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## **DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG PLURILINGUAL STUDENTS IN MONOLINGUAL CROATIAN LANGUAGE PRACTICE**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The educational system in the Republic of Croatia covers the following: preschool (ages 3-6), eight-year primary school (ages 7-14), high-school (ages 15-18) and three or five year higher education according to the Bologna process. Primary education is obligatory and free. It is divided into two cycles: lower grades (1-4) and upper grades (5-8).

The research described in this paper focuses on the first part of the educational axis, i.e. the initial grades of primary school. During that period, applied linguistics slowly replaces its monofunctional approach to learning and acquiring the mother tongue by a multifunctional approach. Considering that multifunctionality is an important developmental characteristic of children's language, such a standpoint has in many ways influenced our research on early discourse in Croatian language. The essential European document on education (The Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment, Council of Europe 2001), also emphasizes multifunctionality as a determinant which significantly influences language learning at an early age. Importance is given to communication in the mother tongue as the first of the eight key competences (The Key Competences for Lifetime Learning: Communicative competence, European Commission 2005). Other competences are: communication in a foreign language, mathematical literacy, media (digital) competence, the "learning to learn" competence, entrepreneurial competence, and creative expression. The process of language communication distinguishes between linguistic competence and communicative competence. The first one implies theoretical knowledge of the language, i.e. knowledge of language rules, definitions, standards, while the latter one implies knowledge of language use, i.e. practical application of the knowledge of language in everyday communication situations. The development of communicative competence is taking on one of the leading roles in early language, and also represents the characteristic of a developmental period

from the beginning of the first sounds to the final phase of concrete cognitive operations and the finalization of language (Stančić and Ljubešić 1994; Pavličević-Franić 2005; Jelaska 2007). Both competences are realized in Croatian language teaching and also through content of other subjects since a child speaks, writes and reads in its mother tongue. In early language development it is therefore necessary to encourage development of the communicative competence considering that students in lower primary grades are in the phase of concrete thought. At a later point they enter the phase of abstract cognitive processes (Piaget 1969), when they should develop their linguistic competence.

Because of the above mentioned facts, this paper explores the possibilities of finding purposeful and efficient ways to develop communicative competence in Croatian mother tongue during the initial period of language learning and teaching. The standard Croatian language is learned systematically starting in primary school. Communicative practice is then carried out exclusively in the standard idiom of the mother tongue which for the majority students represents a non-dominant code (L2). Prior to starting primary school learners were exposed to other idioms of the Croatian language (L1) which were more or less different from the standard code. In that way a monolingual school practice develops a plurilingual environment creating a web of various codes. The consequence of such a situation is the development of an interlanguage field (cross-linguistic area), and the majority of students become vertically multilingual. Vertical multilingualism implies a diglossic relationship of codes within the system of the same mother tongue. In most cases, interference and transfer of language elements from one system into another can be a negative language occurrence, however, in our research interpolations are treated as a positive linguistic occurrence, i.e. a sign that a child knows how to think linguistically (Pavličević-Franić 2005).

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1. Language competences within the framework of general linguistic theories

The modern communicative model of acquiring and learning a language requires a functional teaching process which is age appropriate and efficient, different from the traditional lecturing manner of teaching. It is founded in accordance with the principles of modern linguistic theories but it is also psycholinguistically and didactically redesigned for the needs of the early language teaching/acquisition process. Mother tongue teaching is carried out in accordance with the educational purpose of teaching social-humanistic content in primary school (Nastavni plan i program 2006), and in accordance with curricular theories which are becoming acknowledged in the Republic of Croatia (Poljak 1990; Težak 1998; Pavličević-Franić 2005). Particular attention is given to the development of language competences and promotion of language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Language competences are an important segment of various linguistic theories. Noam Chomsky (1966, 1989) considered competence to be linguistic professionalism, i.e. knowledge of grammar, as opposed to performance which would imply realization of language knowledge which a monolingual speaker possesses. Dell Hymes (1984) introduced the concept, communicative competence, defining it as a discourse application, i.e. use of language in everyday communication situations. Advocates of functional linguistics, particularly A. Martinet (1982), considered competence to be a communicative qualification at the level of functional application. Representatives of pragmatics (Yule 1998, 2003; Levinson 1995), emphasize the importance of the applied, practical knowledge of language as a basis for developing communicative competence. As learning a language is a complex intellectual process, but also a social fact, its successful teaching also includes cognitivists' thoughts (Slobin and Ferguson 1973) who point to the relationship between cognition and communication, as well as Canale and Swain's (1980) perception which link knowledge of basic grammatical principles and the communicative function of language with the social context, i.e. environment.

## **2. Communicative competence and theories of early language development**

The communicative-functional model of learning, based on principles of positive psychology and humanistic education, is suitable for the early phase of language acquisition since it rests on the fact that abstract content such as grammar should be taught through visualization, based on examples from everyday communication situations (communication), including not only systems by which language information is transferred (cognition) but relationships between persons who are communicating (feelings, character traits). Affirmation of such an approach and the theoretical framework of the research are supported by numerous theories of language development. In addition to the mentioned general linguistic theories, an important role in the research was given to findings by specific theories of early language development.

