English is sufficient in primary school	7	15.6

In addition to this, it is important to emphasize that some participants (n=10), who gave both affirmative and negative answers, would not replace English as the first foreign language in primary school, but would only select another language alongside it. Some participants even regarded English as a priority among foreign languages and would add other languages as elective subjects after Grade 5 or in secondary school. The languages which the participants would choose for their children included German (n=5) and Chinese (n=2).

The answers given by the participants suggest that English was perceived as the most important foreign language in primary school, due to its extensive use all over the world. These results confirmed the findings of other studies (e.g. Cenoz 2009; Medved Krajnović & Letica 2009; Mihaljević Djigunović 2013, etc.), which also characterized English as the most popular foreign language in European schools. However, other languages – German, French, Spanish, Japanese and Chinese – would only be chosen instead of English, mostly because of their important role in Istria and Europe, their influence on the world economy and trade, etc. In several cases, another language would only be added alongside English, because English was perceived as sufficient at the current stage of children's education.

3.4.4. Simultaneous acquisition of three languages

As mentioned in previous chapters, children learn three languages – Croatian, Italian and English – from Grade 1 of primary school. Therefore, the participants were asked to express their opinion on potential advantages and disadvantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age.

As far as the advantages are concerned, 36 participants (80 %) offered their explanations on possible advantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from Grade 1 of primary school. However, 9 participants (20 %) failed to answer the question. Their explanations would be presented in the following section (see Table 15).

Once again, most participants (n=19) believed that the acquisition of several languages from an early school-age occurred in a quicker and easier way. Some participants further explained that the early school-age was the best period for learning three different languages. They claimed that the period of acquisition was longer due to the early start, which allowed children to master the languages thoroughly. According to them, children were like sponges that absorbed and remembered new information without much effort. In relation to this, the participants believed that children easily mastered the pronunciation and picked up new words, even though grammar often caused difficulties. One participant even stated that children not only enriched their vocabulary, but also developed their communication skills. Also, few participants (n=2) emphasized that learning different languages enabled children to discover other cultures, traditions and history, which enriched various aspects of their lives with each language they encountered. One participant even pointed out that simultaneous acquisition of three languages had positive effects on the brain since it increased the cognitive flexibility. Another participant claimed that learning three languages improved child's mutual relationships with other children. Furthermore, few participants (n=2) emphasized the importance of teachers and their teaching methods. In other words, if the teachers used interesting methods – preferably games, songs, etc. – to teach languages, children would not have problems with mastering different languages. In relation to this, participant 19 further added that children were not even aware of the long-term benefits of knowing more languages. Moreover, several participants (n=3) believed that children had more time to devote to language learning since they were not burdened with other obligations. Some participants (n=12) emphasized the advantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages for the children's future. They believed that the languages acquired in the early school-age would be a valuable asset for the rest of children's lives. In other words, the participants believed that understanding and using three different languages would facilitate children's progress during education, the acquisition of other languages later in life, the opportunities for finding a job after school, for example, in tourism-related professions and multinational companies, etc. In addition to this, participant 14 stated that the acquisition of three languages

would enable children to build a more prosperous future abroad, in a country with higher income and better standard of living.

Table 15 Reasons in favour of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age

What are the advantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age?	Number	Percentage
Quicker and easier acquisition	19	42.2
The period of acquisition is longer	19	42.2
Children easily master pronunciation and vocabulary	19	42.2
Discovering other cultures	2	4.4
The development of cognitive flexibility	1	2.2
The improvement of children's relationships with others	1	2.2
Interesting teaching methods (games, songs, etc.)	2	4.4
Children do not have other obligations	3	6.7
Children's future (education, employment, etc.)	12	26.7

Apart from the advantages, 34 participants (75.6 %) explained the disadvantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age. However, once again, 11 participants (24.4 %) did not express their opinion on this issue. Their answers would be presented as follows (see Table 16).

