

The Process of Learning the Standard Language of a Country of Origin for People Born Outside the Country

—On the Example of Croatian Supplementary Teaching in Minority Communities and Diaspora

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Abstract

Most Croatian minority communities are small, rural, and located in Central and Southeastern Europe. They are between 200 to 500 years old. Within these communities, the old local languages are usually preserved, but the learning of the Croatian standard language is taught in school. The challenges of organizing Croatian language teaching in minority communities vary not only from country to country but also in different environments within the same country. The Croatian emigrant population is very heterogeneous regarding their proficiency of their mother tongue. The first generation was born and educated in Croatia, and actively speaks the Croatian standard language. Those born in the second generation already in emigration usually speak some local variant of the Croatian language within the family. Learning the standard language for them is organized in supplementary classes, usually on Fridays later in the afternoon or Saturdays in the morning. Most members of the third and especially the fourth generation of Croatian emigrants did not speak Croatian in their families, many did not even go to supplementary schools, and in adulthood some of them decide to learn the Croatian standard language, either remotely (most often), or through courses in their environment or by going to Croatia and studying in specialized courses at Croatian universities. Countries such as Germany, where new young families are constantly immigrating are especially problematic for language preservation. The knowledge or ignorance of the Croatian language among children from these families is determined by the number of years of life spent in Germany (from birth or later), the number of years of schooling in Croatia, the situation in

the family and especially to what extent Croatian is the spoken language within the family. Children from mixed marriages usually have a weaker command of the Croatian language, especially if their mother does not speak Croatian. It is impossible to generalize the organization and implementation of supplementary teaching in the diaspora or minority communities, as well as the difficulties and challenges that are related to it because every environment is different. The nature and characteristics of teaching are intricately shaped by a range of factors beyond the societal context and the age of the learners. Relevant factors are: the age of the participants, their level of general education and socioeconomic background, their level of prior knowledge of the Croatian language, their attitude towards the language in the family context, the level of organization of the minority or immigrant environment and attitude towards the mother tongue in that environment.

Keywords

Learning the Standard Language, Croatia, Minority Communities, Diaspora

1. Introduction

To summarize the very heterogeneous process of learning the Croatian standard language by members of the Croatian diaspora, it is first necessary to describe in basic terms what kind of communities in the diaspora we are referring to in this paper, because the latter are very diversified. We divide them into two basic groups: firstly, autochthonous Croatian minority communities and secondly Croatian diaspora. An exception is the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have the status of a constitutive people therein. Autochthonous minorities are compact groups, who have lived in the same area for over a hundred years. Such groups are further characterized by common dialect linguistic features, common ethnographic heritage, and common cultural characteristics, and until recently a shared way of life because most minority communities consisted of agricultural rural population. Such groups were extremely homogenous until the last quarter of the 20th century. They mostly dwell in Central and South-Eastern Europe, primarily in countries that are either neighboring Croatia or territorially not far away from it. Numerous minority communities managed to preserve their language variants for centuries. In recent decades, the number of speakers has rapidly declined in all communities and some variants are starting to disappear or have already disappeared.

Diaspora communities on the other hand are heterogeneous dialectically and culturally, according to reasons for emigration as well as to values and worldview. Their members have different social and cultural backgrounds and they come from various parts of their home country both rural and urban. In their new home they usually occupy large cities, scattered in different city districts and suburban settlements (Cohen, 2022; Vulić, 2021, 2022). They are connected only

by individual organized gatherings (such as joint religious rites, joint events, various ceremonies, and in some communities also organized teaching of the mother tongue). Until recently, most Diaspora communities were strongly emotionally connected to their homeland and people. These communities mostly began to form in the last decades of the 19th century through migration of individuals, families, or smaller kinship groups, who upon arriving in their new homeland accepted a new way of life and fully integrated into the new environment, sometimes already in the first, most often in the second, and rarely only in the third generation. Until the Second World War, most emigrant communities were formed in the overseas countries of North and South America and Australia and New Zealand, and in the second half of the 20th century there were significant departures to Western Europe and South Africa. Since the 21st century, they are all over the globe (Vulić, 2021; Bošnjak, 2022). Comprehending the heterogeneity within diaspora communities is essential for valuing the complexity of their cultural and linguistic dynamics (Cohen, 2022). On the one hand this diversity enriches diasporic life and contributes to the formation of unique and multifaceted identities among community members. On the other hand, it creates challenges for language instruction.