Earlier linguistic-didactic research claimed that language development ended with the child starting school (McNeill 1970), which could be correct if referring to language acquisition, but is certainly an incorrect claim when the process includes language learning, i.e., the time after starting school. Language basics are usually acquired by the age of five (Karmiloff-Smith 1986; McShane 1991), but language development does not end. The core principles of acquisition and language learning from a linguistic-didactic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspect are elaborated and described in books by H.G. Widdowson (2000), W. Littlewood (2000), R. Cattello (2000). However, most of their observations have their theoretical bases in specific theories of early language development. The first theory to emphasize is the theory of Eve Clark on acquiring semantic lines (1981, 2003) which studies the development of vocabulary and acquisition of word meaning, during which a child takes over parts of semantic fields of already familiar words, which provides an important insight into the process of language development in general. The theory of semantic bootstrapping, theory of syn-

tactic bootstrapping, (Smiley and Huttenlocher 1995), questions the acquisition of lexical meaning of words and early acquisition of syntax based on insights into the conditions of their use and the terms of language organization. Nelson's theory of input language (1973) observes child directed speech during which the input language directly affects the formation of the target (aim) language. In generalizing points of view, we can point out that the majority theories of early language development place functional linguistic before theoretical. In other words, language learning in the function of everyday communication is emphasized first with less insistence on normative grammar. That means emphasizing pragmatics over norm, logic of speech over grammar of speech, i.e. developing communicative competence over linguistic competence. Chomsky, in his research on child language (1966, 1989) established that a child has a developed innate mechanism for acquiring the mother tongue, i.e. that children exposed to language data form a particular algorithmic system (Language Acquisition Device - LAD) which structures the display of the language expression. According to that thesis he established the theory of language ability which works on the principle of universal grammar.

### 3. Communicative competence in Croatian school practice

The communicative – functional approach to language content is set in basic educational documents in the Republic of Croatia (HNOS 2006). It emphasizes the importance of communicative practice and a pragmatic approach to language content, functional teaching of language with the purpose of successful understanding of everyday communication situations, and the development of language competences. However, although the development and incentive for communicative competence in the mother tongue is emphasized as a priority in the educational system, there is a discrepancy between declaratively set aims and actual teaching practice. Students complete their primary education at an inadequate level of acquisition of the standard Croatian language and with a low level of language knowledge in general. Therefore, a number of scientific research are underway in the Republic of Croatia which raise an issue of successful learning process and Croatian language teaching.<sup>1</sup>

The research results point to possible answers and conclusions. Systematic and institutionalized learning of a language begins in preschool through games and reading and writing practice activities (until age 6-7). A child comes to school as a monolingual student with a developed native idiom (the language it learned in family and the environment in which the child lives – L1). Starting school, a child also begins to learn the standard language (L2), in communication with other children it is exposed to subsystems of the standard language (L3), with

<sup>1</sup> *Communicative competence in Language Pluralistic Environment* (University of Zagreb and TEMPUS project, European Community, 2000–2003); *Early Communication and Language Development* (Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb, 2001); *Developing communicative competence in the early discourse of Croatian language* (Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, 2006–2010); *Acquisition of Croatian in cross-linguistic perspective* (Laboratory for psycholinguistic research, Zagreb, 2006–2010); *Croatian as L1 and L2* (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, 2006–2010).

early learning of a foreign language a child starts to acquire systems of a foreign language (L4, L5...), and thus becomes a multilingual student. It can be said that during early learning of Croatian language, at the beginning of a child's education, a monolingual child with an acquired L1 becomes plurilingual because of the language contacts with other idioms in school practice. In that way a cross-linguistic area is established which can be a point of difficulty in the process of learning the mother tongue. Considering that school practice in the Republic of Croatia is monolingual but in the standard idiom of the Croatian language, which is non-dominant L2 to the majority of the students and the fact that during early education students in lower primary grades are vertically plurilingual, and that their mother idiom (L1) is more or less different from the standard L2.

As learning the standard grammar in the early language period is not necessary for successful acquisition of the mother tongue and the development of communicative skills, grammatical content should be adapted to the cognitive abilities and interests of a particular age. Therefore, standard grammar should be restructured into a so called functional school (didactic) grammar with basic characteristics such as: descriptiveness, immanence (attributive and appropriate) and functionality (language for the purpose of everyday communication). In the process of learning the mother tongue, students should also be freed from anxiety of making a mistake in communication. Language is learned through communication, i.e. by encouraging and acquiring concrete language activities. Communication is developed through communication, in the function of real expression. If a child is silent because of fear of making a mistake, even the very best teacher will struggle to develop its communicative competence. Therefore, from communication to grammar and not the other way around!