Many participants (n=10) stated that the simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age had no disadvantages. However, other participants (n=10) pointed out that one of the disadvantages could be language mixing. The participants claimed that children used words from one language in sentences in another language, applied syllables specific to one language to another language, etc. Children also had problems with mastering the grammatical aspects of different languages. Thus, participant 20 further added that children who acquired three languages at an early age did not master all the languages to the same extent. Some participants (n=3) emphasized that children could get confused with which language to speak, especially when classes in different languages were on the schedule on the same day. The participants believed that the simultaneous acquisition of three languages presented a significant cognitive overload for children. One participant even pointed out that two languages were acceptable, but the third language might cause immense difficulties for

the child. Another participant stated that the number of different languages in children's repertoire could reduce the size and scope of the vocabulary of each language. Furthermore, several participants (n=7) believed that the disadvantages of the simultaneous acquisition of three languages were related to the organization of the education system. According to them, the curriculum was too broad; it was not adapted to children's age; the children had too many diverse subjects which made their school bags too heavy; they had to learn a large amount of detailed information which was usually poorly explained; they were stressed out because of the exams and grades; language classes included too much grammar, etc. Lastly, few participants (n=3) pointed out that some children quickly lost interest in learning different languages and began to perceive language learning as a waste of time.

Table 16 Reasons against simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age

What are the disadvantages of simultaneous acquisition of three languages from an early school-age?	Number	Percentage
No disadvantages	10	22.2
Language mixing	10	22.2
Difficulties with grammar	2	4.4
Confusion	3	6.7
The third language creates complications	1	2.2
Smaller vocabularies	1	2.2
Poor organization of the education system	7	15.6
Children lose interest in language learning	3	6.7

These results showed that the participants recognized the early school age as the best period for the simultaneous acquisition of three languages, which was also indicated by Jessner (2006), Cenoz (2009) and Hofer (2015). The participants acknowledged that the early start gave children the opportunity to master different linguistic aspects, improve their cognitive abilities, discover other cultures and traditions, set a better foundation for their future, etc. These results confirmed Baker's findings (2000) since he claimed that learning several languages at an early age could have a major influence on children's cognitive abilities and their future in general.

On the other hand, some participants identified the disadvantages of the early start of the simultaneous acquisition of three languages. These disadvantages included code-switching, unequal acquisition of each language, confusion and lack of interest, cognitive difficulties, etc. Once again, the participants' answers reflected the widespread concerns – language mixing, language delay, difficulties in linguistic and cognitive development, etc. – which were observed in numerous studies (e.g. Baker 2000; Lightbown & Spada 2006). Lastly, the participants also criticized the poor organization of the education system, which did not provide the necessary conditions for the simultaneous acquisition of three languages.

3.4.5. The influence of previous language knowledge on L3

Since all children learned at least one language before enrolling in Grade 1 of primary school, the participants were inquired to express their agreement or disagreement with the possible influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English as L3. Out of the total number of participants, 17 participants (37.8 %) believed that previous language knowledge had some influence on the acquisition of English as L3. However, 26 participants (57.8 %) thought otherwise. One participant (2.2 %) could not decide whether previous language knowledge could have some influence on the acquisition of English as L3, while one participant (2.2 %) failed to answer the question. The results are shown in Table 17.

Table 17 Do you think that previous knowledge of two languages influences the acquisition of English?

The influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English	Number	Percentage
Agree	17	37.8
Disagree	26	57.8
Does not know	1	2.2
Not answered	1	2.2

In addition to this, the participants were asked to illustrate some positive influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English as L3 (see Table 18). Thus, 23 participants (51.1 %) attempted to provide some examples of positive influence, while 22