2. On the Teaching of the Croatian Language in Minority Communities (A Brief Excerpt Based on a Case Study of Hungary)

Most Croatian minority communities are small, rural, and located in Central and Southeastern Europe. They are between 200 to 500 years old. Within these communities, the old local languages are usually preserved, but the learning of the Croatian standard language is taught in school. The challenges of organizing Croatian language teaching in minority communities vary not only from country to country but also in different environments within the same country (Vulić, 2022). For example, in Hungary, in the province of Muramenti, in the villages where the Croatian minority community lives, there are almost no Croatian speakers under 50, and often under 60 years of age¹. In that province, there are two primary schools that have the status of *nationality* schools (in the towns of Murakeresztúr and Tótszerdahelyi) where Croatian is taught as a foreign language for 5 hours a week, that is, one hour per day. Hungarian is exclusively spoken at home, even in families where both parents are Croats, and even in those where the mother of the family is a teacher of the Croatian language. Pupils enroll in the first grade without any prior knowledge of the Croatian language. Most of them complete the entire elementary school with little opportunity to communicate in the Croatian language, because all pupils in these schools are from the same or neighboring towns and communicate with each other in Hungarian. In the cities of Budapest and Pécs, there are educational centers from

¹As mentioned above most Croatian minority communities live in Countries bordering Croatia. For this paper we chose two communities as case studies Hungary and Germany. Both because they are exemplary and second because we did most research on them.

kindergarten to high school graduation with Croatian language classes for some subjects (Vulić, 2022). Because of this, the students at those schools graduate with better language proficiency.

1) Croatian minority communities in Central and Southeastern Europe are small and rural, existing for several hundred years.

2) Local languages were preserved within these communities until recently, but Croatian standard language is taught in schools.

3) Challenges in organizing Croatian language teaching vary not only between countries but also within the same country.

4) In Hungary's Muramenti province, most Croatian speakers are over 50 or 60 years old.

5) Primary schools in said province teach Croatian as a foreign language for five hours a week.

6) Hungarian is spoken exclusively at home, hindering Croatian language acquisition within the family.

7) Pupils often enroll supplementary language classes without prior knowledge of Croatian and have limited opportunities to practice.

8) In Budapest and Pécs, educational centers offer Croatian language classes from kindergarten to high school, leading to better language proficiency.

3. Croatian Language Teaching in the Diaspora

The Croatian emigrant population is very heterogeneous regarding their proficiency of their mother tongue. The first generation was born and educated in Croatia, and actively speaks the Croatian standard language. Those born in the second generation already in emigration usually speak some local variant of the Croatian language within the family. Learning the standard language for them is organized in supplementary classes, usually on Fridays later in the afternoon or Saturdays in the morning. The majority of members of the third and especially the fourth generation of Croatian emigrants did not speak Croatian in their families, many did not even go to supplementary schools, and in adulthood some of them decide to learn the Croatian standard language, either remotely (most often), or through courses in their environment or by going to Croatia and studying in specialized courses at Croatian universities (Vulić, 2021). In rare cases members of diaspora enroll in Croatian language studies in their new homelands (e.g., at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia).

Teachers of Croatian classes for school children in the diaspora face several challenges they need to address:

1) Heterogeneous Structure of Student Groups: In terms of both age and prior language knowledge. This heterogeneity can pose challenges for teachers aiming to tailor their instruction to meet the varied needs and proficiency levels of the students.

2) Formation Criteria: The criteria for creating groups are usually driven by pupils' extracurricular obligations, travel constraints, and familial considera-

tions. This approach can lead to a mix of students with diverse levels of language knowledge and skills within the same class.

3) Scheduling and Travel Considerations: The scheduling of extracurricular activities and the travel time to the class venue play a crucial role in determining class composition.

4) Sibling and Social Factors: The inclusion of siblings and children from the same social circles in the same class contribute to the varied age groups within classes. While this approach may foster a sense of familiarity and comfort, it presents a challenge for instructors who need to accommodate diverse learning needs.

5) Parental Convenience: Coordinating schedules and transportation plays a significant role in class composition. This can pose a pedagogical challenge for teachers who must navigate a broad spectrum of learning abilities and preferences.

6) Potential Impact on Learning Outcomes: The diversity in age and language proficiency within the same class can affect the effectiveness of language instruction. Teachers might have to utilize diverse teaching approaches tailored to accommodate the different requirements of students, which could influence the ultimate learning results.