### III. RESEARCH

#### 1. Research description

The aim of the research was to attempt to answer two important linguistic-didactic questions. The first one referred to the appearance of parallel language codes and the development of the cross-linguistic area. Will such a communicative situation represent an advantage or an obstacle in the process of learning the standard idiom of the Croatian language? The second question deals with errors which are inevitably a result of the overlap and intertwining of language systems. We would like to test whether errors really have such a negative effect on successfully acquiring the mother tongue, i.e. should they "always" be treated as a negative linguistic occurrence? In answering the questions our starting point was Glasser's statement which also represent the motto of our research: "Fear is the main obstacle in the process of learning: fear of failure, of error. Therefore every teacher is a quality school should enable each student to err without punishment. To welcome an error means to encourage learning. Establishing trust means to develop a feeling that we are taking care of everything, that we are here to help and not to hurt someone" (Glasser 2005).

## 2. Research problems and aims

The Croatian educational system allocates the largest number of teaching hours throughout the school year for learning Croatian language as the mother tongue. Croatian language is considered to be the most extensive school subject in primary education (4-5 hours per week). The complexity of Croatian language as a school subject is its content since language teaching includes teaching language expression, literature and media education. In lower grades of primary school teaching language and language expression takes up 70% of the total teaching hours per year. If by the end of the primary school cycle we want educated students to be able to communicate in various discourses, orally, and in writing, language and language expression teaching should be harmonized with the postulations of the communicative-functional approach and language content should be taught visually, based on examples from everyday life (Miljević-Ridički et al. 2004). However, research indicates that in teaching the mother tongue too much time is devoted to learning language theory, and less attention is given to the development of language skills and communicative competence. The outcome of such practice is that at the end of the educational cycle, students have a better developed linguistic competence (knowledge of language) than communicative competence (practical language use) (Pavličević-Franić and Aladrović 2009). Considering that various language learning theories advocate various approaches, it is necessary to test the usefulness of particular language learning strategies in order to establish which settings are relevant, i.e. which linguistic-didactic approaches would be more useful, more efficient in the process of learning and acquiring the mother tongue. Taking all of the mentioned into account, the purpose of this research was to test which particular strategies of learning a language influence its acquisition and to establish the effect of learning the mother tongue has on developing a cross-linguistic area and learning a foreign language. According to the research questions the following aims were set:

- Test how the application of the cognitive-linguistic paradigm on learning the mother tongue influences the development of communicative competence in lower primary school grades.
- Test how the application of the theory of learning through mistakes influences the development of communicative competence in lower primary grades.
- Test whether the development of a cross-linguistic area and intertwining of language codes has a positive or negative effect on learning Croatian mother tongue in lower primary grades.
- Test whether learning a foreign language influences the development of communicative competence in the Croatian language in lower primary grades.

## 3. Sample and research methodology

The sample of the research was made up of students in lower primary grades (N = 100). Half of the participants used the written form in their expression, while the other half used the oral form in expressing their answers. The students had a task to structure a story according to a motivating dialogue. This was followed

by content analysis of written texts. The second group of students had to tell the story according to the same motivating dialogue. The oral expression was taped and the tape script served as a corpus for this research. In order to meet the needs of the protocol, a discursive observation of the teaching lesson was also carried out. The research instruments consisted of a communicative competence test and test of linguistic competence and pedagogical observation. The data obtained were analyzed by the statistical program SPSS and processed using analysis of variance, t-test, and Chi-square test.

#### 4. Starting hypotheses

In accordance with the research questions and research aims, the following hypotheses were set:

H 1 – It is expected that the application of the cognitive-linguistic paradigm in early discourse in the acquisition of the mother tongue will have a positive effect on the development of communicative competence.

H 2 – It is expected that learning through mistakes will have a positive effect on the development of communicative competence with students in lower primary grades.

H 3 – It is assumed that the development of a cross-linguistic area will have a positive rather than a negative effect on the process of learning the mother tongue in lower primary grades.

H 4 – It is assumed that learning a foreign language will have a positive effect on the development of communicative competence in learning the Croatian language in lower primary grades.

#### 5. Methods of learning/teaching the Croatian language

The manner of learning and teaching language is a specific area. Language is an abstract system of symbols and therefore it is important to teach it according to the principles of appropriateness, progression, induction and visualization (Težak, 1992; Pavličević-Franić, 2005) particularly at an early age. Attention must be given to cognitive abilities of a child, its emotional maturity and environment in which the language is learned. Every language, including Croatian, has its specificities which demand specific manners of teaching. The achievements in linguistics, linguistic-didactic and other primary sciences aid to that teaching, also including psychology, pedagogy, sociology and other disciplines which suggest different language learning/teaching strategies in order for it to be successful. In this particular research we attempted to integrate the knowledge of some theories in order to be more precise in establishing and presenting strategies which are useful and efficient in the process of early language acquisition.