participants (48.9 %) did not give their examples of the above mentioned matter. Several participants (n=7) pointed out that previous language knowledge could facilitate the acquisition of the third language if the languages belonged to the same group of the same language family. They further added that languages from the same language group would be similar in some aspects, which would allow children to compare them and easily learn a new language. In this case, the participants mentioned Germanic, Slavic and Romance languages, which were groups and sub-groups of the Indo-European language family. For example, some participants believed that knowledge of Italian could facilitate the acquisition of other Romance languages, like Spanish, French, etc. Participant 17, whose child had been going to private lessons of French for two years, stated that the French teacher linked the child's rapid acquisition of French to previous knowledge of Italian. In addition to this, most participants (n=9) mentioned vocabulary, an aspect of language in which the similarities between different languages could be observed. They pointed out that some words from different languages shared the same etymological root, so children could make connections between the languages and learn new words without much effort. One participant even emphasized that children easily mastered the grammatical rules of a new language because they had learned grammar of other languages. Moreover, some participants (n=3) believed that children had a certain predisposition to learn new languages because they already had some experience with two different languages. Their knowledge of other languages increased their cognitive abilities, which were not at the same level as in children without previous language knowledge. Furthermore, several participants (n=3) claimed that previous language knowledge aroused children's curiosity when hearing another unknown language, increased their self-esteem, motivated them to try harder when learning a new language, etc. One participant even pointed out that children seemed happier and more satisfied when using different languages to communicate.

Table 18 Examples of positive influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English

Can you list some examples of positive influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English?	Number	Percentage
Easier acquisition of each subsequent language	7	15.6
Mastering vocabulary (e.g. the same etymological root)	9	20
Making connections with other grammatical systems	1	2.2
Previous experience in language learning	3	6.7
Individual development (increases self-esteem, motivation, interest, etc.)	3	6.7
Children are happy and satisfied	1	2.2

When asked about the negative influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English as L3, 22 participants (48.9 %) attempted to provide some examples, while 23 participants (51.1 %) did not answer the question. Their explanations are presented in Table 19. Although several participants (n=9) claimed that Italian, a Romance language, and Croatian, a Slavic language, could not negatively influence English, a Germanic language, other participants listed some examples of the negative influence of previous language knowledge. Most participants (n=7) stated that the negative influence could be noticed in code-switching between the languages. According to them, children often used words from different languages in the same utterance. They also had difficulties in writing because they applied letters specific to one language in another language or mixed letters while trying to formulate a word. Few participants (n=2) claimed that the similarities between the languages could lead to mistakes when learning a new language. They pointed out that some aspects from previously acquired languages could not always be applied to a new language. For example, even though some words had the same etymological root, their meaning could be different in each language. One participant even emphasized that learning Italian before English could cause difficulties in pronunciation. Another participant claimed that previous language knowledge could lead to children's confusion. Lastly, few participants (n=2) stated that children were sometimes overwhelmed and stressed with language classes, grades and exams, so they refused to learn a new language.

Table 19 Examples of negative influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English

Can you list some examples of negative influence of previous language knowledge on the acquisition of English?	Number	Percentage
No negative influence	9	20
Code-switching	7	15.6
Difficulties in writing	7	15.6
Confusion due to the similarities between languages	2	4.4
Problems with pronunciation	1	2.2
Stress as a result of grades, exams, etc.	2	4.4

Based on these results, the participants recognized that previous language knowledge could positively influence the acquisition of subsequent languages, especially if languages demonstrated similarities in vocabulary and grammar. Also, the participants believed that previous language knowledge influenced children’s individual characteristics – such as their cognitive abilities, motivation, curiosity, self-esteem, etc. – which could improve the acquisition of L3. These results were in line with the findings of Jessner (2006), Cenoz and Jessner (2009), Falk and Bardel (2010), etc., who explained how bilingualism could affect metalinguistic awareness, language learning strategies, thinking styles, etc.

However, some participants noticed that previous language knowledge could lead to code-switching in oral and written utterances, difficulties in pronunciation, incorrect transfer of certain linguistic aspects, etc. Also, when acquiring L3, previous language knowledge could cause confusion, stress and refusal to learn a new language.

3.4.6. The influence of L3 on the development of L1 and L2

In relation to the previous question which dealt with the interrelationship between three languages, the participants were also asked to express their opinion on the positive or negative influence of English on the development of Croatian and Italian, which were L1 and L2 in children’s linguistic repertoire. On the one hand, most participants, 42.2 % (n=19), believed that English could have some positive influence on the development of L1 and L2.

On the other hand, 26.7 % (n=12) of participants thought that English had negative influence on previously acquired languages. Despite the large amount of positive and negative replies, 31.1 % (n=14) of participants did not answer the question (see Table 20). Their explanations would be presented in the following section.

