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ENGLESKI KAO TREĆI JEZIK: PERCEPCIJE SLIČNOSTI S DRUGIM JEZICIMA

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LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS L3: PERCEPTIONS OF SIMILARITIES WITH

PREVIOUSLY ACQUIRED LANGUAGES

Diploma paper

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Contents

Abstract

This diploma paper deals with multilingual learners of English as L3, with either Italian or Croatian as their L1. The aim of this paper is to explore the way these speakers perceive the language distance between English, Italian and Croatian because this can greatly influence the process of language acquisition. The theoretical part deals with factors that can influence the learning process, such as transfer and perceived similarity; and we provide a brief overview of the differences between SLA and TLA. We wanted to see not only which languages were perceived as more similar, but also how participants explained the relationships between them, and whether the perception of similarities was influenced by their L1.

Key words: multilingualism, TLA, perceived similarities, psychotypology

1. Introduction

In today's globalised world, when more and more people travel abroad, encounter different cultures, and communicate with people all around the globe via the internet; knowing more than your native language is a necessity. Consequently, multilingualism today "does not present an exception but the rule" (Cenoz & Jessner, 2009, p. 121), and children all over the world learn a third language at school. This is also the situation in Croatia. Croatian pupils start learning their first foreign language in the first grade of elementary school, and many start with their first foreign language as early as kindergarten (the language is usually English – 85 to 90% of Croatian pupils learn English as their first foreign language (Medved Krajnović & Letica, 2009)), and their second foreign language in the fourth grade of primary education (most often German). In addition to that, many students have the opportunity to learn another foreign language (Italian, French, Spanish, etc.), either in elementary school or in high school.

When it comes to learning a new foreign language, the knowledge that students get from their first language (L1), and all the other languages acquired before the foreign language they are in the process of acquiring, can be of great help (Ringbom, 2007). This is also the reason why the study of the effects that the student's L1 alone has on the acquisition of a new language is inadequate if a learner knows another language (De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; as cited in Utgof, 2008). Hall (2002) and Ausubel (1968) make two very interesting remarks about previous language knowledge. Firstly, the amount of knowledge that learners bring to the learning task is very often underestimated, and secondly, Ausubel (as cited in Ringbom, 2007) states that the most important factor that influences learning is what learners already know. The essential task for any teacher, according to him is to "[a]scertain this and teach him accordingly." Neuner (1992, p. 158; as cited in Ringbom, 2007, p. 2) came to the same conclusion: "It is a general and basic law of any kind of learning that we associate new elements, items and structures with elements, items and structures already stored in our memory."

The focus of this diploma paper are learners of English as third language (L3), more specifically their psychotypology, i.e. their perception of language distance, because the way they perceive the relationships between the languages they already know or are in the process of acquiring can greatly influence and accelerate the process of learning English. We will try

to gain insight into the way they perceive the closeness of Croatian, Italian, and English, and how they explain the similarities among these three languages. We will also try to see whether the learners' L1 affect the way they perceive the similarities between these languages.

2. Theoretical framework
2.1. Second language acquisition (SLA) vs. third language acquisition (TLA)

The attitude learners have towards the language they are learning (be it their first or their fourth foreign language) affects the learning process. It is widely accepted that a positive attitude can benefit and accelerate the learning process, while learners' negative attitudes (or negative attitudes within their social environment) towards a foreign language or its speakers slow down or obstruct the acquisition of that language. However, these are not the only factors that affect the language learning process. It is also influenced by the learners' individual differences, the status the language has in a given community, or other factors, such as the (perceived) complexity of the language. Language acquisition, according to Haghverdi and Tabrizi (2012), is affected by sociocultural (e.g. attitude), affective (e.g. motivation) and cognitive (e.g. psychotypology) factors. In this thesis, we will concentrate primarily on the cognitive factors, more specifically on one subcomponent – psychotypology, a phenomenon related to the concept of language transfer; because it is learners' psychotypology that determines what they actually transfer.