4. Croatian Language Teaching for School Children: A Case Study from Germany²

Countries such as Germany, where new young families are constantly immigrating are especially problematic for language preservation. The knowledge or ignorance of the Croatian language among children from these families is determined by the number of years of life spent in Germany (from birth or later), the number of years of schooling in Croatia, the socioeconomic family situation and especially to what extent Croatian is the spoken language within the family. Children from mixed marriages usually have a weaker command of the Croatian language, especially if their mother does not speak Croatian (Vulić, 2021). Often in the same class of supplementary education in Germany, there are students who spent the first ten years of their lives in Croatia attending classes together with those who were born in Germany and never lived in Croatia, and even with those who belong to the third generation, born to parents who were themselves born in Germany. All the above, as well as other factors, affect the heterogeneity of the different supplementary classes in the Diaspora. Therefore, educative priorities are adapted to this situation, e.g., the level of tolerance for the use of dialectal idioms is increased, but also standards for the observance of grammatical and spelling rules of the standard language lessened. Of course, the specificity of the foreign environment in which supplementary teaching of the standard Croatian language takes place directly affects the way the teaching is carried out, but also the frequent occurrence of the same spelling and grammar mistakes

²The following data is based on yet unpublished research material.

when using the standard language. The examples from Germany that are mentioned in this series are based on a survey of the range of knowledge of pupils who are learning the Croatian language in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg.

Pupils in large cities like Munich come from various parts of the city to one primary school to learn Croatian. Since children less and less want to have additional classes on Saturdays (because Saturdays are reserved for other activities), they come to classes during the week tired after the full day they spent at regular school. When in one of these supplementary classes for example a poem by a Croatian poet was analyzed some of the students were barely able to compose simple sentences in the Croatian language, while those with a good knowledge of the language showed great willingness to actively participate in the discussion. Joint classes were not a satisfactory solution for either. However, it should be emphasized that the motivation to attend additional Croatian classes increases with the level of Croatian language knowledge. Younger students, on the other hand, are motivated if their older siblings or some other pupils close to them are making substantial progress in their knowledge of Croatian. School holidays in Croatia are a common motivation for everyone.

1) Countries like Germany pose challenges for Croatian language preservation due to constant immigration.

2) Children's proficiency in Croatian depends on factors like years lived in Germany, schooling in Croatia, family language use, and mixed marriages.

3) Supplementary classes in Germany may include students with varied backgrounds, affecting teaching priorities and methods.

4) In large cities like Munich, pupils from different areas attend Croatian classes together, often after full days at regular school.

5) Motivation to attend Croatian classes increases with language proficiency, and younger students are motivated by older siblings or peers' progress.

6) Holidays in Croatia serve as a common motivation for all students.

5. Analysis of the Level of Croatian Language Proficiency in Supplementary Classes in Germany Using Examples from Our Observations

1) Spelling errors. Two types of spelling errors dominate which can be divided into three basic groups:

a) The same spelling errors are also encountered by pupils in Croatia. The most common are difficulties in distinguishing *č* and *ć* and in recording *i*je and *je*, for example: *kuća, ići, Njemačka, njemački, uvijek, bjela boja* instead of correct *kuća, ići, Njemačka, njemački, uvijek, bijela boja*. This type of error occurs with many pupils, regardless of their level of Croatian language proficiency. It is also common with pupils who were born and partially educated in Croatia, including those whose family speaks Croatian at home because their parents do not know German well.

b) With pupils who were born in Germany or came to Germany in preschool age and whose parents are both Croats and who speak Croatian in the family

and communicate with other Croatian families in Germany in Croatian, this error is common: composite writing of negation *ne* with present tense verb forms and compound writing of enclitics, e.g. *nepomaže, nepjevamo, neznam, vidjela-sam* instead of correct *ne pomaže, ne pjevamo, ne znam, vidjela sam*. This is because these words are pronounced together, students also hear it in everyday conversation and write it that way. Although less often, such mistakes are also encountered with pupils Croatia.

c) There are some mistakes which are characteristic of pupils attending German schools. This is primarily about capitalizing common nouns, which is contrary to Croatian spelling, e.g. *Jadransko More, Mama i Tata i Brat, idemo posjetiti Familiju, idem dva Mjeseca na Hrvatsku, Nastavu svaki Tjedan, kod Bake, ja sam Dječak, jedna Baka živi u Zaprešiću, a druga Baka živi u Dugom Selu* instead of correct *Jadransko more, mama i tata i brat, idemo posjetiti familiju, idem dvamjesecana Hrvatsku, nastavu svaki tjedan, kod bake, ja sam dječak, jedna baka živi u Zaprešiću, a druga baka živi u Dugom Selu*.