Table 20 Do you think that the acquisition of English can have a positive or negative influence on the development of previously acquired languages?

The influence of English on the development of L1 and L2	Number	Percentage
Positive influence	19	42.2
Negative influence	12	26.7
Not answered	14	31.1

Several participants (n=8) only pointed out that English could have positive influence on the further development of L1 and L2. However, other participants attempted to elaborate on their opinions of the positive influence of English. Some participants (n=3) believed that learning English could facilitate further development of L1 and L2 because children constantly learnt new words in English, which could later be applied to their L1 and L2. In addition to this, few participants (n=2) emphasized the great amount of loan words from English, since many English words were often used in other languages. Also, some participants (n=2) mentioned the similarities between certain words in different languages which could influence the interrelationship between the languages. In addition to this, participant 45 stated that learning three languages enabled the child to compare the languages and notice possible similarities or differences between the languages. In this way, the child strengthened the knowledge of all three languages. Furthermore, apart from influencing the development of L1 and L2, one participant believed that English could also be helpful in other school subjects like information technology, history, physics, chemistry, etc. Moreover, some participants (n=3) stated that learning English could improve children's cognitive abilities, even though learning a new language could at first lead to confusion. Also, participant 17 claimed that the knowledge of English could influence the development of children's self-esteem because they could recognize the language on TV and computer. In a certain way, recognizing English could evoke the feeling of being a part of the world. Their answers can be seen in Table 21.

Table 21 Examples of positive influence of English on the development of previously acquired languages

Can you list some examples of positive influence of English on the development of previously acquired languages?	Number	Percentage
English can positively influence L1 and L2	8	17.8
New words from English can be applied to L1 and L2	3	6.7
Loan words from English	2	4.4
Similarities between the languages facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary	2	4.4
Comparison of languages	1	2.2
Helpful for other school subjects	1	2.2
Improvement of cognitive abilities	3	6.7
Development of self-esteem	1	2.2

Several participants (n=3) could not be grouped to neither the positive nor the negative section. The first participant claimed that English influenced L1 and L2 both positively and negatively, depending on how often the other languages were used. The second participant could not decide whether English had any kind of influence on L1 and L2, while the third participant stated that English did not influence the development of previous languages neither in a negative nor a positive way.

When observing the negative influence of English, most participants (n=6) simply stated that English did not influence the knowledge of previously acquired languages. One participant even pointed out that the reason for the lack of influence lay in the fact that the languages belonged to different groups of the same language family – Croatian was a Slavic language, Italian was a Romance language and English was a Germanic language. However, few participants (n=2) believed that adding another language to children’s repertoire could cause difficulties in the area of grammar, because none of the languages would be acquired properly. Moreover, one participant claimed that learning English could reduce the desire to learn a new language because everyone spoke, understood and used English in mutual communication, while only a smaller percentage of people spoke some other language. Their explanations are presented in Table 22.

Table 22 Examples of negative influence of English on the development of previously acquired languages

Can you list some examples of positive influence of English on the development of previously acquired languages?	Number	Percentage
English has no influence	6	13.3
Difficulties in the area of grammar	2	4.4
Knowing English reduces the desire to learn other languages	1	2.2

According to their answers, the participants shared the belief that certain linguistic aspects from English – such as words – could be applied to the L1 and L2. Thus, through comparison of similarities and differences, the knowledge of all three languages could be strengthened. What is more, the participants recognized the positive influence of an additional language on children’s cognitive abilities and their self-esteem.

On the other hand, several participants identified the negative influence of English on the L1 and L2, especially prominent in the difficulties with the use of grammar and vocabulary. Lastly, the participants acknowledged that the acquisition of English could reduce the desire to learn other languages because of its widespread use all over the world.

4. Conclusion

In the recent decades, learning multiple languages at an early age has become the norm, rather than the exception. More and more children learn several languages, either as native languages at home and in the wider community, or as foreign languages during the formal education. Foreign languages, such as English, have been introduced into the education systems all over Europe, receiving support from governments, education policy-makers and parents alike. Among the supporters of foreign language learning, parents have the most significant role, because they not only influence language policy decisions and the choice of foreign languages, but also have a major impact on children's attitudes and their overall linguistic development.

