

## **The situation of modern language learning and teaching in Europe:**

### **CROATIA**

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Language teaching has always occupied an important place in language policy in Croatia. Considerable attention is given to the teaching and learning of modern languages in a small country whose official language is Croat and in which there are a number of minority languages such as Italian, Slovak, Hungarian and German, spoken in the regions bordering Italy and in Slavonia.

#### **The Croatian education system**

The compulsory system covers eight years of primary school, divided into two cycles: the first from the age of 6-7 years to 10-11 years, and the second from 10-11 to 14-15 years.

After primary schooling, pupils continue their education, if they wish, in specialised secondary schools, general secondary schools, or technical colleges, in which courses last in most cases for four years (from 14-15 years to 18-19 years). Among the specialised secondary schools (*science schools*) there are schools with a language focus in which the emphasis is on studying modern languages; a considerable number of hours per week (2, 3 and 4) are devoted to teaching/learning a first, second and third language. In classical secondary schools, besides studying Ancient Greek and Latin, learners have to study a first foreign language and often choose a second or even a third as an optional subject. Secondary schools specialising in languages thus offer young people a solid knowledge of languages which opens up various channels for them later. Secondary schooling always ends with an upper secondary leaving certificate (*matura*).

After the *matura*, pupils may enrol in one of the faculties of the Universities of Zagreb, Split, Osijek and Rijeka, or may pursue their studies in a college of higher education (specialising in catering and tourism, nursing, information technology engineering, etc.). University courses usually last between four and six years, as against two or three years in a college. Tertiary education is free in Croatia and because there is a *numerus clausus* in most faculties and colleges of higher education, an entrance examination determines the number of students enrolled.

#### **Teaching of languages**

Croat is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels. Minority languages are also taught, especially in the regions where they are spoken. In some border regions, for example, besides foreign language teaching, all subjects are taught in a second language or bilingually at all levels (from pre-school to upper secondary). With respect to other minority languages, we are in the process of devising programmes to complement national curricula.

Foreign languages are generally taught for two to three periods of 45 minutes a week. They are taught according to national curricula, available for all

subjects, which follow the principles of the functional/notional communicative approach. Modern language teaching/learning is thus based on linguistic, communicative and cultural objectives which support pupils' cognitive development and acquisition of communicative competence. Depending on their level of learning and age, knowledge of the foreign language should contribute to pupils' general development. The ability to communicate in someone else's language enables them better to understand how people differ, to see their own identity from a different standpoint, to accept differences as features of the international community, and to integrate other people's experience with their own. Pupils must acquire basic grammar and vocabulary, and the study of functions must enable them to express their opinions and to find out about their fields of interest and topics related to their lives and the life of the society in which they live, and to that of the target language. Teaching makes use of a range of teaching material: national textbooks or textbooks produced in the countries of the target language and approved by a committee of experts at the Ministry of Education and Sports. In advanced classes, authentic documents, literary texts and new technologies are used together with textbooks.

### **Modern languages within the system of education**

#### ***Primary schools***

A foreign language is compulsory from the end of the first cycle of primary education, i.e. starting in grade 4 at the age of 9-10 years. Compulsory foreign language teaching comprises three periods per week. However, it is possible to start learning a foreign language in the first class of primary schools. Such classes, which are then optional, are given for two periods per week and are usually paid for by parents.

The aims of language learning at this level initially stress receptive skills and gradually develop productive skills (both oral and written), accompanied by a rudimentary linguistic and sociolinguistic inventory.

In the curriculum we take account of the diversification of modern language teaching. Learners have a choice of the modern language they study, according to their wishes, preferences and motivation. However, there is a financial constraint in terms of the number of pupils (10-15) necessary to set up a language class. Learners can select any of the languages offered: English, French, German, Italian and Russian. Once they have made their choice, pupils are obliged to continue studying that language for two or three periods a week throughout their school careers: during the two cycles of primary education, the four years of secondary school or technical college and, very often, at university as well. An examination in that language is compulsory as part of the upper secondary leaving certificate in specialised secondary schools, but optional (language vs mathematics) in general secondary schools and technical colleges.

Modern language teaching policy aims at a balanced spread of language learning so that English and German are not the only languages taught/learnt. Other "less-favoured" languages are thus also given a chance, such as Italian,

French, Russian and Spanish (at secondary level).

	English	German	Italian	French	Russian	Spanish
Primary school	212,777	88,469	10,807	9,129	1,914	-
Secondary school	132,035	125,414	13,477	12,223	5,140	34
Total	444,812	213,883	24,284	21,452	7,054	34

***Number of pupils per language offered within the school system***

***First foreign language***

It goes without saying that despite the efforts made, the vast majority of learners choose English as the first foreign language due to its role as the *lingua franca* of contemporary society. German usually takes second place, while the third and fourth places are shared by French and Italian. The other languages mentioned are, on the other hand, usually chosen by learners as a second foreign language.