2) Grammatical errors:

Pupils most often use cases incorrectly, that is, they replace most cases with the nominative, e.g., *samo sa moja sestra, malo govorim hrvatski sa tata* instead of correct *samo s mojom sestrom, malo govorim hrvatski s tatom*.

They often make mistakes when using the verb form, e.g., *dosadim se* instead of correct *dosadujem se*. This type of mistake is common also with pupils who otherwise know Croatian well.

3) Spelling errors:

a) Under the influence of the German language, some students use the grapheme *z* for the phoneme *c*, and analogously for the phoneme *č* the grapheme *ž*, e.g., *Herzegovina* (very frequently), *zrvana* (very frequently), *zjeli dan, žesto* instead of correct *Hercegovina, crvena, cijeli dan, često*.

b) They are also often unfamiliar with the grapheme *đ*, so they write, for example, *ročen* instead of correct *rođen*.

c) Also, under the influence of German the phoneme *v*, is written with the grapheme *w*, and the phoneme *š* with the trigraph *sch*, e.g., *zrwen, dva Mjeseca, dva puta, weč, nastawa, wolimswe, nasche, Schvedska* instead of the correct *crven, dva mjeseca, dva puta, već, nastava, volim sve, naše, Švedska*. This type of error occurs with pupils born in Germany as well as with those who have been in Germany only since kindergarten.

4) Dialecticisms instead of standard language expressions

Pupils frequently employ dialecticisms originating from their native region. This is especially common among children whose family speaks a Croatian dialect or who often stay with relatives in Croatia who speak that dialect. This is also encountered in cases where both parents were born in Germany and do not use the standard Croatian language but only a dialect.

a) Dialecticism inserted into standard phrases: *imam dvanajstgodina, moreš za dvi minute stignitnastavu, tribam, kruz, brat je vidia, išosam* instead of the correct *imam dvanaest godina, možeš za dvije minute stići na nastavu, trebam,*

kruh, brat je vidio, išaosam. Very frequent is the dialecticism *ondan* instead of the correct *onda* which clearly testifies to the origin of the pupils from Dalmatinska Zagora or Herzegovina.

b) A replacement of entire Croatian phrases with German occurs among students who have a passive knowledge of Croatian, but in many situations, they cannot express themselves in the Croatian language, e.g., to the question *Koliko često viđaš rodbinu?* They answer *An Feiertagen*.

5) Exceptional influences

They refer to unique linguistic influences that may impact the language proficiency of students, particularly those with diverse linguistic backgrounds. In cases of pupils whose father is a Croat and whose mother is a member of another Slavic nation, Slavic languages may mix, so for example a student whose mother is Czech says *Ja sam putovala na Hrvatsko* instead of the correct *Ja sam putovala u Hrvatsku*. It is important to recognize exceptional influences both in the fields of linguistics and language acquisition, as it sheds light on the dynamic nature of language development, especially in diverse cultural and familial contexts (Togonjal and Pleše, 2020). Recognizing these influences allows educators and researchers to better understand the complexities of language acquisition and provide more targeted support for individuals navigating multiple linguistic inputs in their daily lives.

6) Comparisons of various environments

Just as in minority communities, also in the diaspora the problems, and challenges in the organization of Croatian language classes vary from country to country. If, for example, supplementary Croatian language classes in Germany and Ireland are compared, it can be stated that, at least for the time being, it is easier to organize classes in Ireland because the level of heterogeneity of pupils is lower. Since World War II, Germany has been a significant destination for Croatian immigrants. Ireland however is a new country for Croatian emigrants, so the pupils are usually first-generation immigrants who came to that country with knowledge of the Croatian language. Those who are a little older bring with them not only the knowledge acquired in everyday family conversations but also a more structured knowledge acquired at school. That is why classes in supplementary education are more homogeneous in Ireland than in Germany (Vulić, 2021).

Experiences from practice show that only those teachers who actively work with certain groups of students and know their needs and possibilities can compile a quality teaching program for each of the considered groups of pupils and students of the Croatian language.

