

## **DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE PROCESS OF MASTERING CROATIAN STANDARD LANGUAGE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

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### **0. Introduction**

The basic aim and purpose of teaching Croatian as an official language in the Republic of Croatia in the primary school is to develop language skills. Croatian language is the most comprehensive subject in primary education because pupils learn it from the first to the sixth grade nearly every day (5 hours per week). Pupils, therefore, read, write and speak in Croatian language. To make that process of mastering simpler and closer to pupils, language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are implemented in language teaching. However, research shows that pupils in elementary school have a very negative attitude towards the Croatian language as a school subject and very often have "fear of the language".

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the linguistic competence of elementary school pupils from the second to the sixth grade. The pupils will be offered a test of linguistic competence and a test of communicative competence. Results will be compared according to pupils' age, gender, region they come from, quality of their teachers, their mark in Croatian language and attitude towards the Croatian language as the school subject. It is assumed that to students in all age groups (grades) linguistic competence will be significantly better developed than communicative competence. It is also assumed that the girls will achieve better results than boys just like pupils who come from Stokavian areas because the Croatian standard language is shaped on Stokavian dialect. It is expected that the pupils who have better grade in the Croatian language and more positive attitude will also show significantly better results in both tests. It is also expected that the attitude of pupils towards the teacher and his teaching way will greatly affect their attitude towards the subject, but also that the results of both tests will depend on that.

## **1. Acquisition and learning of Croatian language**

Institutional learning and teaching of standard Croatian language in the Republic of Croatia starts about the age of seven, when the child enters the first educational period (the 1st – 4th grade). During the period of preparation for school, in the final preschool phase, the children master the pre-writing and pre-reading techniques in order to be able to learn how to read and write in the most efficient way. The child first masters capital print letters and then small print and cursive letters, until the end of the first grade fully mastering the graphic system of Croatian language (Bežen 2009). Since the first educational period coincides with the developmental stage of concrete operations, the mother tongue should be taught on the basis of concrete examples and everyday communicative practice, encouraging children to use the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The aim of Croatian language teaching in early primary school period is to enable the pupil to communicate in various situations they might encounter in the real world. This aim is closely related to development of language competences, first of all the language communicative (communicative) competence, and also the linguistic competence (Curriculum 2006). The importance of successful communication in the mother tongue is also recognized by the European Commission in the document „Eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning“ (2005), putting the acquisition of mother tongue to the first and vital place. It is assumed that better mastering of the mother tongue also implies better mastering of foreign languages and other competences and contents which the child is to acquire since the entire communication is done in Croatian language.

Acquisition and learning of Croatian language as the mother tongue presents a problem for many pupils of average intellectual abilities, which is confirmed by the exams at the end of the fourth and the eighth grade of primary school (according to the data of the National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, 2007). Moreover, the results of the secondary school final exams (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) point to the unsatisfying level of language competences. Though in 2006 the new Curriculum was introduced into primary schools whose contents were reduced in comparison to the previous one, Croatian language is still one of the most comprehensive subjects of primary school and requires from pupils a lot of work and effort. Many pupils often encounter problems when learning educational contents which are too demanding and not in line with their cognitive development. Because of that, the most important is to

develop language competences in the process of learning Croatian language as mother tongue, especially communicative competence.

## **2. Development of language competences**

Competence is a recognized expertise or ability of a person (Anić 2004: 710). This word is of Latin origin (cometare, competentia = to achieve, be better). The term „competence“ was first related to language by Chomsky (1996, 1989), who defines it as a fluent knowledge of grammar possessed by the native speaker which enables the said speaker to produce the correct sentences in their native language. Chomsky makes a difference between the competence of the native speaker as an innate knowledge of language and the performance, the real use of language in actual situations.

Linguistic or language competence implies acquisition of linguistic knowledge on the level of grammatical norms or standards which means that it is primarily concerned with the theoretical knowledge of the language (Pavličević-Franić 2005: 9). The term of linguistic competence is related to norms and normative grammar.