A number of parameters generally dictate the choice of a language. These are usually geographical or utilitarian factors, with people learning their neighbours' language (if they are near Italy or Austria), geopolitical factors (Croatia having been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century), social factors (the children of workers who emigrated in the 1970s to Germany and Austria), and economic and cultural impact of Anglo-Saxon culture (American and British films, television series, pop music, new wave, video games, software, foreign magazines, signs and slogans encountered daily, etc.). These are just some of the reasons which explain the imbalance in foreign language learning.

***Second foreign language***

It is possible to learn a second modern language from the beginning of the second cycle of primary education (10-11 years), and this is continued until the end of compulsory schooling (14-15 years). Depending on the circumstances, this language may be classified as an optional subject. The language is often continued in secondary school up to the leaving certificate (although some learners obviously drop out for various reasons).

***Early learning***

A remarkable shift concerning modern language teaching occurred with the introduction of democracy in Croatia in 1991. At that time, the education authorities realised that they had to give greater importance to modern language learning: by lowering the age limit for the start of modern language teaching/learning in order to raise the quality of teaching and facilitate international exchanges and contacts between young people. For that reason, the education authorities initially opened a few pre-schools in which children of three years of age started learning a foreign language. Then, a pilot early modern language teaching/learning project was launched in primary schools.

The Ministry of Education and Sports will provide funding for this project until the year 2001.

From the start of the school year 1991/92, French, English and German were introduced in the first class in 12 primary schools in Zagreb (one class per school and four schools per language, split equally). As a result, 350 children aged 6-7 years started learning a foreign language. In the interests of linguistic diversification, another language, Italian, was introduced in autumn 1992, in two schools in Zagreb. By 1994, 30 new schools had joined the project, most of them in Zagreb and the remainder in the major provincial cities. In order to provide the best conditions for effective teaching, attention was given to ensuring both small groups (10-15 children per group), and maximum exposure to the foreign language for children. This meant five language classes of 45 minutes a week in the first year, four periods a week in the following three years of the first cycle, and three periods in the four years of the second cycle.

In the first cycle, the language is taught by a Croatian qualified secondary teacher specialising in the foreign language. Sometimes, there is a team of two teachers, a specialist and a general primary teacher, who generally work together during periods devoted to physical expression, drawing and singing. In other subjects, such as mathematics, awareness activities, environmental studies, etc., the topic is usually taught first by the primary school teacher in the mother tongue, and is then taken up by the foreign language teacher. In this way, the foreign language is no longer regarded as something separate but becomes an integral part of the school curriculum. It becomes the basis for the child's entire affective, social and intercultural development.

### ***Secondary schools***

The first modern language learnt at primary school is usually continued at the secondary level in a specialised or general secondary school or technical college. One of the aims of this learning is the initial consolidation of what has been learnt at primary level. Another is the acquisition of oral and written communicative skills. At this stage, learners should have a greater degree of mastery of the written language. Knowledge of the mother tongue and of a first and even a second foreign language should enable them to reflect on how the foreign language works. At this stage, the target is for learners to be able to learn independently.

### ***Second foreign language***

Learners who did not have the opportunity at primary school to study a second foreign language can take up a second language when they enter secondary school. The others may continue learning the second language they chose in primary school. Depending on the case in question, this language may be compulsory (language focus secondary school) or optional. Pupils generally continue studying this language for two periods a week (three periods a week in language focus schools) up to the upper secondary leaving certificate. Besides the acquisition of communicative competence, the

emphasis is on the development of reflective learning and on intercultural understanding of the learner's environment and that of the target language.

### ***Third foreign language***

There is also the opportunity to study a third foreign language, especially in secondary schools specialising in languages and classics (where learners opt to study a third modern language alongside Ancient Greek and Latin). This combination only caters for a minority of secondary pupils, however. Depending on the school, this language may be classified as compulsory, elective or optional. It is taught for two periods a week. The teaching aims to reinforce the motivation and interests of learners. Frequently, relationships between the study of the mother tongue and that of the foreign language are emphasised (in terms of linguistic functioning or of interpretation of authentic texts).

### ***Bilingual secondary schools***

Also in 1991, a pilot project for three bilingual secondary schools, German, French and English, was launched in Zagreb. In order to be admitted, pupils took an entrance examination testing their knowledge of the foreign language concerned. For the purpose of ensuring high quality teaching, class size was restricted (15-20 pupils). The curriculum was designed so that the foreign language was taught intensively for four periods a week. In the majority of cases, the subjects taught in the foreign language concerned the humanities: history and geography, complemented in the two highest classes by sociology and philosophy. Since the curriculum has not been approved by the education authorities, it is to be revised, with some amendments to the national content of each subject taught in the foreign language.

### ***Tertiary education***

At the university level, a modern language is compulsory for all students in all non-philological faculties during the first two years. Most students go on studying their first foreign language. At this level, this language is treated as language for special purposes (LSP) and is taught according to specialist curricula. A second language may also be studied, depending on the course and the faculty (for example, in faculties of economics or foreign trade). There are also other opportunities for learning modern languages at this level, usually in private language schools.

### **Conclusion**

Croatian policy thus encourages the diversification of modern language teaching. Great importance is attached to the learning of modern languages, linked to the diverse reality of the countries where each language is spoken, and to an appreciation of the cultural dimension offered by each language to the education of the individual, opening the way to full participation in international communication.