Previous experience has shown that pupils (and students, of course) from families where Croatian is not spoken at all can, if they are provided with quality teaching, learn the language so well that they can not only communicate in Croatian without any problems, but also continue their studies or perform more complex tasks that require knowledge of said language (Bošnjak, 2012). A

one-size-fits-all approach obviously is not sufficient. Teachers need to be attuned to the unique characteristics, needs, and capabilities of diverse groups of pupils and students. A successful strategy of supplementary language teaching should include:

- a) Tailored Teaching Programs
 - b) Knowledge of Student Needs
 - c) Quality Teaching for Non-Native Speakers
 - d) Language Proficiency Beyond Communication
- 7) On some aspects of Croatian language teaching for adults

Another unique side is the organization and method of conducting Croatian language classes for adults of Croatian origin. Since it is mostly about people who work and who are therefore most interested in distance learning, this type of teaching is often organized for them. This can be in the form of online classes, radio programs or even podcasts, usually for second or third generation diaspora members. The first generation of emigrants who have lived in their new country for several decades, have over time mostly stopped using their mother tongue, are good candidates for this type of teaching. Not communicating regularly in Croatian with a larger social circle for them resulted in the impoverishment of the lexicon and loss of ease of expression (Vulić, 2021). This they might then try to compensate with short weekly distance courses. Such language classes need to engage, allow for practical application, and finally result the ability for students to communicate effectively with their relatives in Croatia. Short lessons are organized for them once a week, lasting 15 to 30 minutes, and sometimes even less than that. Every short conversation must be accompanied by a dictionary of lesser-known words (Bežen and Bošnjak, 2012). Classes reflect an approach that goes beyond language acquisition by integrating cultural and practical elements into the learning experience. A successful approach to adult supplementary classes should include:

a) Engaging Content Selection: such as sports competitions, shopping destinations, restaurants, music concerts, religious events, and weather forecasts. The goal is to make the language learning experience both enjoyable and applicable to real-life situations.

b) Practical Application: This approach promotes the use of language in meaningful contexts, fostering a deeper understanding and retention of the language.

c) Teacher's Role: Instructors employing this teaching method are advised to speak slowly. This helps to ensure that students can follow the teacher's instructions, explanations, and discussions more easily. This consideration is crucial, especially for learners who may still be developing their language skills.

d) Cultural Relevance: The choice of topics, such as local sports competitions, popular shopping spots, and cultural events, reflects an awareness of the learners' cultural context. Integrating these aspects into language instruction not only enhances language skills but also make the learning experience more holistic and

meaningful.

e) Communication with Relatives: The goal is for students to feel confident communicating about their experiences in Croatia. By focusing on practical, everyday topics, the class aims to equip students with the language skills needed to engage with family members during visits, enhancing their ability to share and connect through the Croatian language.

Admittedly, speaking slowly is also essential for teaching in supplementary schools, and not only at a distance. This type of short teaching units admittedly is not suitable for members of the second or third generation of emigrants who spoke little Croatian in their families. They already mix grammatical genders, so for example they use feminine forms for male persons. The nominative often takes over the role of other cases, and if necessary, they insert whole English phrases and other syntagms into their speech, for example, *moja tata je bio, moja tata rođak, učim druga godina*, I am looking for instead of the correct *moj tata je bio, rođak mojega tate, učim drugu godinu, tražim*.

6. Conclusion

This small selection of examples proves the initial claim that it is not possible to generalize the organization and implementation of supplementary teaching in the diaspora, as well as the difficulties and challenges that are related to it because every environment is different. The nature and characteristics of teaching are intricately shaped by a range of factors beyond the societal context and the age of the learners. Relevant factors are: the age of the participants, their level of general education and socioeconomic background, their level of prior knowledge of the Croatian language, their attitude towards the language in the family context, the level of organization of the minority or immigrant environment and attitude towards the mother tongue in that environment, motivation and needs of the individual, needs of the family, attitude towards Croatia, connection with Croatia and relatives in Croatia, ability to master the language, quality of teachers as well as the amount of available time. A successful approach to supplementary language teaching will also include special attention to societal specifics since the teaching process is significantly influenced by the specific features of the society in which it takes place. Cultural norms, values, educational policies, and societal expectations play a crucial role in shaping the methods and content used by educators. New technological tools in education, such as online learning platforms, interactive and digital resources, further add to the complexity to teaching. It is crucial that educators adapt their methods to incorporate these tools effectively, catering to the evolving needs of modern learners. This selection of examples demonstrates the complexity of organizing supplementary teaching in the diaspora. The main factors for this are participants' age, education level, socioeconomic background, prior knowledge of the language, family attitudes, societal specifics, cultural norms, educational policies, technological tools, and societal expectations. Further research and case studies are needed to

explore effective language acquisition programs.

It would therefore be beneficial to investigate the question of language acquisition in the diaspora further: in depth case studies of successful, learner based supplementary language programs are useful in identifying best practice. Longitudinal studies on the other hand would keep track of students' progress and challenges in designing adequate programs over time. Internal and external factors of language acquisition and retention should be isolated. Conducting a comparative study across diaspora communities should result in a synthesis of all findings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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