Communicative or language-communicative competence is related to the notion of pragmatics which, within the process of acquisition, learning and teaching of Croatian language, implies communicative functionality or, in other words, learning of communicative grammar which means encouragement of communicative competence of pupils and development of pragmatic expertise on the level of functional language application in everyday communication. Communicative (functional) grammar is didactic or school grammar whose aim is to achieve successful everyday communication. It is definitely based on normative grammar, but it has to be reshaped in a way to be appropriate to the age, abilities and primary language competence of the pupil (J1).

In the recent years, the term of communicative competence has been increasingly used in the papers of Croatian linguists, many of them making a clear distinction between the communicative and language competence. When talking about the level of language acquisition, the possibility of its discursive application in language practice and the ability of the speaker to choose the most appropriate of several language systems in an actual communicative situation, Hymes (1980) uses the term communicative competence. Chomsky (1966) uses the term competence only for linguistic competence, which means knowledge of grammar (Pavličević-Franić 2005: 82). The Curriculum (2006) emphasizes that the basic aim of Croatian language

teaching is development of language competences. The linguistic competence implies the knowledge of language theory and the meta-language knowledge, while communicative competence refers to the knowledge of language in practice. Croatian language teaching in junior grades of primary school puts emphasis on development of communicative competence, while in senior grades, with the development of abstract cognitive operations, it is also necessary to develop linguistic competence. Unfortunately, teaching practice and experience show that Croatian schools still dedicate more time to development of linguistic competence and demand from pupils to reproduce previously memorized rules and definitions, not enough attention being paid to communicative competence. Though the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2010) instructs that Croatian language teaching should develop four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, this has not been fully realized in the actual teaching practice yet. NCF also instructs that primary school should be organized in three educational periods: 1st – 4th grade, 5th – 6th grade and 7th – 8th grade. This concept of primary school would be in line with the cognitive abilities of pupils. However, this idea lives only in educational documents, but not in practice. Entering the fifth grade the child encounters a statistically significantly larger number of linguistic contents than in the fourth grade and also has to master meta-language knowledge. The child will memorize such contents, but is not certain whether they will understand and acquire the said contents since at this age the children have still not reached the stage of abstract cognitive operations. This means that the linguistic contents are more demanding at the beginning of the second educational cycle (5th and 6th grade) and more time is dedicated to mastering the theory, while less time is planned for application, exercising and actual usage. It is visible that the new educational cycle does not logically follow the previous one since the contents of the new cycle are significantly more comprehensive and much more demanding for the pupils in cognitive terms, therefore, more appropriate for the next educational cycle (7th and 8th grade). The result is a large difference in the pupils' knowledge of linguistic and communicative level of language, since the tasks are much more complex, while the pupils are not cognitively much more developed.

### *2.1. Sociolinguistic aspects of communicative competence development*

Mastering of standard Croatian language is influenced by the immediate environment of the child, meaning: first the maternal idiom, then the textbooks used by

the child, the media as ever more present factors of transfer of lexemes and grammar structures from English and other languages and the teacher as the role model of a speaker. In order to make the learning process more successful, it is necessary to do more practical oral and written exercises and introduce different types of language games since children learn faster and with less effort when playing, memorizing information more successfully and feeling more comfortable.

Croatian language is spoken by approximately 4.500,00 million people in the Republic of Croatia and a little bit less abroad. According to the number of speakers, Croatian language belongs to small language groups, with three different dialect groups spoken on the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia (shtokavian, kajkavian and chakavian). The said dialect groups can be further divided into dialects (16 dialects altogether), the dialects into regional vernaculars and regional vernaculars into local vernaculars. This is the reason why the organic idiom to which the child is exposed greatly influences mastering of the standard language since there are local and regional vernaculars which differ from the standard Croatian language on both the lexical and grammatical level to a large extent and this fact was taken into account in this research.

The textbooks for Croatian language and other school subjects in primary school also have a large influence on mastering and acquiring of the standard language. In fact, the research (Pavličević-Franić and Gazdić-Alerić, 2010) shows that the textbooks for junior grades of primary school abound not only with words which are unknown and unintelligible, but also with contents which are very often boring and, moreover, impenetrable to the pupils. In the last few years, there have been efforts to produce and create a communicative textbook, but unfortunately, the majority of the textbooks for teaching Croatian language as the mother tongue still contain only literary and artistic texts as linguistic and didactic samples, instead of including all kinds of texts and in this way making the textbooks closer to the pupils.

