

Big Challenges for a Small Language

Students' Expectations of Croatian L2 Course

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Introduction

The Croatian language belongs to the group of South Slavic languages. It is morphologically very rich, i. e. it has 3 genders, 2 numbers, 7 cases, different declination for noun and adjectives/pronouns, 7 verb classes, verbal aspect and morphological changes. More systematic research on the acquisition of Croatian as L2 started 15 years ago. Most of the studies deal with the acquisition of morphology, verbal and nominal (Globan, 2003; Cvirkic and Kuvac, 2003, 2005; Cvirkic, Kuvac and Dobrovac, 2004; Novak 2002, 2003). The biggest problems students face are: large number of endings, affixal homonymy and polysemy, morphological rules which influence morphological and vocabulary acquisition, and the verbal aspect which, as well as the word order of clitics, is not acquired even at the highest level of knowledge of Croatian.

Courses of Croatian as L2

Since 1990s Croatia found itself in new social and political circumstances which led to a bigger interest for learning the Croatian language. That interest induced organising new courses, reorganising the old ones and developing new teaching materials.

There are 2 academic courses of Croatian as L2 organised at the University of Zagreb: *Croaticum - Centre for Croatian as Foreign and Second Language* and *The University School of Croatian Language and Culture*. *Croaticum* offers a semestral course (winter and summer semester). Each

course lasts 3.5 months, has 220 class periods in total (15 per week). Participants are divided into 3 levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced), each with 2 sublevels. Groups contain up to 20 students. *University School* is a 4 week summer course which includes 110 class periods in total (25 per week plus additional classes). Classes are organised in small groups (up to 12 students) at 10 levels. Both courses offer lectures on Croatian culture and teaching materials have been specifically developed for these courses.

Needs analysis

Participants

The research included 30 participants from each course who were given a questionnaire about personal data, educational background, language learning history, setting for usage of Croatian, detailed purpose of learning Croatian, content of the syllabus, learning styles and preferences for teaching methods.

The structure of participants according to their knowledge of languages is: 6% speak only L1, 27% speak one L2 and 67% speak 2 or more foreign languages. The purpose of learning Croatian: 52% of students learn Croatian for personal purposes, 15% for professional, 17% for personal and professional ones, 8% for study and 8% gave no answer to that question.

According to the history of learning Croatian, participants can be divided into 4 groups: 37% learned Croatian in formal settings, 25% in informal, 7% in both formal and informal, 14% studied by themselves and 17% gave no answer.

Content of Croatian L2 classes

In order to find out more about the preferred content of L2 classes 22 statements were offered. Students used a five-point scale to express their preference (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest).

According to the students' answers, the most preferred content of Croatian L2 classes is:

- Croatian cultural features (37 students graded it with the highest grade),
- Finding out about Croatian language (36 students),
- Talking about habits, customs of people from other countries (27 students),
- Talking about family and friends (26 students).

On the other hand, the least preferred content in Croatian L2 class is:

- Learning Glagolitic script (15 students graded it with the lowest grade),
- Singing popular (13 students) and traditional songs (11 students),
- Finding out about Glagolitic script (11 students).

The results show that the most preferred content is language and cultural specifics as well as the topics that are connected with everyday life. On the other hand, students do not like to learn so called "academic content". The Glagolitic script is an old Slavic script that was used in the history of Croatian literature. Even though it is also highly culturally specific, it can be that students perceive it as highly professional-specific and demanding content. The fact that students expressed high dislike to singing was to some extent unexpected.

Since the two Croatian L2 courses are of the different length and intensity, and have different syllabuses, it was supposed that the preferred content depends on the language course itself. Therefore, the data was analyzed according to the type of the course the subjects attended.

Students at the *Croaticum* course prefer to find out about Croatian language (17 students graded it with 5), they like to talk about education (15 students), listen to the radio (13 students) and talk about movies, music and TV program (both was preferred the most by 13 students). Students attending University School like the most to find out about Croatian cultural features (21 students graded it with 5), Croatian language (19 students), they like to learn how to use the phone (16 students) and to talk about other cities and countries (16 students). Both groups of students listed the same topics as the least preferred, although in different order.

The difference in the listed preferred topics might be explained with the different structure of the course participants. The significant number of students at Croaticum course are the students from foreign universities who came to Croatia to master the language. Most of them are students of Slavic or Croatian studies. Smaller percentage consists of students from the fields that require knowledge of Croatian. That can explain their interest in the topic of education. Knowing the fact that most of them are in their 20s, it is not surprising that they are interested in music, movies and TV program.