The present study observed parents' attitudes towards the early learning of English as the third language at the Italian-medium primary school in Istria, a bilingual county in Croatia. The participants were asked to express their attitudes and opinions towards early learning of multiple languages, language teaching, the presence of foreign languages in primary school and the interrelationship between the three languages.

The findings of this study demonstrated that the participants generally had positive attitudes towards the early learning of multiple languages. They perceived languages as an important asset for children's overall development and their future, especially in the area of education, employment and tourism. The participants also regarded foreign languages, with emphasis on English, in a very positive way. As a language of global communication, English was seen as the basic prerequisite in today's world. The results also showed that the participants mostly supported the formal acquisition of three languages, recognizing the influence of teachers and their teaching methods on children's linguistic and cognitive development. As for the interrelationship between the languages, the participants were almost evenly divided, expressing both positive and negative perceptions of the reciprocal influence between the languages. All in all, the study provided a valuable insight into parents' attitudes to different aspects of early language learning and provided a basis for future research into this issue.

Still, certain limitations of the study should be considered. Since this study included a small number of participants, future studies might benefit from a larger sample, which would

provide more conclusive evidence of this topic. Also, a more detailed and reliable data could be obtained from a mixed-design research. Quantitative methods could lead to more generalized findings which could support the data obtained from qualitative methods.

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Sažetak

Ovaj diplomski rad analizira stavove roditelja o ranom učenju jezika u školama u Istri, dvojezičnoj županiji u Hrvatskoj. Cilj ovoga rada bio je promatrati pozitivne i negativne stavove roditelja o usvajanju tri jezika od prvog razreda osnovne škole, budući da njihovi stavovi i mišljenja mogu uvelike utjecati na dječji uspjeh tijekom procesa učenja jezika.

Rad prikazuje teorijsku pozadinu istraživanja koje se usredotočuje na pojmove kao što su rano učenje više jezika, međuodnosi između jezika, uloga i utjecaj stavova roditelja te jezični kontekst Hrvatske i Istre. Drugi dio rada obuhvaća opis cilja, sudionika i postupka istraživanja, nakon čega slijede rezultati i rasprava. Rezultati su pokazali da roditelji većinom imaju pozitivne stavove o ranom učenju jezika, podučavanju jezika, izboru stranih jezika, istovremenom usvajanju tri jezika i međuodnosu između jezika. Naposljetku, zaključak donosi sažetak glavnih pojmova i rezultata predstavljenih u ovome radu.

Ključne riječi: dvojezična zajednica, formalno obrazovanje, rano učenje jezika, stavovi roditelja, usvajanje više jezika

Appendix

Upitnik o ranom učenju engleskog jezika

(Questionario sull' apprendimento precoce della lingua inglese)

Poštovani roditelji,

Pred Vama se nalazi upitnik o ranom učenju engleskog jezika. Upitnik je dio istraživanja koje se provodi u svrhu izrade diplomskog rada na Odsjeku za anglistiku Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu. Vaši odgovori su u potpunosti anonimni (ne morate upisati svoje ime), a podaci će se koristiti isključivo u istraživačke svrhe. Svaki Vaš odgovor mi je od iznimne koristi te Vam se unaprijed zahvaljujem na uloženom vremenu i trudu.

Napomena: Zamolila bih Vas da svoje odgovore pišete na hrvatskom jeziku budući da je moje poznavanje i korištenje talijanskog jezika puno slabije od hrvatskog.

Gentili genitori,

Il questionario qui proposto fa parte della ricerca per la tesi di laurea magistrale presso il Dipartimento d' inglese della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia di Zagabria. Il tema del questionario è l'apprendimento precoce della lingua inglese. Le vostre risposte sono completamente anonime (non è necessario inserire il vostro nome). I dati saranno utilizzati esclusivamente a scopo di ricerca. Ciascuna delle vostre risposte è di grande aiuto per la mia ricerca e vi ringrazio in anticipo per il vostro tempo dedicato compilando il questionario.