European countries have a clearly defined language politics which is mostly visible in the school system dedicating the largest number of teaching hours per week to the mother tongue (e.g. Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, England). In the Republic of Croatia, the number of hours has been reduced in comparison to the near past. At the moment, five hours of Croatian language is taught in junior grades of primary school, four hours per week in senior grades of primary school and comprehensive secondary schools (gymnasiums), and only three hours per week in vocational schools. Unfortunately, the tendency of Croatian educational system is to reduce the number of

hours, despite the poor results of pupils on the trial final exam at the end of primary school and the final exam at the end of secondary school. Insufficient training of the pupils during Croatian language lessons, inappropriate teaching methods, textbooks that lack communicative approach and insisting on the knowledge for which the pupils are not sufficiently mature in cognitive terms: all these are factors which influence the general competence and (lack of) knowledge of Croatian language as well as mastering of its standard idiom.

The discrepancy between the cognitive abilities and cognitive maturity on one side and the planned educational contents on the other side results not only in the negative attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject, but also in poor mastering of grammatical and orthographical contents. Thus, after eight years spent in primary school, our pupils are still incompetent speakers of standard Croatian language. The research conducted by D. Pavličević-Franić and K. Aladrović (2007), showed, among other issues, that the examinees in the first grade of primary school have a better developed linguistic competence – theoretical knowledge of language, than the communicative competence – use of the said knowledge in actual situations. This scientific fact shows that Croatian educational system still focuses on theory mastering and definition learning, even in the first grade (Aladrović 2008). Significantly less emphasis is put on appropriate oral and written communication and development of language skills, which seems to be the key for success in the world based on communication.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### *3.1. Aims and hypotheses of the research*

The aim of the research is to investigate the development of language competences in mastering of standard Croatian language until the period of language automation (by the age of twelve or the end of the sixth grade). The research problems are related to the main aim:

- a) To investigate the level of linguistic and communicative competence of pupils in view of their age.
- b) To investigate whether the results of the examinees differ in the tests of linguistic and communicative competence depending on their sex.

- c) To investigate whether the results of the examinees differ in the tests of linguistic and communicative competence depending on the place where their school is located.
- d) To investigate the correlation between the tests of linguistic and communicative competence on one side and the final mark in Croatian language on the other side.
- e) To investigate the correlation between the tests of linguistic and communicative competence on one side and the attitude of examinees towards Croatian language as a school subject on the other side.

The research hypotheses are related to the main aim and problems of the research, as follows:

H 1 – It is expected that the examinees will have language competence more developed than linguistic competence. It is expected that older examinees will have communicative competence more developed than linguistic competence.

H 2 – It is expected that the girls will have significantly better results than the boys. The girls have always been better at written communication and more interested in the activities of listening and reading.

H3 – It is expected that the examinees from shtokavian areas will achieve significantly better results than the examinees from other areas of the Republic of Croatia since their local vernacular is the closest to the standard Croatian language.

H 4 – It is expected that the examinees who have better mark in Croatian language will also have better results since better mark actually means better knowledge of the school subject.

H 5 – It is expected that the examinees who have better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject will also have better result in both tests.

The research was done on a sample of 1000 pupils from different parts of the Republic of Croatia (Slavonia, Lika and Gorski kotar, South Dalmatia, North-West Croatia, Istria, Central Croatia, Central Dalmatia, Zagreb) in order to determine if the maternal idiom influences the process of Croatian language mastering. The pupils were divided according to their sex (boys and girls), age (the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth grade) and according to their final mark from Croatian language (insufficient, sufficient,

