

How Important Is English to Croatian Pre-Service Primary School and Preschool Teachers Not Majoring in English?

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that English has spread enormously around the world and the trend is likely to continue. This global status can also be supported by the fact that English is given priority in foreign language teaching. According to Crystal (2012), in more than 100 countries around the world (mainly in Europe, Asia, North Africa and Latin America) English has the status of a foreign language, and in most of them it is the main foreign language taught in schools or at least the language which is most likely to be introduced in schools. Many people are thus exposed to and surrounded by English in different contexts. Today, the internet, with English as the dominant language, has turned into one of the most relevant communication channels and information sources, so it may be presumed that the greatest exposure to English would be on the internet.

In view of its status as a *lingua franca*, English has also been identified by Croatian urban adults as the most desirable and important foreign language, both in private and in professional life (Cindrić & Narančić Kovač, 2005). It is not only the preferred foreign language for the majority of Croatian speakers, but it is also a language in which Croatian speakers strive to achieve high proficiency. This is particularly true when other speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are compared with Croatian EFL speakers, as was found in the study comparing the EFL performance between eighth graders in Croatia and Hungary (Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov, & Ottó, 2008). Furthermore, Croatian speakers tend to consider their EFL proficiency as rather high. The same was confirmed by Jelovčić (2010) who found that the majority of Croatian university students in her study (87.2%) thought of their EFL proficiency as being very good or good.

Such a great need for English and interest in teaching/learning English has increasingly stimulated studies in which special attention has been also given to individual differences (Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016; Robinson, 2002; Zafar, & Meenakshi, 2012), in particular affective factors (Henter, 2014; Ni, 2012; Rubio, 2007), since their role has been emphasised on numerous occasions and mostly referred to learner attitudes to teaching/learning (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006; Zhao, 2015). Research has confirmed that the positive attitudes of students to English Language Learning (ELL) are related to the perceived importance of English for their

studies, future career opportunities, and communication (Suwannatho & Thepsiri, 2015). Learner attitudes have also been investigated in Croatia, showing that Croatian secondary school learners (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007) and university students (Martinović & Poljaković, 2010) have positive attitudes to English in general.

2. The Study

2.1. Study Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of the current small-scale study was to gain insights into the exposure of a group of Croatian university students (N=151) to EFL, their proficiency in EFL, their attitudes to this language, and their perceived importance of being proficient in EFL. Its further aim was to ascertain possible relations referring to the participants' attitudes and exposure to EFL and other foreign languages (FLs), their proficiency in EFL and other FLs, and their overall academic achievement. Finally, the study focuses on the possible differences between two subgroups - English non-majors (N=83) and English majors (N=68) with respect to the above-mentioned variables.

In order to achieve the aims above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: All the participants will report great exposure to and high proficiency in EFL, positive attitudes to EFL, and perceived importance of being proficient in EFL.

H2: There will be relationship between the participants' attitudes and their exposure to and proficiency in EFL and other FLs, their perceived importance of being proficient in English and their overall academic achievement.

H3: There will be significant differences between the two subgroups of the sample, i.e. English majors and English non-majors, on all of the tested variables.

2.2. Sample

The sample included 151 second- and third-year university students of the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb ($N_{\text{female}}=144$, $N_{\text{male}}=7$, age Median=21). They were enrolled in three different study programmes: (1) pre-service primary school teachers; (2) pre-service preschool teachers; and (3) pre-service primary school English teachers. For the current purpose, the participants were treated as one group for H1 and H2, and were subdivided into: (A) English non-majors (N=83); and (B) English majors (N=68) for the purposes of H3. It is also important to stress that the two groups significantly differed in their exposure to English in the course of their studies. Namely, in addition to some courses taught in Croatian (e.g. Mathematics, Sciences, Developmental Psychology, Introduction to Pedagogy, etc.), the total study programme for the English majors group entails 1,290 compulsory hours of direct instruction in English and 255 hours of English language teaching and classroom practice over a period of five years (Cindrić, Andracka, & Bilić-Štefan, 2013), whereas the English non-majors group has only 75 (pre-service primary school teachers) or 90 (pre-service preschool teachers) hours of direct instruction in English.