Nota Bene: Si pregano i gentili genitori se possibile, compilare il questionario in lingua croata perché la mia conoscenza della lingua italiana è scarsa.

I Opći podaci (*Informazioni generali*)

Molim Vas da popunite navedene podatke o Vama i o Vašem djetetu.

(Vi prego di compilare le informazioni elencate necessarie per condurre la ricerca a buon fine, i dati che dovrete inserire riguardano voi e i vostri bambini.)

Osnovne informacije o roditelju (*Informazioni generali riguardo il genitore*)

Molim Vas da zaokružite ili nadopunite odgovor. (*Vi prego di accerchiare e compilare le seguenti domande.*)

1. Dob (Età)

- a) ispod 30 (*meno di 30 anni*)
- b) između 30 i 40 (*tra i 30 e i 40 anni*)
- c) iznad 40 (*oltre i 40 anni*)

2. Spol (Sesso)

- a) muški (*maschio*)
- b) ženski (*femmina*)

3. Mjesto rođenja (Luogo di nascita) _____**4. Stečeni stupanj obrazovanja (Livello d'istruzione acquisito)**

- a) osnovna škola (*scuola elementare*)
- b) srednja škola (*scuola media superiore*)
- c) viša škola (*scuola superiore*)
- d) fakultet (*università*)

ostalo (*altro*): _____

5. Koje jezike ste učili, kada ste ih počeli učiti i kako biste procijenili Vaše znanje navedenih jezika?

(Che lingue avete studiato, quando avete iniziato a studiarle e come valutate la vostra conoscenza di queste lingue?)

Molim Vas da jezike poredate kronološkim redoslijedom.

(Vi prego di elencate le lingue in ordine cronologico.)

1 = loše (*scarso*), 2 = dovoljno (*sufficiente*), 3 = dobro (*buono*), 4 = vrlo dobro (*molto buono*), 5 = izvrsno (*eccellente*)

Jezik (<i>Lingue parlate</i>)	Dob kada ste počeli učiti jezik (navedite dob u godinama) <i>L'età quando avete iniziato a studiare le lingue (specificate l'età in anni)</i>	Znanje jezika (zaokružiti odgovarajući broj) <i>Livello di conoscenza delle lingue</i> (<i>accerchiate il numero appropriato</i>)				
		1	2	3	4	5
		1	2	3	4	5
		1	2	3	4	5
		1	2	3	4	5

6. Koje od jezika koristite u svakodnevnom životu i kako često? (*Quali lingue usate nella vostra vita quotidiana e con quale frequenza?*)

1 = nikad (*mai*), 2 = rijetko (*raramente*), 3 = ponekad (*a volte*), 4 = često (*spesso*), 5 = vrlo često (*molto spesso*)

Jezik (<i>Lingue parlate</i>)	Uporaba jezika (zaokružiti odgovarajući broj) <i>L'uso della lingua parlata</i> (<i>accerchiate il numero appropriato</i>)				
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

7. Smatrate li se dvojezičnim govornikom? (*Vi sentite come un oratore bilingue?*)

DA (*SÌ*)

NE (*NO*)

Molim Vas da obrazložite svoj odgovor. (*Vi prego di spiegate la vostra risposta.*)

Osnovne informacije o djetetu (*Le informazioni basi riguardo il bambino*)

Molim Vas da zaokružite ili nadopunite odgovor. (*Vi prego di accerchiate o completate la risposta.*)

1. Dob (*Età*) _____

2. Spol (*Sesso*)

a) muški (*maschio*)

b) ženski (*femmina*)

3. Mjesto rođenja (*Luogo di nascita*) _____

4. Koje jezike je Vaše dijete učilo i kada ih je počelo učiti? (*Che lingue ha imparato il vostro bambino e quando le ha iniziato a studiarle?*)

Molim Vas da jezike poredate kronološkim redoslijedom. (*Vi prego di elencate le lingue in ordine cronologico.*)

Jezik (<i>Lingue parlate</i>)	Dob kada je Vaše dijete počelo učiti jezik (navedite dob u godinama) <i>L'età quando il vostro bambino ha iniziato a studiare la lingua</i> (specificate l'età in anni)