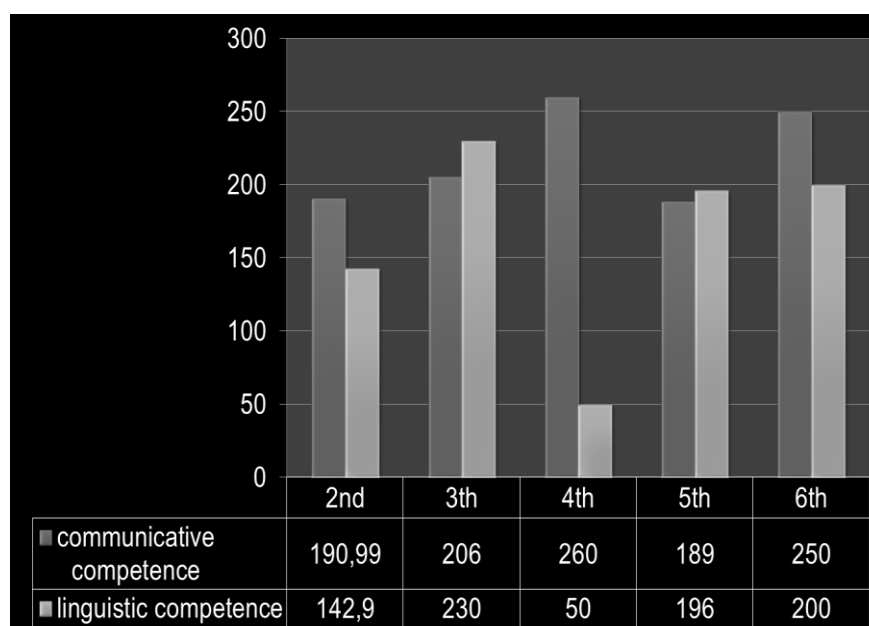
good, very good, excellent). For the purpose of this research, a Test of communicative competence and a Test of linguistic competence was done with different types of tasks: completion, matching, circling, underlining and creative writing in order to investigate all levels of pupils' knowledge and determine if the pupils are better in language theory (the results of the test of linguistic competence) or use of language (the results of the test of communicative competence). Additionally, for the purpose of this research, a Questionnaire was made on the attitude of pupils towards Croatian language as a school subject in order to determine how the attitude of examinees influences the process of mastering of the standard Croatian language. The results of the tests of linguistic and communicative competence as well as the results of the questionnaire on attitude towards Croatian language were first analysed by the content analysis and then all usable data were analysed by the quantitative linguistic analysis in the SPSS statistic programme. Due to irregular data distribution, nonparametric statistical methods were used: Kolmogorov z Test, Mann Whitney Test, Kruskal Wallis Test, Wilcoxon Rank Test, Spearman's coefficient of correlation.

### 3.2. *Research results*

The first aim of the research was to investigate the level of language competences – the linguistic and communicative competence in pupils from the second to the sixth grade. The results of the Wilcoxon ranks test show that the examinees of the third ( $z = -6,26$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and the fifth grade ( $z = -4,70$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) of primary school have better developed linguistic than communicative competence, which means that they are better at the theory than the use of their language. The examinees of the second ( $z = -9,85$ ,  $p > 0,01$ ), fourth ( $z = -19,13$ ,  $p > 0,01$ ) and the sixth grade ( $z = -9,03$ ,  $p > 0,01$ ) show significantly better results in the test of communicative competence, which means that they have better language knowledge in use (chart 1). In the third and the fifth grade the pupils encounter a large number of grammatical and orthographic contents, especially in the fifth grade, and therefore it is likely that they find it very difficult to process all this language material and thus they tend to learn definitions and neglect language exercises and use. Furthermore, due to a large number of the said grammatical and orthographic contents, the teachers probably dedicate insufficient time to language expression and language practice and therefore the results of the third and the fifth grade are in favour of linguistic competence.