The theory that is particularly relevant for our present research is that of Odlin (1989), where he states that "transfer can involve more than native language influence alone" (as cited in Haghverdi & Tabrizi, 2012, p. 46). Odlin does not limit transfer only to the influence of L1. In other words, any language acquired before the current target language (TL) can influence the process of its acquisition. Haskell's explanation of transfer supports this statement: "[t]ransfer refers to how previous learning influences current and future learning, and how past or current learning is applied or adapted to similar or novel situations" (2001, p. 23; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 4). As we can see, all previous learning, that is, all languages learned prior to the current one, can influence learners' understanding of the current language and their production. Therefore, the difference between acquiring a second and a third (or fourth, or fifth, etc.) language is that, when acquiring a second language, learners have only their mother tongue to rely on; as opposed to learning a Ln where they can rely on and be influenced by all the languages they acquired prior to the language they are currently learning. In other words, "all previous linguistic knowledge is facilitative in developing proficiency in a new language" (Utgof, 2008, p. i).

This leads us to the difference between second language (L2) and L3 learners. The need to examine possible differences arising from the presence of multiple languages in the

learner's mind resulted in the expansion of second language research and emergence of TLA research. As has been mentioned earlier, today's learners of foreign languages usually have some command of at least two languages (L1 not included), and it is almost impossible to find a real monolingual speaker in today's society.

While SLA and TLA do have certain common points (e.g. acquiring a new language system, learning how to conceptualize the world in a different way), research has shown that there are characteristics particular only to TLA. These include, but are not limited to: different (more advanced) skills and strategies; larger linguistic repertoire, multilingual compensatory strategies, variation in the order of learning the languages, language management and maintenance skills, higher metalinguistic awareness, etc. (Bulach, 2011; Herdina and Jessner, 2000; as cited in Molnár, 2008; Molnár, 2008).

The definition of third language acquisition provided by Cenoz (2003, p. 71; as cited in Letica Krevelj, 2014, p. 6) says that TLA is "the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages". Sometimes the term *third or additional language acquisition* (L≥3) (De Angelis, 2007; Fouser, 2001; as cited in Letica Krevelj, 2014, p. 12) is also used. This means that the term *third language* (L3) refers to *any* language acquired after a second language.

Hufeisen and Marx's Factor Model (2007; as cited in Letica Krevelj, 2014) enumerates the factors responsible for differences between SLA and TLA. The elements mentioned in this model include neurophysiological factors (e.g. age, general language acquisition capability), learner external factors (e.g. type and amount of input, learning environment), cognitive factors (e.g. language and metalinguistic awareness, learning strategies), linguistic factors (L1, L2), affective factors (e.g. motivation, anxiety, **perceived closeness/distance between the languages**, attitude(s)) and Foreign Language Specific Factors (FLSF) (e.g. individual foreign language learning experiences and strategies, previous language interlanguages). The elements of FLSF are what differentiates an L3 learner from an L2 learner because "L3 learners have at their disposal L2 learning experience that can be activated in the process of TLA" (Letica Krevelj, 2014, p. 11). To sum up, TLA and SLA have some cognitive and linguistic processes in common, but the processes in TLA are more complex due to an additional language.

Several studies dealt with transfer in TLA, i.e. in L3 production. Ringbom's 1986 study conducted on Finnish and Swedish bilinguals learning English indicates that learners

acquiring an L3 do not always rely on their L1, but that they use their knowledge of other languages and transfer from the one that they perceive to be closer to the target language. In this case the learners transferred more often from Swedish (genetically closer to English), than from Finnish, regardless of their L1. Tremblay (2006, as cited in Molnár, 2008) also claims that the learners' perception of the language distances is an important factor in transferring from one language to another. She conducted a study on English-French bilinguals learning German and found that they perceived English to be closer to their TL (in this case German), and, in consequence, they relied on their knowledge of English instead of on their knowledge of French.

2.2. Definitions of transfer, and the related concepts

Before giving the overview of research previously carried out in this field, and before presenting the findings of our study, definitions of the terminology central to the topic of the study, such as transfer, similarity, cross-linguistic influence, and psychotypology, are presented.

One crucial strategy in learning a new language is transfer as it enables the learner to understand the new language. We will start with Odlin's definition of transfer because it connects the concept of transfer with the concept of similarity, which is particularly pertinent to our present study. Odlin defines transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (1989, p. 27; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 5). For transfer to occur, learners need to perceive the languages as similar at least to some degree. According to Ringbom (2007) transfer "is the use of perceived and assumed cross-linguistic similarities in L2 comprehension and L2 production" (p. 26). The same thing applies to the comprehension and production of L3. Transfer can be both positive – and in these cases it facilitates the learning process, and negative, when it is the cause of errors in learners' production. The majority of research on transfer has focused on errors, and much more research still needs to be done to find out how it interacts with other learning processes.