##### 5.1. The method of learning from errors

The method of learning through mistakes was developed by an American psychologist E. L. Thorndike (1913), who within his connectionism theory gave a

new interpretation to the process of learning by association. Thorndike's students named such a process as learning through trial and error. It is based on the principle of readiness, frequency, recentness, and effect. In order to start a particular sequence, a person must be ready, i.e. should establish associations with the environment. The principle of recentness refers to the fact that we best know what we had experienced most recently and thus such events are more easily reproduced. According to the principle of effectiveness, we will be faster and more successful in acquiring that content which has a particular value for us, and towards we have a positive attitude (Grgin 2004).

If we are referring to language learning through trial and error method, we can say that in that learning in which a mistake is considered to be a motivator for learning and the correct reaction is left to experience. Learning is most efficient when it occurs in a situation without fear of error. Therefore, learning the mother tongue begins with diagnosing the mistake (error) and random problem solving. In the beginning the attempts are mostly erroneous, but in accordance with imitating the positive model, correct examples are reinforced and remembered while incorrect ones are lost. Through trial and error method a student selects the correct example which can be found in the existing repertoire. Accuracy is established through activities in real communication situations. Often, however, due to the intertwining of language codes, mistakes occur in the established interlanguage field. It should be noted that such mistakes always occur within the language system of the mother tongue and never out of that system, which proves that a child knows how to think linguistically.

Mistakes which are found in the interlanguage field can occur in written and spoken language. We divided them into: errors, i.e. mistakes which occur due to not learning particular language content that is, in forming the system; and lapses, i.e. mistakes which occur accidentally in using the system (according to: Jespersen 1976). The largest number of mistakes, regardless of type, was observed at two levels: lexical (spoken language) and grammatical (spoken and written language). At the level of lexemes there are three ways according to which mistakes occur: combining (two or more words are joined to make one), exchange (exchanging one word for another) and transfer (change in word order) (according to: Garrett 1975). The early language period is witness to other causes of lexical mistakes. Such are primarily association disturbances which cause mistakes in selecting words in situations when the selection of one lemma is interrupted by associations between lemmas; conceptual disturbances which cause mistakes in selecting words when two or more concepts are activated at the same time (Erdeljac 2005). In early discourse we can also observe mistakes which are usually caused by neologic formations, i.e. with the occurrence of the so called innovative lexemes and innovative "grammateme", e.g. children's age neologisms and words which are acquired by meaning but with an incorrect morphological form (Pavličević-Franić 2005). Having in mind all of the above, teachers should establish a positive environment in a classroom in which mistakes will not be treated as a negative occurrence and be corrected in a harsh manner. The opposite is recommended; mistakes which are inevitable due to the intertwining of language codes in the interfiled should be used as positive encouragement for learning a language.



## 5.2. Method of discursive monitoring in communication

Discursive monitoring is a semantic concept which implies the process of surveillance of the teaching discourse in which new information occurs in order to correctly understand the quality of the message (Splichal 2003). It is carried out through a meaningful analysis and cognitive understanding, logical by nature and in opposition with the intuitive. Its purpose is to aid coming to correct conclusions and understanding concepts logically. In modern communication, particularly when referring to the teaching process, participants should know how to utilize discursive surveillance. Automatic reception of a message is often insufficient, although a large number of communicators do so, since it can lead to being unable to understand or to misunderstand. Therefore, discursive monitoring has shown to be a purposeful method in teaching serving to ensuring quality information and security that there will be no disruptions in the communication channel. For teachers, discursive monitoring can aid the process of learning since in that way they can correct language information, direct them towards the correct understanding and finally based on grammatically correctly prepared and semantically comprehensible language messages.

## 5.3. Content analysis method

Content analysis is a method by which we can establish the source of the message and its characteristics, the message content and its influence on the message recipient (Zvonarević 1991). The principle of implementing content analysis follows several points: based on a representative sample of particular messages one can establish the representation and meaning of particular content; analyze one text or several of the same type quantitatively in order to establish the frequency of occurrence of a particular word, syntagm or topic, analyze the influence of the message on particular social groups and formation of thought, attitudes and opinions. If we are referring to analysis of language content, the division is based on researching linguistic structures of a concept and researching sociocultural context in which the concept is used (Plačko 1990). Content analysis is a frequent method in researching written textual corpora. Through content analysis method one can analyze particular elements integrated in the content. The analyzed fragments serve for generalization and analysis of relationships between language levels in a corpus.

## 5.4. Imitation method

By imitating a model (teacher) the student acquires a scheme, practices it and learns new language content. Even classical philosophers observed that man can acquire new forms of reaction by imitation others' behavior. Aristotle considered imitation to be a natural human activity which starts in childhood.