2.3. Instrument and Procedure

The participants completed a questionnaire, designed by Mikulec (2016) and adapted for this study (see Appendix). It consisted of 26 open- and closed-ended

questions with the objective to elicit information about the participants and their foreign language learning history. More specifically, the participants were asked about the length of their English and other foreign language learning, and about their average grades in English and other foreign languages in their previous education. We also collected data about their GPA, self-assessment of EFL proficiency, and daily/weekly exposure to the languages in question. Finally, the participants were asked about the frequency and form of their contact with native speakers of English, their attitudes to English, and the importance they assign to their proficiency in English. The questionnaire was written in Croatian and administered during regular English language classes. The data analysis was based on descriptive statistics, as well as on correlation and nonparametric statistical procedures (the Mann Whitney test). The Software Package for Social Sciences for Windows (SPSS) 15.0 was used for data processing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Participants' Exposure to EFL, Their Proficiency in EFL and Attitudes to EFL

The emphasised presence of English in everyday life, especially among younger people, has resulted in significant exposure to the language. The current study aimed to ascertain the extent of this exposure in the case of the Croatian student population, and to determine other closely related relevant factors. The results indicate that the average length of English language learning in the target population was $M=11.54$ ($SD=3.061$). Further analysis of their language learning history indicates that 43% of the participants reported having additionally learned English in various language courses (mostly between 1-4 years), and as many as 80% of them reported having had contacts with native speakers of English. Next, we were interested in the participants' weekly exposure to English outside their studies, and the results show that 33.8% of them reported exposure of up to 10 hours, 32.5% of them reported up to 15 hours and more, while 29.1% of them reported up to 5 hours. The participants were also asked about the form and length of their daily exposure to English, and the results (Figure 1) show that, for all of the suggested forms (the internet, music, films, books and journals/magazines), exposure was predominantly up to 3 hours a day.

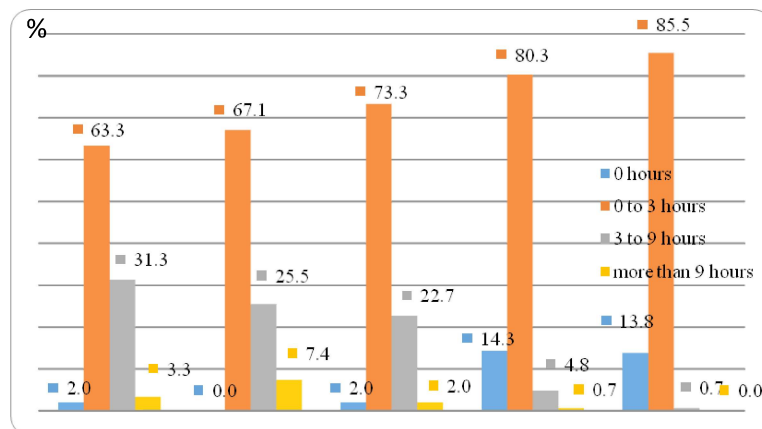


Figure 1. Length and form of the participants' daily exposure to English outside their studies, presented in percentages

However, fairly significant exposure (3-9 hours a day) was reported for the internet (31.3%), music (25.5%) and films (22.7%), whereas more than 9-hour exposure was reported for music (7.4%) and the internet (3.3%). These results suggest that the most frequent forms of daily exposure for the target group included the internet and music, while the least frequent forms were journals/magazines and books. These results are in accordance with those in some previous studies which found that internet use was positively correlated with student achievements in English (Josipović Smojver, 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007). Regarding the participants' exposure to English, it may be concluded that the first part of H1 was confirmed; in other words, the participants reported great exposure.