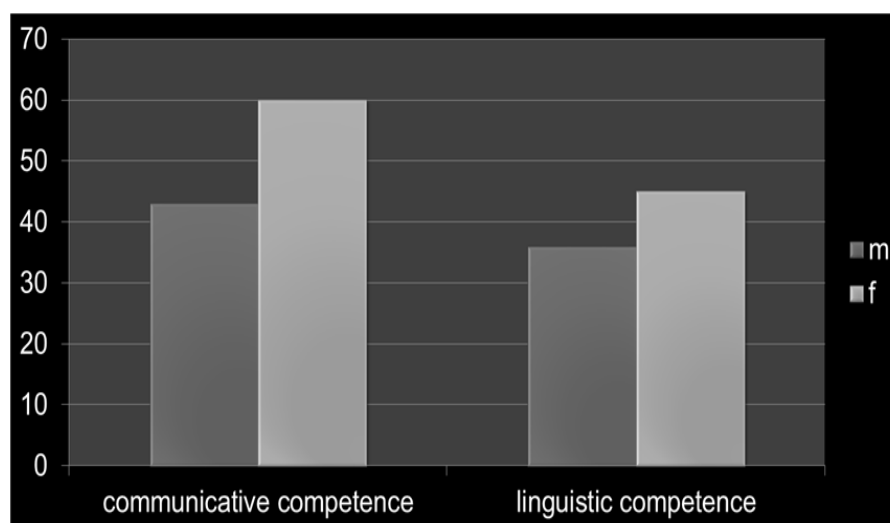
**Chart 1** *Distribution of the results on the test of communicative and linguistic competence with respect to age*



These results partially confirm the first hypothesis which assumes that the examinees will have linguistic competence better developed than the communicative competence. However, the second part of the hypothesis which assumes that older examinees will have better developed linguistic competence can be rejected. Though early learning of Croatian language should focus on communicative competence, the results show that older examinees do not necessarily have linguistic competence better developed than the linguistic one and that the development of one of the competences does not depend on the age of the pupils in the process of early learning of Croatian language since the pupils of the third grade show, for example, significantly better results in the test of linguistic competence than the pupils of the sixth grade. This confirms the fact that the pupils until the age of 11/12 all belong to the same developmental stage of concrete cognitive operations and even their results are not statistically significantly different.

Another aim of the research was to investigate whether there is a statistically significant difference in the answers of examinees in both tests depending on their sex. The results of the Mann Whitney U test show that the girls achieved statistically significantly better total results both in the test of communicative ( $z = -5,87$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and linguistic ( $z = -4,62$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) competence (chart 2).

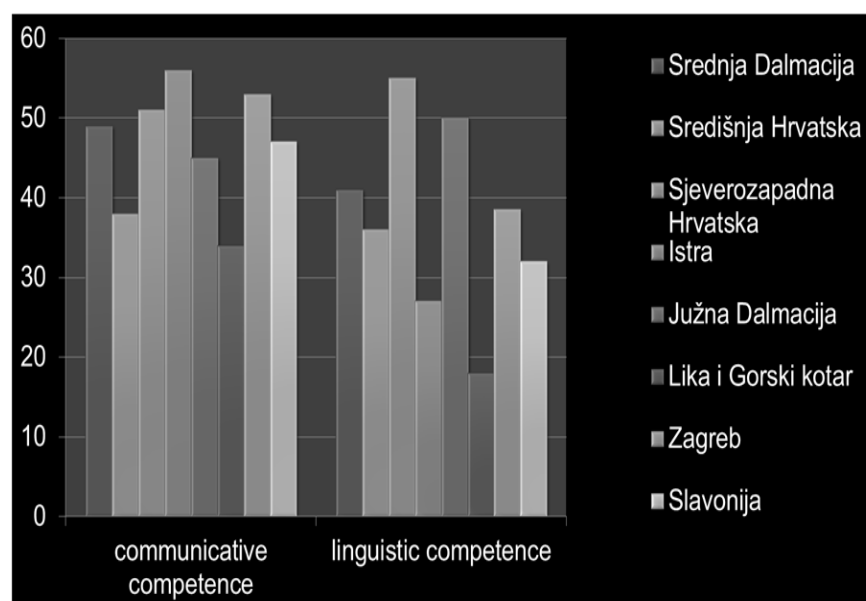
**Chart 2** *Distribution of results on the test of communicative and linguistic competence with respect to gender*



This confirms the third hypothesis that girls will be statistically significantly better both in the test of linguistic and the test of communicative competence. The girls are generally more interested in the activities of reading and writing at this early age and that is probably the reason why their results are significantly better than the boys' results.