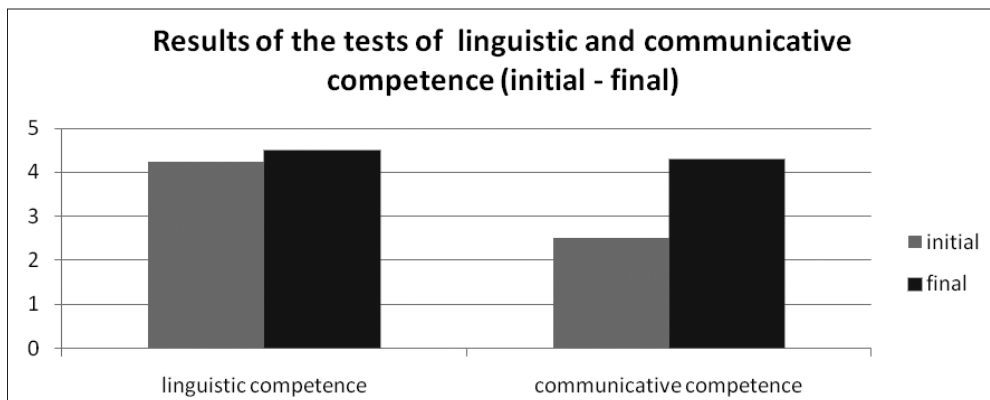
Learning through imitation is based on observing the behavior of other people and through the observed forms of reaction personal attempts are subject to modifications until they are acquired. In contemplating the behavior theory, Miller and Dollard (1950), emphasize that a child's predisposition to imitation

represents an acquired instinct of the second order which would match the social motive and is thus related to social-cognitive theories of learning. A child can thus spontaneously imitate the behavior of other people in their environment, and the social environment often rewards such reactions and in that way encourages their predisposition to imitating. Learning a language according to the representative model mostly occurs unknowingly since children are prone to imitation, listening to adult speakers (parents, teachers) as knowledge authorities. Considering that language is realized in two ways, as a spoken and written system it is good to learn it according to a good representative model which would apply to all teachers, particularly mother tongue (or foreign language) teachers.

## 6. Research results and discussion

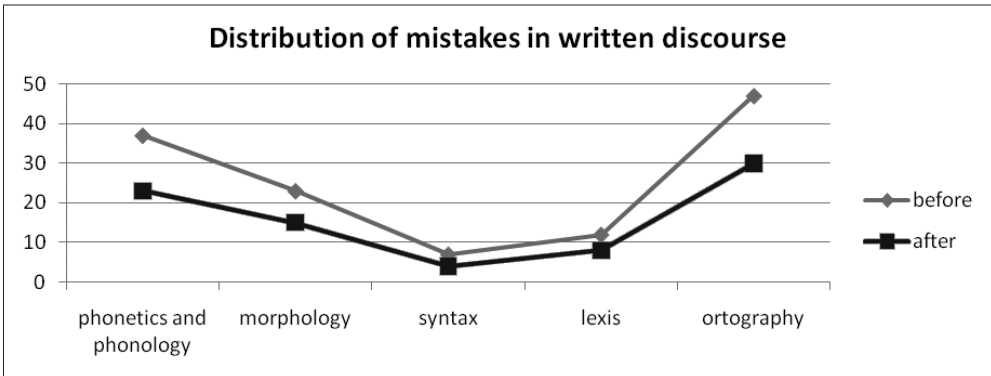
In this research we applied the cognitive-linguistic paradigm which implies learning a language according to the student's cognitive development in a particular developmental phase. Piaget (1969) established that a child passes through 5 developmental stages: the sensor-motor learning phase lasts until 18 months and is based on senses which a child relates to the external world; the second phase is the preoperational stage between the ages of 2 and 7 when fundamental language is also developed and a child functions according to the principle of egocentrism; this is followed by the concrete-operational stage between the ages of 7 and 11; and from the ages of 11 to 15 a child enters the formal-operational stage. If effective cognitive development is taken into consideration, in the first phase of language teaching, when a child is in the concrete-operational stage, language should be taught through imagery and by encouraging functional communication. Language is an abstract system of symbols and language content must, above all be adapted to the child's age and cognitive development in order for learning to be successful.

Having all of the above in mind, we conducted two types of tests in our research: the first one was carried out prior to the application of the cognitive-linguistic paradigm in language teaching, and the second one after that. We tested the level of linguistic and communicative competence. The results of the t-test showed that in the initial test students in lower grades of primary school show a statistically significant difference in the results between linguistic and communicative competence (Sig. = 0,07,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 49$ ), which indicates that in language teaching it is insisted on acquiring abstract language concepts for whose understanding children are not developmentally ready. The final testing showed that there were no statistically significant differences (Sig. = 0,89,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 49$ ) in the results between linguistic and communicative competence (Graph 1). That indicates that learning and teaching according to the psychocognitive abilities of a child, while applying the cognitive-linguistic paradigm has a positive effect on more efficient acquisition of language content, as well as on the development of communicative competence in the early discourse of acquiring the mother tongue. The conclusion confirms the first hypotheses (H1).