Language proficiency can be determined on the basis of several indicators (Leclerq & Edmonds, 2014), one of which is self-assessment. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001), self-assessment may prove an efficient addition to learners' assessment, especially when there are no "high stakes" involved, i.e. when their future does not depend on the results of self-assessment, which is the case in this study. Furthermore, Demel (1990) confirmed a high correlation between learners' self-assessment and their real proficiency. On the other hand, since the reliability of data obtained through any form of self-report depends on participants' honesty (Sternberg, 2005), proficiency was based on three variables: (1) primary school average grades in EFL, (2) secondary school average grades in EFL, and (3) self-assessment. The obtained results (Figure 2) indicated that all of the measures were fairly high, especially primary (M=4.81, SD=0.391) and secondary school average grades in EFL (M=4.33, SD=0.800), which grouped towards the higher values. This means that the distribution was negatively skewed, whereas self-assessment (M=3.89, SD=0.799) was somewhat lower than the other two measures. Regardless of these differences, a high correlation was found between the participants' self-assessment on the one side and their primary ($r=.352, p=.000$) and secondary school grades on the other side ($r=.469, p=.000$).

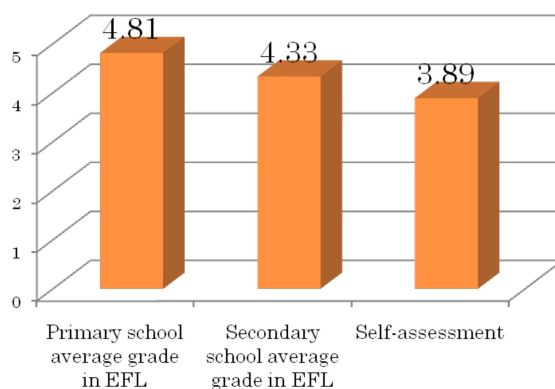


Figure 2. Proficiency measures: primary and secondary school average grades in EFL and the participants' self-assessment of EFL proficiency

The current self-assessment results are similar to those obtained by Jelovčić (2010). It may therefore be concluded that the second part of H1 was also confirmed as the participants' self-assessment of EFL proficiency was rather high.

Since attitudes play an important role in foreign language learning (Singleton, 2014), data on the participants' attitudes to English were also collected. The results

showed that a great majority reported positive attitudes (89.3%). Such a high percentage may have resulted from the fact that they were predominantly female students (95.4%) and that 70.7% of them were grammar school graduates. Namely, Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) found a more positive affective profile in a Croatian group of primary and secondary school female learners, and she also determined that grammar school graduates had more positive attitudes to English when compared to graduates from other secondary schools in Croatia. The results of the present study additionally show that as many as 92.7% of the participants reported having learned another foreign language during their education, mostly for four (38.1%) or nine years (23.8%), with a fairly high ($M=4.59$, $SD=0.587$) average grade achieved in that foreign language. Although the majority of participants (69.6%) stated that they had no contact with their second foreign language, which may be explained by the fact that it was mostly one of the less present languages (e.g. German or Latin), especially among the young Croatian population, Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) concluded that the learners who had learned more than one foreign language “enhance language awareness, develop learning strategies and decrease language anxiety, which contributes to more positive attitudes to learning English and to a better perception of oneself as a foreign language learner” (p. 119). When the open-ended question related to the participants’ attitudes was analysed, it was clear that a majority of the participants expressed positive attitudes to English, which means that they could recognise some present and future benefits of knowing English. Besides, affective reasons, for instance language attractiveness, might have contributed to this. Therefore, it may be concluded that the third part of H1 was also confirmed.

Apart from gaining insights into the participants’ attitudes to English, the objective was to ascertain their attitudes to the importance of being proficient in English. Considering the total sample, the percentage was very high again (95.3%). Based on the overall results, the final part of H1 was also confirmed, i.e. most of the participants reported very positive attitudes to English and the importance of being proficient in English, as well.

3.2. The Relationship between the Participants’ Attitudes and Other Tested Variables

Further data analysis in this paper is related to H2 and focuses on determining possible relationship between the participants’ attitudes and exposure to EFL and other foreign languages, their proficiency in English, and their overall academic achievement. The results (Table 1) indicate that the participants’ attitudes correlated with the three variables which were used to determine their exposure to EFL: (1) length of EFL learning ($r=-0.381$, $p=.000$), (2) learning EFL in language schools ($r=0.171$, $p=.038$), and (3) weekly exposure to EFL beyond study programmes ($r=-0.386$, $p=.000$). However, only one correlation was positive, i.e. those participants who had learned English in language schools expressed more positive attitudes to English, whereas the length of English learning and weekly exposure to English outside their studies were negatively correlated with the participants’ attitudes. All three proficiency measures also correlated with the participants’ attitudes as follows: (1) average grade in English in primary school ($r=-0.412$, $p=.000$); (2) average grade in English in secondary school ($r=-0.329$, $p=.000$); and (3) self-assessment of English proficiency ($r=-0.499$, $p=.000$), but again the correlations were negative. That is, the participants with higher primary/secondary school grades and self-assessment had less positive attitudes to English.