2.2.1. Similarity

Like psychotypology, similarity also depends on the learner. As Ard and Homburg (1983, p. 162; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 2) point out, "similarity, like beauty, may exist in the eye of the beholder, but have no objective existence." In his study of transfer, Condon (1973; as cited in Haghverdi and Tabrizi, 2012) emphasizes the essential role of perception in the process of language transfer. It is Ringbom who makes a distinction between "*perceived* similarity" – when elements (such as word forms or functions) from different languages resemble each other, and "*assumed* similarity", which is a hypothesis made by the learner about an element of a language before they encounter it within the target language (2006; as cited in Utgof, 2008).

Another very clear definition and distinction between perceived and assumed similarity is provided in Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008): A *perceived similarity* is a learner's judgement that an element of the recipient langue corresponds to an element in the source language. On the other hand, an *assumed similarity* is an assumption that there is an element in the recipient language that is equivalent to the one from the source language, "regardless of whether the L2 user has yet encountered anything like it in the input of the recipient language, and regardless of whether it actually does exist in the recipient language" (p. 179).

The key word for us here is **_perceived_**. Again, it is not an exact science – learners might not recognise some similarities that are indicated by linguists. Students often perceive similarities between two systems differently than linguists and education theoreticians (Utgof, 2008). Moreover, it should be noted that, even when present, perceived similarity is not always fixed: it will vary depending on the context and the changes in the learner's knowledge base (Haskell 2001; as cited in Utgof, 2008). Ringbom (2007) noticed the same thing - according to him the reason for this lies in the fact that while learners look for similarities, linguists look for differences. Additionally, perceived similarity is hard to define and explain because of individual differences among learners, "who recognize similarities and make similarity judgements in many different ways" (Utgof, 2008, p. 6). As early as 1957, Lado notes how blurry the line between what is similar and what is different can be (as cited in Utgof, 2008). Similarities perceived by learners have a facilitative role in language acquisition. Even in the first stages of language learning, learners benefit from the similarities they manage to perceive because these similarities, especially if they are formal, "help them to establish cross-linguistic equivalences" (Ringbom 2007, p. 92). Comprehension is made easier if learners are aware of the similarities between languages.

As has been proven by research, "a target language related to L1 is perceived to be at least in some respects similar, while an unrelated language provides little concrete material for tentative cross-linguistic identification" (Ringbom, 2007, p. 8). However, even though cross-linguistic similarity is most easily perceived in formally similar or identical individual items or words, Seppänen (1998) pointed out that at least "[g]rammatical similarities occur even across wholly unrelated languages" (as cited in Ringbom, 2007, p. 8). Hall & Ecke (2005; as cited in Ringbom, 2007) studied the attitudes of multilingual learners who spoke English and Spanish and were learning German and French. More than 80% of the participants said English was easier for a Spanish speaker and more than 90% of the learners thought that German was easier to learn than Spanish for an English speaker.

However, Ringbom (2007) acknowledges the importance of proper guidance in making consistent use of similar elements between languages, while emphasizing the facilitative influence cross-linguistics similarities can have. This is an indication to all the teachers to value transfer as "the ultimate aim of teaching" (Haskell, 2001, p. xiii; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 1), and not punish their students for any errors they make as a result of transfer but encourage the use of any previous language knowledge their students possess.

2.2.2. Cross-linguistic influence (CLI)

According to Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986) and Ringbom (2007), the term *cross-linguistic influence* might be a better term to use in place of *transfer*. However, *transfer* is still the term that is most commonly used. Many researchers treat CLI as a super-ordinate term that includes many other language phenomena. According to Kellerman and Smith (1986; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 4), CLI includes "under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing', and L2-related aspects of language loss." De Angelis and Selinker (2001, p. 42; as cited in Utgof, 2008, p. 5) also treat CLI as a super-ordinate term which includes "instances of native language transfer, interlanguage transfer, avoidance due to influence of another system, and even 'reverse transfer' from an interlanguage back into a native language."

CLI has mostly been researched in the context of the influence of L1 on the acquisition of L2 (Tremblay, 2006). The instances of CLI from the background languages into the L3 have mostly been observed at formal levels of the lexicon, either in pure code-switches

or in word construction attempts (e.g. Bardel &Lindqvist, 2007). Research clearly shows that cross-linguistics influence has a strong and important effect in foreign language acquisition. One of the instances in which it can be seen is the facilitative effect of L2 on L3. Researchers and theoreticians claim it is "particularly helpful in foreign language comprehension at the early stages, and is indirectly conducive even to production" (Utgof, 2008, p. 1).