*Graph 1: Results of the tests of linguistic and communicative competence*

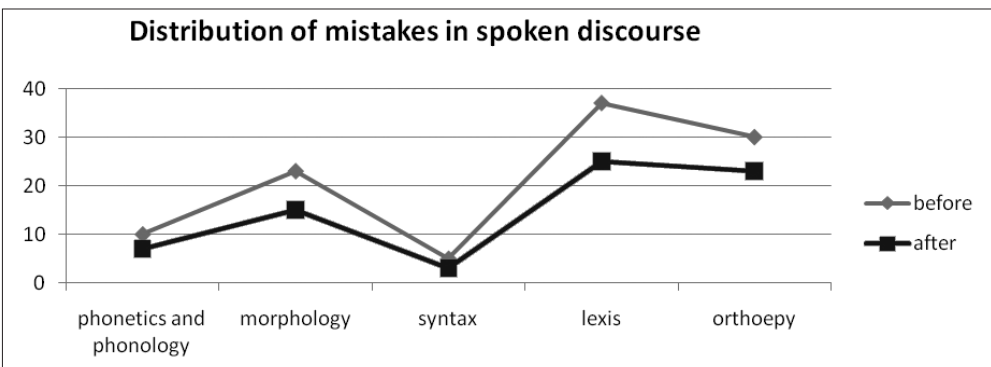
Learning through mistakes has shown to be very efficient in language teaching since if it occurs in a situation in which students are not afraid of making a mistake, they hold on to the mistake in their consciousness and experience and learn based on differentiating between the right and the wrong. The research was conducted on a corpus of written and spoken discourse. After the testing, the method of learning by means of trial and error was integrated into the teaching process. The results indicate that students err mostly in written Croatian language in the area of spelling (capitalization, punctuation, writing specific Croatian phonemes -č, -ć, -dž, -đ, and marking the reflex of the old Slavic vowel “jat”). Also noted were various types of grammar mistakes primarily of a phonological and morphological nature, a somewhat smaller number of mistakes in the area of syntax. The least observed mistakes in written language were lexical mistakes. There is a correlation between spoken and written expression considering that the majority of the phonetic-phonological mistakes in the written corpus belongs to recognizing or not recognizing the phonemes -č and -ć, and the reflexive of the old Slavic vowel jat. Those students who could not differentiate between those phonemes in speech, mostly made mistakes in written communication. Morphological mistakes are established with the verb tense formation, declension of noun word categories and in writing the superlative form of the adjective which is expected considering that the morphological system of the Croatian language is extremely complex. Mistakes in written lexical discourse mostly fall into the category of inappropriate use of jargon and inappropriately borrowed words (Graph 2). The analysis of variance showed that there is a statistically significant differences in the number of mistakes between particular areas of grammar (Sig. = 0,04,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 149$ ), while the T-test confirms the statistically significant difference between the number of mistakes prior to the research and after introducing the strategy of learning a language through trial and error (Sig. = 0,05,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 149$ ). Such results confirm the second hypothesis in which we assumed that learning a language based on trial and error will positively (not negatively) influence the development of communicative competence in lower grades of primary school.



*Graph 2: Distribution of mistakes in written discourse*

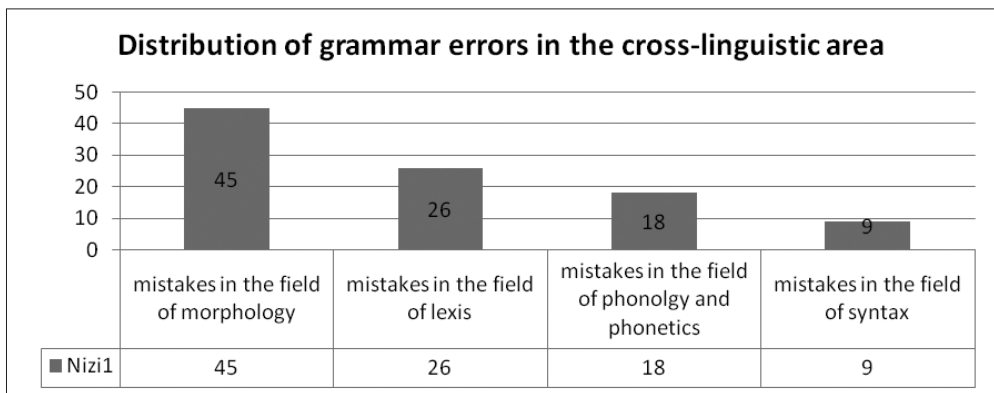
It is worth emphasizing that the largest number of mistakes in oral discourse shows up in the area of lexicology, and the smallest number of errors occur in the area of syntax, just as in written discourse. It is also interesting that a very small number of mistakes occurs in the area of phonetics and phonology while the same number of mistakes as in written discourse occurs in morphology (Graph 3). The analysis of variance also indicated that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of mistakes between particular grammatical areas (Sig. = 0,03,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 149$ ).