Table 1 Correlations between the participants' attitudes and other tested variables

Variables	Attitudes
Length of ELL	-0.381**
Learning English in language schools	0.171*
Weekly exposure to EFL outside studies	-0.386**
Learning other foreign languages	0.085
Exposure to other foreign languages	-0.058
Average grade in English in primary school	-0.412**
Average grade in English in secondary school	-0.329**
Self-assessment of proficiency in English	-0.499**
Grade point average (GPA)	-0.038
Participants' perceived importance of being proficient in English	0.233**

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

A positive correlation was found only for the participants' perceived importance of being proficient in English ($r=0.233$, $p=.004$). Moreover, no correlation was found between the participants' attitudes on the one hand, and their overall grade point average at the faculty ($r=-0.038$, $p=.324$), knowledge of other foreign languages ($r=0.085$, $p=.150$) and exposure to them ($r=-0.058$, $p=.241$) on the other hand. These results are somewhat unexpected, in particular because previous research revealed a relationship between learning another foreign language and more positive attitudes (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007). This may be because other foreign languages in our population were obligatory school courses, and, as such, they did not have a positive influence on the participants' attitudes to English. So, it can be concluded that H2 was partially confirmed since a positive correlation with the attitudes was found just for learning English in a language school and for the perceived importance of being proficient in English, while the participants' length of ELL and weekly exposure to English outside studies were negatively correlated. Besides, no correlation was determined for the participants' overall academic achievement and knowledge of other foreign languages.

3.3. The Comparison of English Majors and English Non-Majors Subgroups

As stated above, the participants were classified into English non-majors and English majors for the purpose of H3, i.e. for the comparison of the obtained results across the two subgroups. The analysis included the Mann-Whitney test (Table 2) to compare variables related to the participants' language exposure. The first variable for which statistically significant differences were established was average length of English language learning. As expected, the exposure was in favour of the English majors group (Mdn=13), in comparison to the English non-majors¹ group (Mdn=10), $U=1109$, $p=.000$. Similar results were obtained when the two groups were compared according

¹ All the results obtained for the English non-majors group were collected in the process of PhD thesis writing by Mikulec (2016).

to: (a) the length of learning another foreign language ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=4$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=8$), $U=1667$, $p=.002$; (b) weekly exposure to English outside their studies ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=3$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=3$), $U=1994$, $p=.001$; and (c) contacts with native speakers ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=1$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=1$), $U=1109$, $p=.000$. In other words, statistically significant differences in favour of the English majors were found for each variable above.

Table 2 Mann-Whitney test results showing significant differences between the English non-majors and the English majors

Variables	U	p
Length of ELL in years	1109	0.000
Length of learning another FL in years	1667	0.002
Weekly exposure in hours to English outside studies	1994	0.001
Contacts with native speakers	1109	0.000
Length of daily exposure in hours – the internet	2072	0.002
Length of daily exposure in hours – books	1934.5	0.000
Length of daily exposure in hours – journals/magazines	2056	0.001
Self-assessment of proficiency in English	1740	0.000
Participants' attitudes to English	2244	0.000
Perceived importance of being proficient in English	2546	0.015

The length and form of daily exposure to English were also compared between the two groups and the results indicated statistically significant differences, i.e. longer daily exposure for the English majors on three out of the five tested variables: (a) the internet ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=2$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=2$), $U=2072$, $p=.002$; (b) books ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=2$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=2$), $U=1934.5$, $p=.000$; and (c) journals/magazines ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=2$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=2$), $U=2056$, $p=.001$. These results were in accordance with expectations since, as mentioned earlier, the English majors were significantly more exposed to English during their studies, and presumably outside them, due to the fact that teaching English is the core of their future profession. However, statistically significant differences were not determined for the participants' exposure to music and films in English.