The third aim of the research was to investigate how much the organic idiom and the place of birth influence the process of mastering of Croatian language. Therefore, the examinees were divided into eight groups, depending on the place where their school is located (Slavonia, Lika and Gorski kotar, South Dalmatia, North-West Croatia, Istria, Central Croatia, Central Dalmatia, Zagreb). The total results of the Kruskal Wallis test show that there is a statistically significant difference in the results depending on the place of living and that the examinees coming from the Shtokavian areas (Lika and Gorski kotar) show significantly worse results both in the test of linguistic ( $X^2 = 96,35$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and the test of communicative competence ( $X^2 = 96,08$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) than the examinees from other areas, though their local vernacular is the closest to the standard Croatian language, while the examinees from the North-West Croatia achieve significantly better results in the test of linguistic competence and the examinees from Istria in the test of communicative competence, though their local vernacular statistically significantly differs from the standard Croatian language (chart 3).

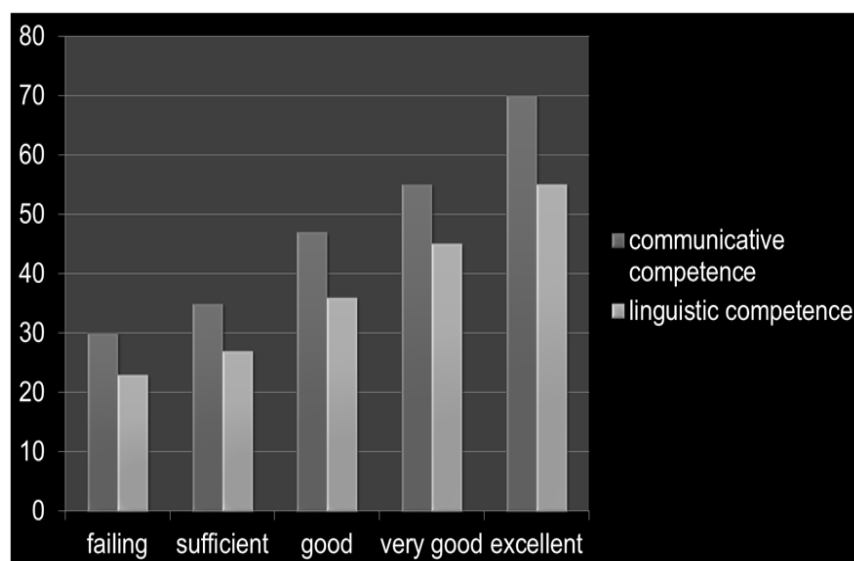
**Chart 3** *Distribution of examinees in results on the test of communicative and linguistic competence in different region*



This result rejects the third hypothesis which assumes that the examinees from shtokavian areas (Lika and Gorski kotar and Slavonia) will achieve statistically significantly better results in comparison to the examinees from other areas.

The fourth aim of the research was to investigate if there is a correlation between the final mark in Croatian language and the results in the tests of linguistic and communicative competence. The Spearman correlation coefficient shows a positive correlation between the marks in Croatian language and the results in the test of linguistic ( $r = 0,39$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and communicative ( $r = 0,49$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) competence (chart 4). In other words, the pupils with better marks in Croatian language also achieved better results in the tests of linguistic and communicative competence.

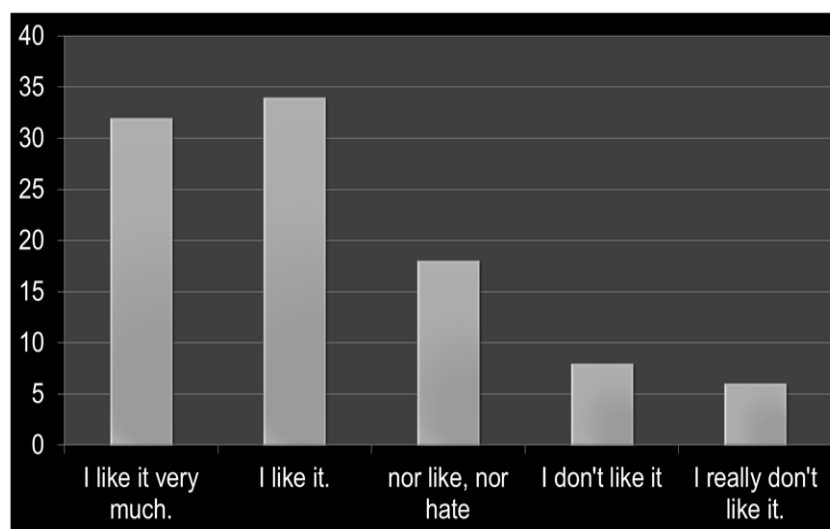
**Chart 4** *Colleration between results on the test of communicative and linguistic competence and marks of Croatian language as a school subject*