Students attending the University School make a more heterogeneous group. A significant number of them are from Croatian descent, others need to learn Croatian for professional or various personal reasons. Their motivation to learn Croatian could explain their preference to learn about cultural features.

The aim of the questionnaire was to learn about students' preferred way of learning. 32 statements about various ways of learning were offered. Participants used the same five point scale to show their preferences. The most learners graded the following statements with the highest grades:

- I like the teacher to explain rules of grammar to me (36 students);
- I like the teacher to explain new words to me (35 students);
- I like the teacher to correct me immediately (30 students);
- I like to know rules of sounds, word forms and sentences (30 students).

The least preferred ways of learning among the students were:

- Correction in private (15 students);
- Correction by other students (12 students),
- Later correction (11 students),
- Finding mistakes by themselves (9 students).

From the students' answer it can be concluded that a teacher still plays the key role in the learning process. Students like very much when the teacher explains grammar and vocabulary and they want to be corrected immediately. It seems that students don't like the learning/teaching process to take place outside the classroom. They do not like to be corrected later or in private and they do not want other students to correct them or to find their mistakes by themselves.

The researchers' assumption was that the preferred way of learning was influenced by the previous language learning experience. Therefore the data was analyzed according to the way the students had learned the Croatian language. The subjects were divided into 3 groups: group of students that had learned Croatian in formal settings, informal settings and the students that studied themselves.

The results show that learning style does not depend on the previous learning experience. All the students put the teacher at the first place. They prefer the teacher to explain grammar, meaning of words and their mistakes. Students who had learned Croatian in an informal setting or by self-study emphasized their interest to find out about word relationship. One possible explanation for that might lay in the fact that the most bilingual dictionaries, with Croatian being one of the languages, are written for native speakers of Croatian. Therefore, Croatian L2 learners can not find all the important or needed information in these dictionaries, especially information about usage constraints or differences between synonyms. A language teacher might be of great help in that respect.

When speaking about the least preferred ways of learning, the informal and self-study group differ from "formal group" only because they stated they do not like at all to work out the rules of grammar themselves. Since they have the experience of self-study, we could assume they are aware of the fact how difficult it is to find out grammar rules of the Croatian language by themselves. That might be the reason they stated they do not like to do it at all. On the other hand, the group of students that had been taught Croatian in a formal setting do not like the teacher to make all the decisions about what they learn. It could be that a certain number of students have previous experience of attending a course where they were not active participants in the decision making process.

The students at both courses were asked about their preferred teaching and learning methods. The students like the most to learn by reading, listening, as well as listening and taking notes. They like to learn from written materials, TV, video and film. The students do not like to learn by memory, from radio and by writing their own texts. Even though they did not choose any particular activity as the most preferred, they had chosen songs and memorized dialogs, i. e. conversation as the least useful activities.

Conclusion

Creating a general language course is a demanding task. If the language is a less commonly taught, as it is with Croatian, it is even more complex to create a course curriculum since the students at such a course make a heterogeneous group. In order to create a Croatian language course curriculum that will fit the students' needs as much as possible, the needs analysis was conducted. The analysis showed that the preferred language class content depends on the type of course participants, differentiating between university students and non-students. The course participants that are students at foreign universities showed a reference to the topics connected with education, as well as for the topic that can be appealing to the young population (movies, TV, music). On the other hand, non-student population showed bigger interest in learning about Croatian cultural features. Culture-related topics for them mean only so called "everyday culture", not the culture related to history, art, literature etc. This result emphasized the need of developing the intercultural competence in learning L2. The subjects in our survey showed the interest for learning about language structure. Since most of the course participants have previous experience of learning Croatian, which is a flective language, the interest in language structure is not surprising.

Regarding the preferred ways of learning, the course participants showed that for them the teacher still plays the central role in the learning process and the preference for self-studying is quite low.

Students also expressed their preference for teaching/learning methods. They like to learn by reading, and listening, they prefer to use written materials and multimedia. These methods were preferred over role playing, language games and learning from personal experience.

The conducted research gave us the insight in students' needs and preferences. It showed that different groups of students had interest in different topics. Knowledge of student needs and interests enables language instructors to teach the same communication tasks, grammar units and vocabulary using various texts, i.e. discussing various topics. The survey showed that Croatian L2 students preferred traditional teaching. In this respect the real challenge is with language

teachers. They have the opportunity not only to teach the language, but to show to their students that there are some other teaching methods that can be equally effective but more dynamic and learner-centered.

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