Further comparison of the two subgroups was related to their self-perceived proficiency in EFL, and the difference was found to be statistically significant ($Mdn_{Enon-majors}=4$; $Mdn_{Emajors}=4$), $U=1740$, $p=.000$. It is interesting to note that – despite significantly lower exposure to English – the self-assessment within the English non-majors group was rather high ($M=3.64$, $SD=0.820$) when compared to that within the English majors group ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.657$). It appears that the former group members were less critical of their proficiency in English, which is in accordance with previous research reporting that less proficient learners tend to overestimate their language abilities, while more proficient learners are more likely to underestimate them (Heilenman, 1990; Oskarsson, 1984). That is to say, “the more experience that learners have in a domain ... the more likely they are to be aware of the limitations of their skills and knowledge” (Heilenman, 1990, p. 190), which was obviously the case here.

The participants' attitudes were also compared across the two sub-groups. Naturally, it was found that the percentage of English non-majors who expressed positive attitudes towards English was somewhat lower at 80.5%, although still relatively high in terms of the participants' language learning profile. On the other hand, the entire English majors group reported positive attitudes. The Mann-Whitney test confirmed statistically significant differences between English majors ($Mdn=1$) and English non-majors ($Mdn=1$), $U=2244$, $p=.000$. The results further indicate that English majors put much more emphasis on affective aspects and the characteristics of the language itself, i.e. they considered English to be easy to learn, claimed that for them everything sounded better in English, and found it easier to express themselves in English. Negative attitudes were expressed only by English non-majors, who mainly listed their personal and affective characteristics, along with the teaching situation and teacher(s), as the main reasons for this. In other words, they pointed out their own failure in the English language learning context, lack of language aptitude, negative experiences with language teachers in the past, and the omnipresence of English ("I don't like English because everyone can speak it, so it is boring") as the main causes of their negative attitudes to English.

The final comparison of the two subgroups was related to their perceived importance of being proficient in English. As expected, the entire English majors group considered this proficiency very important, in comparison to 91.6% of the English non-majors group. The difference was again statistically significant ($Mdn_{\text{Enon-majors}}=1.08$; $Mdn_{\text{Emajors}}=1$), $U=2546$, $p=.015$. The analysis of the participants' responses to the second open-ended question, i.e. the explanation why they found proficiency in English so important, also revealed slight differences between the two groups since the English non-majors group members mostly mentioned the benefits of knowing the language. For example, they commented: "English is a *lingua franca*", "knowing English facilitates communication with foreigners", "it enables one to read literature, websites, etc., in English", "it is helpful in professional development", and "it facilitates travelling abroad (whether for pleasure, study or work)". As opposed to English non-majors, the English majors group expressed stronger attitudes, i.e. their replies included quantifiers like *very* and *extremely important*. Apart from the reasons above, English majors emphasised proficiency as a requirement for their future profession, expressed a strong wish to become EFL teachers, and stressed personal satisfaction in knowing EFL. Although classified as English non-majors, a very high percentage of the other group also saw their English language proficiency as important.

Based on the presented results, it may be said that H3 was mainly confirmed since statistically significant differences were found for all tested variables, except the participants' exposure to music and films in English.

4. Conclusion

Considering the entire sample, this study confirmed great exposure to English as a foreign language, predominantly via the internet and music, as well as rather high self-assessed EFL proficiency.

It also has to be mentioned that the results indicate very positive attitudes in the target population both to English and the importance of being proficient in English, which is in accordance with the current status of English and in light of today's globalisation processes in the world.

Furthermore, the attitudes to English were positively correlated only with learning English in language schools and the perceived importance of being proficient in English, whereas the other variables were either negatively correlated (length of ELL, weekly exposure to English outside studies), or no correlation was determined (the participants' overall academic achievement and their knowledge of other FLs and exposure to them). Positive correlations may indicate that the students who had learnt English in language schools had more positive attitudes to English, although it is hard to discover whether these attitudes reflected their additional exposure to the language or whether it was the other way round, i.e. those who had more positive attitudes were also more likely to learn English in language schools. The positive correlations regarding the perceived importance of being proficient in English are perhaps related to instrumental motivation. Namely, it seems that the positive attitudes of the participants are associated with the possibilities offered to them when they are proficient in English. However, negative and no correlations indicate that additional factors may have affected the participants' attitudes.