This confirms the fourth hypothesis which assumes that the examinees with better grades in Croatian language will also achieve better results in the test of linguistic and the test of communicative competence.

The fifth aim of the research was to investigate the attitude of examinees towards Croatian language as a school subject. The results show that the majority of examinees like or very much like Croatian language as a school subject (chart 5). However, some examinees (about 14%), dislike or very much dislike Croatian as a school subject. The examinees with a better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject at the same time show significantly better results in the test of linguistic and the test of communicative competence. In other words, the Spearman correlation coefficient shows the correlation between the attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject and the results in the test of communicative ( $r = 0,57$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and linguistic ( $r = 0,48$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) competence.

**Chart 5** *Distribution of examines to the attitude amoung Croatian language as school subject*



This confirms the fifth hypothesis which assumes that the examinees with better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject will also have better results in the test of linguistic and the test of communicative competence.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

The process of Croatian language mastering is under the influence of not only psycholinguistic, but also sociolinguistic elements, some of which were taken into account as variables in this research. The results show that the examinees from the third and the fifth grade of primary school have linguistic competence better developed than the communicative competence as it regards Croatian language, which is a result of a large quantity of grammatical and orthographic contents which the pupils of that age have to master as well as the lack of time for language expression, which means the practical use and exercising of the learnt language theory. It is also interesting that the girls showed significantly better results in both tests in comparison to the boys and these better results were achieved by the examinees not coming from the shtokavian areas whose local vernacular is the closest to the standard Croatian language. These results point to the fact that the examinees whose organic idiom is considerably different than the standard language put more efforts into mastering of the language and are also aware of the difference between their vernacular and the standard Croatian language and therefore achieve significantly better results. The marks in Croatian language as a

school subject also show correlation with mastering of the standard Croatian language since the pupils with better marks in Croatian language achieved better results in both tests of language competences as well. Another interesting fact is that the attitude of examinees influences the process of mastering of Croatian language since the examinees with a better attitude towards Croatian language as a school subject also achieved significantly better results in the tests of knowledge.

The said results point to the fact that it is necessary to make certain changes in Croatian educational system. First of all, Croatian language lessons should dedicate more time to language expression, which means that pupils should exercise in practice their theoretical knowledge of grammar and orthography. Moreover, the pupils should not learn the material which is not appropriate for their cognitive abilities and cognitive maturity. Therefore, it is necessary to divide the primary school, as it has already been planned in the curriculum, into three educational cycles, the first three grades being the first cycle, the second three grades the second cycle and the last two grades the third cycle. In this way the educational content would be more in line with the cognitive abilities of the pupils and the process of teaching would be more efficient. It would also be very important to build a positive attitude of pupils towards Croatian language as a school subject since it would make the pupils more motivated to learn grammar and orthography and therefore to achieve better results. The positive attitude towards Croatian as a school subject would also have a positive influence on other aspects of the pupils' achievements. In addition, the awareness of the standard language should be developed so that the pupils might better differentiate their organic idiom from the standard language, though it is very important to use all possibilities and resources provided to the pupil by their organic idiom and then learn the standard Croatian language by means of differential grammar. This new approach to Croatian language teaching in primary school would surely help the pupils to develop the positive attitude towards the school subject, insisting on learning the standard language in comparison to the organic idiom by means of differential grammar and decreasing the large differences in results depending on the sex, age and other extra-linguistic factors.

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