Generally, taking into consideration the number of mistakes in spoken language is smaller than in spelling (written language). The t-test indicates that the number of mistakes in the spoken discourse is statistically significantly lower after introducing the method of trial and error in the teaching process (Sig. = 0,00,  $p = 0,05$ ,  $df = 149$ ). This confirms the second hypothesis that learning a language based on the diagnosed frequent mistakes has a positive effect on developing communicative competence until the age of 12. By applying the theory of learning through mistakes, we target and influence mistakes in the area of lexicology, morphology and spelling.



*Graph 3: Distribution of mistakes in spoken discourse*

In the third hypothesis we predicted that the development of a cross-linguistic area does not necessarily have to be a negative occurrence in early learning of the mother tongue. The intertwining of parallel language codes is a developmental occurrence in early discourse. Mistakes which have developed in cross-linguistic can be used in a positive way (since they indicate that children can think linguistically). The dominant role in the cross-linguistic area is carried by the students' local idiom which is characteristically revealed in the formation of the present tense, silencing of the final consonants, transforming non-reflexive verbs into reflexive and the use of enclitics at the beginning of a sentence. Through discourse surveillance mistakes in the cross-linguistic area were observed. Such mistakes can be divided into: phonological mistakes, mistakes in morphology, syntax and lexicology (Graph 4).

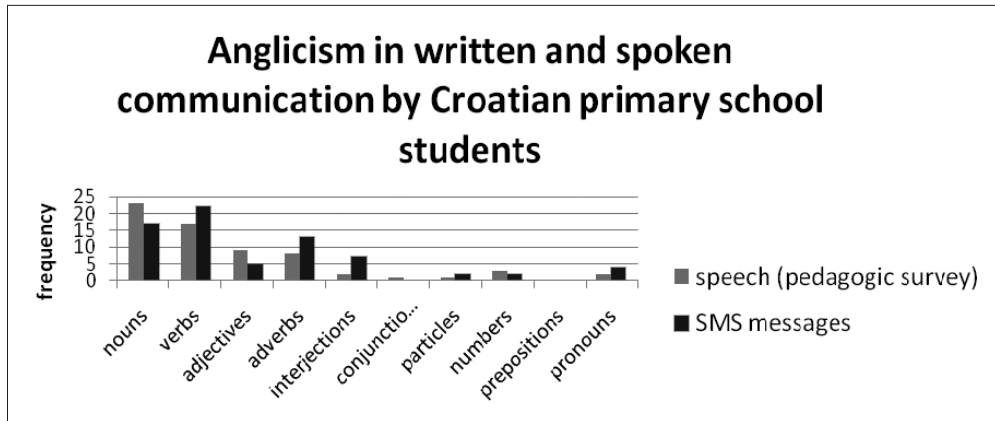


*Graph 4: Distribution of grammar errors in the cross-linguistic area*

The biggest number of mistakes was observed in the area of morphology (45%), which includes mistakes in the formation of the present tense of the verbs, declension of nouns and numbers and the comparison of adjectives. 26% of mistakes occurred in the area of lexicology, mostly in the use of dialect words or the use of newly coined words. 18% of mistakes occurred in the area of phonology, mostly referring to mistakes in the use of the phonemes č, ć, dž, đ. The smallest number of mistakes was expected to occur in the area of syntax (9%), which can be explained by the ability to select sentence word order. The structure of a Croatian sentence is rather free, i.e. word order does not for the majority part influence grammatical correctness (except in forming clitics). In conclusion we can establish that the development of a cross-linguistic area has shown to be a positive rather than a negative occurrence in learning the mother tongue. Thus we confirm the third hypothesis.

Croatian primary school students very frequently use anglicisms in both written and spoken communication. Through pedagogical observations it was established that in speech they mostly use nouns, followed by verbs, adjectives, numbers, i.e. *samoznačne* changeable parts of speech. Of the functional words the most frequently used are conjunctions. The influence of the English language

has a very strong origin in the media (TV, internet, facebook...) which students at this age use frequently thus the interference of the English language into written and oral discourse of lower primary grade students is not surprising (Graph 5). It can be concluded that the interference of the English language into Croatian, at the level of communicative competence has a positive effect. What is more, in early discourse of language learning and teaching, the acquisition of any new idiom stimulates language development and encourages language capabilities of a student.



*Graph 5: Anglicism in written and spoken communication by Croatian primary school students*

In conclusion it should be mentioned that the influence of the English language has a positive effect on the development of communicative competence in general, but also on learning the Croatian language which confirms the fourth hypothesis.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Starting with the two linguistic-didactic issues, the purpose of the research was to try to answer in which way the intertwining of language codes (vertical plurilingualism) and the creation of the cross-linguistic area, influence learning the Croatian standard language and how particular learning strategies influence successful acquisition of the mother tongue at an early age. Research has shown that with the application of the cognitive-linguistic paradigm in early discourse of learning the Croatian language, the development of various language competences is encouraged from communicative competence (knowledge of language use) to linguistic competence (theoretical knowledge of language). Therefore, the process of learning and acquiring a language must be closely related to functional linguistics and principles of humanistic education in order to develop primarily communicative competence and after that linguistic competence in students in early discourse. In doing so, the learning through mistakes learning