5. Je li Vaše dijete dvojezično? (*Pensate che il vostro bambino è un oratore bilingue*

DA (*SÌ*)

NE (*NO*)

6. Molim Vas da navedete koje jezike Vaše dijete najčešće koristi s:

(Vi prego di specificate quali lingue il vostro bambino usa abitualmente con diversi interlocutori:)

	Jezik / Jezici (<i>Le lingue parlate</i>)
majkom (<i>la madre</i>)	
ocem (<i>il padre</i>)	
braćom i sestrama (<i>i fratelli e le sorelle</i>)	
rodbinom (<i>i parenti</i>)	
prijateljima u školi (<i>gli amici a scuola</i>)	
prijateljima izvan škole (<i>gli amici fuori scuola</i>)	

II Upitnik (Questionario)

1. Mislite li da je važno **poznavati više jezika** i zašto?

(Considerate che è importante conoscere diverse lingue e perché?)

2. Smatrate li da je važno započeti s **učenjem dvaju ili više jezika u ranoj dobi**?

(Considerate che è importante imparare due o più lingue fin dalla tenera età?)

DA (SÌ)

NE (NO)

2.1. Koje su, po Vašem mišljenju, **prednosti u učenju dvaju ili više jezika od rane dobi**?

Objasnite ukratko. *(Secondo voi, quali sono i vantaggi dell'apprendimento di due o più lingue fin dalla tenera età? Spiegate brevemente.)*

2.2. Koji su, po Vašem mišljenju, **nedostaci u učenju dvaju ili više jezika od rane dobi**?

Objasnite ukratko. *(Secondo voi, quali sono gli svantaggi dell'apprendimento di due o più lingue fin dalla tenera età? Spiegate brevemente.)*

3. Jeste li zadovoljni **načinom poučavanja jezika u osnovnoj školi**? Objasnite ukratko.

(Siete soddisfatti del modo di insegnamento della lingua nella scuola elementare? Spiegate brevemente.)

4. Jeste li zadovoljni što Vaše dijete uči i **engleski jezik** od rane dobi u osnovnoj školi? Zašto?

(Siete soddisfatti che il vostro bambino impari l'inglese fin dalla tenera età nella scuola elementare? Perché?)

5. Da postoji mogućnost izbora, **biste li odabrali neki drugi strani jezik**? Zašto?

(Se avete una scelta, scegliereste un'altra lingua straniera? Perché?)

6. Molimo Vas da objasnite koje su, po Vašem mišljenju, **prednosti i nedostaci istovremenog ovladavanja trima jezicima u ranoj školskoj dobi**.

(Vi prego di spiegare quali sono, secondo voi, i vantaggi e gli svantaggi della padronanza simultanea di tre lingue in età scolare precoce.)

6.1. **Prednosti (I vantaggi)**

6.2. **Nedostaci (Gli svantaggi)**

7. Smatrate li da **prethodno znanje dvaju jezika** utječe na učenje **engleskog jezika**?

(Pensate che la conoscenza precedente di due lingue influisca sull'apprendimento della lingua inglese?)

DA (SÌ)

NE (NO)

7.1. Možete li navesti neki primjer za **pozitivan** utjecaj prethodnog jezičnog znanja pri učenju novog jezika? (*Potete dare un esempio d'influenza positiva della conoscenza della lingua precedente nell'apprendimento di una nuova lingua?*)

7.2. Možete li navesti neki primjer za **negativan** utjecaj prethodnog jezičnog znanja pri učenju novog jezika? (*Potete dare un esempio d'influenza negativa della conoscenza della lingua precedente nell'apprendimento di una nuova lingua?*)

8. Smatrate li da **učenje engleskog jezika** može pozitivno ili negativno utjecati **na razvoj prethodnih jezika**? Objasnite ukratko.

(*Pensate che l'apprendimento della lingua inglese può influenzare positivamente o negativamente nello sviluppo delle lingue precedenti? Spiegate brevemente*)

Zahvaljujem Vam na sudjelovanju u istraživanju!

Vi ringrazio per aver partecipato alla ricerca.