

# Section 1: THE CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the joint venture of a team of people – of practicing teachers interested in research and researchers interested in school practice – with the aim of improving foreign language competence in Croatia. It was a venture the start of which coincided with the start of the war into which Croatia was forced in order to preserve her independence and freedom – a savage war during which many people lost their lives and numberless families suffered.

The autumn and winter of 1991 were hard times for Croatia, but it was exactly then that 350 first readers aged 6-7 started to learn a foreign language as part of the regular school curriculum, the first time at that age in the history of our schooling. The teachers working with them seemed more like magicians than teachers. For 45 minutes every day the war was forgotten and children happily took part in all sorts of entertaining activities. Only the bags and blankets in a dark corner of the classroom, ready for the shelter, were a reminder of air-raid alerts, and the fear of shells and bombs.

### **The Identity Card of the Project**

The project is sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Education and the educational authorities of the city of Zagreb. The research part is supported by the Ministry of Science and conducted by a group of ELT specialists from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb. The project is a part of a network of similar projects in 20 European countries and Canada in a medium term programme entitled *Language Learning for European Citizenship*, under the umbrella of European Council in Strasbourg.

In the autumn of 1991 English, French and German were introduced into the first grade of 12 primary schools in Zagreb. A total of 352 pupils, aged 6-7 years, were included in the project. Italian was also introduced but on a different organizational basis.

In the year 1992/3 second-graders continued their foreign language course on the same organizational basis, and additional 22 schools joined the project, the majority of them in Zagreb, but some also in Rijeka, Split and Pula. At the time of writing this report (February 1993) the total number of children (not specially selected) is a little over 1000.

The organization of children and languages is as follows:

English/German	4 first-grade classes in Zagreb 1 first-grade class in Rijeka, Split, Pula 4 second-grade classes in Zagreb
French	4 first-grade classes in Zagreb 1 first-grade class in Rijeka and Split
Italian	2 first-grade classes in Zagreb

Each ordinary school class is split into two groups of 12-15 children who have five periods of foreign language weekly, one per day.

The classes are taught by secondary school teachers with a university language degree and additional training for working with young children. They cooperate closely with the class teachers who in most cases have some command of the language being taught.

The basic objective is the gradual development of communicative competence so that in the course of their primary and secondary school children will gradually learn to use the foreign language in real life situations, and in later stages the foreign language will even be able to be used in the study of other subjects.

The basic tasks in the first and second year of teaching are:

- to arouse a genuine interest of the child in the foreign language and culture,
- to develop skills of listening and speaking with special attention to good pronunciation. As these children cannot yet read and write in their mother tongue – Croatian – at the beginning of the course, it is recommended that reading and writing should be introduced in the third term of the first year at the earliest, and
- to interest children in aspects of the target culture of interest to their age.

Class activities are varied and of very limited duration, ranging from songs and games to drama and story telling. TPR is exercised to a large extent. Croatian is used only when a genuine need for it arises, the assumption being that after a certain number of contact hours with the foreign language such a need will be reduced to a minimum. The atmosphere in the class is relaxed, stress-free and potentially entertaining. All activities are in conformity with the abilities, potentials and interests of children of this age.

Parallel research is carried out in all four languages. The number of children included in the longitudinal and cross-sectional parts of the Project research varies from 50 to 200 per language in the experimental classes and an identical number in the control classes. Control groups are recruited among peer-classes not learning any foreign language, and from among beginners of the foreign language at 10+, depending on the requirements of the particular research aspect.

It is expected that the research will provide a verification of the results of early language learning at this age obtained both in Croatia and elsewhere, combined with new insights into the process of learning. For this reason affective, cognitive and neurological factors are being examined as well as the nature of language input to which the child is exposed.

The hypothesis yet to be proved is that children starting a language at the age of 6-7 can learn it as successfully as those starting at 10+ if certain conditions are met, and that at the earlier age they have the unique advantage of being able to master the phonological system of the foreign language with near-native accuracy. If this hypothesis proves correct, it will be a convincing reason for persuading the educational authorities to introduce foreign languages into the school system in the first grade. This would give children ample time to handle the foreign idiom by the time language learning blocks start and when strategies of teaching and learning foreign languages need to be altered.

A more detailed account of the various research tasks will be given in contributions to this publication. Here, only some of them are mentioned:

1. Attitudes and motivation of pupils, teachers and parents towards the particular foreign language and its culture have been examined by interviews and questionnaires.
2. At the end of the school year achievement tests have been administered to register the degree of proficiency in
  - a) pronunciation
  - b) listening comprehension
  - c) the use of selected morpho-syntactic structures
  - d) the use of vocabulary with special reference to Piaget's spontaneous concepts, the hypothesis being that spontaneously acquired concepts are more easily remembered.

It has also been hypothesised that the achievement results in different languages – English, French, German and Italian - will vary due to different extrinsic motivation and different contrastive status of the respective languages in Croatia. For this reason comparative achievement tests will be carried out at the end of the third year of the project. Error analysis will also be carried out at that stage as a different typology of errors is expected in learners' interlanguage in the four languages.

The research team consists of an SLA expert for each language:

English – Mirjana Vilke, M.A., Ph. D., coordinator of the Project

French – Yvonne Vrhovac, M.A., Ph. D.

Italian – Nives Sironić-Bonefačić, M.A., Ph. D.

attitudes and motivation specialist – Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, M.A., Ph. D.  
psychologist – Božica Bartolović, M.A., Ph. D.  
doctoral candidate, Lidvina Štokić, M.A., a link between theory and practice, also  
teacher of English to first and second graders  
novice researcher in English, Milena Kovačević, B.A., working towards her M.A.  
in SLA

The researcher in German had to leave the team for private reasons so the language adviser of the Ministry of Education, Mira Kruhan, B.A., a German specialist, kindly joined to help the work go on.

All these have presented reports illustrating their results in a little more than a year of work on the project.

The publication also contains reports by practicing teachers who describe the various procedures of their successful work and share their experience with colleagues. Some of them are already engaged as authors and co-authors of teaching materials for this age group or act as tutors to less experienced teachers.