strategy proved to be purposeful since students learn while discovering their mistakes thus lowering the total number of mistakes in speech and in writing. Learning through mistakes significantly helps the development of communicative competence and significantly influences the removal of mistakes in the area of morphology and lexicology (in written and spoken discourse) and spelling (written discourse). Research has also shown that students are better in expressing themselves in speech rather than in writing, but in both discourses they make the same number of mistakes. It showed that the development of the cross-linguistic area has a positive effect on learning the mother tongue at an early age since it reveals the difference between “speech logic” (children’s language production) and “grammar of speech” (realization of grammatically correct structures). In such an area mistakes are inevitable, i.e. deviations from standard language norms and rules, but they should be treated as a positive language occurrence since a mistake always occurs within a language system (never outside of one), which confirms that a child can think linguistically. In that way, via the paradigmatic model transfer (regardless of possible mistakes), students will repeat the already acquired language elements in new communicative situation and in that way make learning easier. It is important to mention that in creating a cross-linguistic area, the dominant mother tongue idiom has a particular influence (e.g. in the formation of the present tense, silencing of final consonants, transforming non-reflexive verbs into reflexive and the use of enclitics at the beginning of a sentence). In addition to native idioms within the same mother tongue, learning a foreign language has an effect on learning the Croatian language in early discourse. Research established that such an effect is a positive one. The acquisition of a new language code broadens students’ language capabilities, enriches vocabulary and encourages the development of communicative competence. Due to the influence of the media (film, TV, internet, Facebook...), the influence of the English language is strongest thus in speech and in writing by Croatian students in primary school we can observe a significant number of anglicisms.

The research confirmed that the application of various strategies in the process of learning and teaching the standard Croatian language proved to be purposeful. A positive effect was observed when using the cognitive-functional paradigms and learning through mistakes. A positive environment for learning a language was established making the student feel comfortable, fearless of making a mistake and negative assessment. In that way language content is acquired better and in a quality manner (long-term memory). It is also important to mention that in the early period, i.e. lower grades of primary school, the development of communicative competence should be encouraged firstly, and the linguistic competence should be insisted on at a later phase, i.e. in the period of abstract cognitive processes. The application of the above mentioned strategies resulted in improving the level of communicative abilities of students and that fact had an influence on the positive attitude towards the mother tongue and on the quality of their language knowledge and self-confidence.

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#### ABSTRACT

### **Development of communicative competence among plurilingual students in monolingual Croatian language practice**

When starting school pupils begin to adopt the standard Croatian language (non-dominant L2), which in some regions differs from the native idioms (dominant L1). In this situation the interlanguage field is created and most students become vertically plurilingual, i.e. the interweaving of different language codes is reflected in monolingual school practice.

In this research the greatest attention has been paid to the cognitive-linguistic paradigm and the constructivist theory, within which the stimulus theory and error theory have proven to be an extremely purposeful part of the learning process in the early language development. The aim was to examine the purposefulness of the application of the modern learning theories on the development of communicative competence of younger primary school pupils. The research results have confirmed that communicative competence can be successfully developed, among other, by taking advantage of errors as a stimulus for further learning. Only in such a situation the interlanguage field in monolingual Croatian language practice should be treated as a positive and not a negative linguistic phenomenon.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, Croatian standard language, error theory, early language discourse, interlanguage field

#### POVZETEK

### **Razvoj sporazumevalne sposobnosti med večjezičnimi učenci v enojezičnim hrvaškem okolju**

Ob vključitvi v sistem izobraževanja se učenci začnejo učiti hrvaški standardni jezik (neprevladujoči J2), ki je na nekaterih področjih različen od njihovega domačega jezika (prevladujoči J1). Na ta način se ustvarja medjezikovno polje in večina učencev postane vertikalno večjezičnih. Prepletanje različnih jezikovnih kodov pa se tako kaže v enojezični šolski praksi.

V pričujoči raziskavi sta najbolj poudarjeni uporaba kognitivno-jezikoslovne paradigme in konstruktivistične teorije, znotraj katerih sta zelo pomembni teoriji spodbude in napak kot pomembnih delov procesa zgodnjega jezikovnega razvoja. Cilj raziskave je bil ugotoviti uporabnost sodobnih teorij učenja pri razvoju sporazumevalne zmožnosti učencev nižjih razredov osnovne šole. Rezultati potrjujejo, da se sporazumevalna zmožnost lahko uspešno razvija, če se, med drugim, napake učencev uporabijo kot spodbuda za nadaljnje učenje. Pri tem je treba medjezikovno polje v enojezični praksi hrvaškega jezika razumeti kot pozitiven in ne kot negativen jezikoslovni pojav.

**Ključne besede:** sporazumevalna zmožnost, hrvaški standardni jezik, diskurz zgodnjega jezikovnega razvoja, teorija učenja iz napak, medjezikovno polje