Finally, when the results were analysed across the two subgroups, significant differences in favour of the English majors group were found for a number of variables, such as: the length of exposure to English and the length of learning another foreign language; weekly exposure to English outside studies; contacts with native speakers; and the length of daily exposure via the internet, books and journals/magazines. The differences had been expected due to this group's significantly higher level of exposure to English in the course of studies; the differences in their motivation had also been expected since this particular group will depend on English as the language of instruction in their future profession. It may thus be safe to presume that the students who had been learning English longer would choose to study English, and they would then seek and/or have more opportunities to be engaged in communication with native speakers. Further, either because of their own choice or because of their study purposes, it was expected that they would be more exposed to English outside their studies, and would read more in English, whether books, journals, or materials on the internet. However, differences were not found for the participants' daily exposure via music and films. This indicates that, irrespective of their future profession, a majority of the participants are exposed to English in their leisure time activities through watching films and listening to music.

Further studies are recommended that could employ random sampling and additional measures for the following crucial variables: attitudes, FL proficiency and academic achievement.

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6. Appendix: Questionnaire

Podatci o studentici/studentu

1. Dob _____ Spol M Ž
2. Napišite godinu i smjer studija _____
3. Koliko dugo učite engleski jezik? _____
4. Jeste li učili engleski i izvan škole/fakulteta? Koliko dugo i kada? _____

5. Koju ste srednju školu završili? _____

6. Koju ste prosječnu ocjenu imali iz engleskog jezika u **osnovnoj** školi? _____
7. Koju ste prosječnu ocjenu imali iz engleskog jezika u **srednjoj** školi? _____
8. Volite li engleski jezik? Zašto? _____

9. Jeste li učili još neki strani jezik osim engleskog? Koji/Koje? _____

10. Koliko dugo? 1. jezik _____ 2. jezik _____
11. Koju ste prosječnu ocjenu imali iz drugog (i trećeg, četvrtog) stranog jezika u **osnovnoj** školi? (navedite jezik i ocjenu) _____

12. Koju ste prosječnu ocjenu imali iz drugog (i trećeg, četvrtog) stranog jezika u **srednjoj** školi? (navedite jezik i ocjenu) _____

13. Koliko ste **tjedno** izloženi **drugomu** stranom jeziku?
 - a. nemam kontakt s tim jezikom
 - b. do 5 sati tjedno
 - c. do 10 sati tjedno
 - d. 15 i više sati tjedno

14. Koliko ste **tjedno** izloženi **trećemu** stranom jeziku?
- nemam kontakt s tim jezikom
 - do 5 sati tjedno
 - do 10 sati tjedno
 - 15 i više sati tjedno
15. Kojom biste ocjenom ocijenili svoje znanje **engleskoga** jezika? _____
16. Koji Vam je ukupan prosjek ocjena na studiju? _____
17. Koliko ste sati TJEDNO izloženi **engleskom** jeziku izvan studija?
- nisam uopće
 - do 5 sati tjedno
 - do 10 sati tjedno
 - više od 15 sati tjedno. Koliko? _____
18. Jeste li kada imali ili sada imate kontakt s govornicima engleskog jezika? _____
- U kojem obliku (razgovor, dopisivanje...)? _____

 - Zašto? Koliko često? _____

19. Oblik DNEVNE izloženosti engleskom jeziku izvan studija
- Internet
 - do 3 sata dnevno
 - 3-9 sati dnevno
 - više od 9 sati dnevno
 - glazba
 - do 3 sata dnevno
 - 3-9 sati dnevno
 - više od 9 sati dnevno
 - filmovi
 - do 3 sata dnevno
 - 3-9 sati dnevno
 - više od 9 sati dnevno
 - knjige
 - do 3 sata dnevno
 - 3-9 sati dnevno
 - više od 9 sati dnevno
 - časopisi
 - do 3 sata dnevno
 - 3-9 sati dnevno
 - više od 9 sati dnevno
20. Koliko Vam je važno da budete uspješni u engleskom jeziku? Zašto? _____