A learner of any language can benefit both from intralinguistic and cross-linguistic knowledge. The relevance of a learner's cross-linguistic knowledge is determined by the relationship between L1 and the target language: if the TL is closely related to a learner's L1, they will rely on their prior knowledge. On the other hand, if the distance between languages is great, the previous knowledge will not be pertinent (Ringbom, 2007).

2.2.3. Psychotypology

The concept of *psychotypology* was introduced by Kellerman (1978) who defined it as "the proximity between the L1 and the L2 sensed by the L2 learners" (as cited in Haghverdi & Tabrizi, 2012, p. 44). Kellerman's definition highlights the role of the learner. In other words, the proximity between languages is not exact, it is not scientific; it depends on the learners' perception and the way they see the relationship between the languages in question. The term *psychotypology* has been used to explain the perception of proximity or distance between languages, but researchers have not been able to clearly establish the criteria for determining similarity or equivalence (Eckman, 2004, as cited in Ringbom, 2007). This "uncertainty" is what psychotypology and similarity have in common.

If the learners' language repertoire includes an L1 unrelated to the TL, and an L2 related to the TL, they will rely more on their knowledge of the L2, which is related to the TL, than on their unrelated L1. This instance of relying on your L2, if it is related to your TL/L3, instead of your L1, which is not related to TL/L3, is what Ringbom (2007, p. 78) calls "non-native transfer". It is important to have in mind that transfer, both positive and negative, is more likely to occur if the languages are seen as close, and as somehow related. For example, research in Finland conducted by Ringbom (1987, 2001) suggests that L1 Swedish learners of English rely more on their mother tongue, while L1 Finnish learners more readily transfer from Swedish, which they perceive as closer to English. This phenomenon is most often researched in Asian or African context, where numerous researchers have found that learners

profit more from their knowledge of French/English when learning English/French than they have use of their L1 (Ringbom, 2007). The same phenomenon has been researched in Europe as well, where the same results were found (e.g., Lasagabaster, 2000, found that native speakers of Basque relied more on their L2 Spanish when learning English).

But does the same thing apply if all of the languages are unrelated as is the case in our study? Research shows that "even totally unrelated non-native languages may provide support in the form of positive transfer" (Ringbom, 2007, p. 79). An example for this is a Finland-Swedish professor of sociology who had learnt Swahili and who said that learning Swahili was not a big problem for him because he already knew Finnish (as L2). Even though unrelated, these two languages share some important characteristics (e.g. they are highly agglutinative - in both languages words have a similar status as linguistic units). The professor knew some Germanic languages (as L1, L3, L4 and L5) as well, but they were too different from Swahili to be of any use to him. This example shows the importance of perceived structural similarities across non-native languages (Ringbom, 2007).

Ringbom (2007) claims that one of the reasons why L2 may be more useful than L1 might be because it is sometimes easier for a learner to understand and put into words the processes that lie behind the language elements. The learner is not limited solely by his native-speaker intuition (which is often only subconscious). Seeing that most learners acquire their L2 consciously, they are more aware of the processes, and, in most cases, they can explain why something is the way it is. They do not rely on "It just sounds natural/right to me" as often as they do when it comes to their L1.

Even though there can sometimes be instances of non-native transfer in both grammar and pronunciation, the transfer is most obvious in the area of lexis (Ringbom, 2007). Letica Krevelj (2014) researched the phenomenon of transfer at the level of lexis. In her study, all participants had a certain level of proficiency in Croatian, Italian, and English (which was their L3). These three languages are completely unrelated seeing that Croatian is a Slavic language, Italian a Romance language, and English is a language of Germanic origin. Her results, however, showed that, even though multilingual speakers relied more on their L1, they used the knowledge of both of their background languages when they did not know the word in the target language.

3. Overview of research

Early researchers of multilingualism and multiple language acquisition did not approach the phenomenon in a systematic way. Consolidation of this field of research began in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009).

The research of multilingualism and third language acquisition has bloomed in recent years. Jessner (2006) conducted a study on language awareness, De Angelis (2007) on third or additional language acquisition, Ringbom (2007) on cross-linguistic similarity in foreign language learning, Lasagabaster and Huguet (2006) on language attitudes and use of multiple languages in European context, Cenoz (2009) on multilingual education – to name just a few[1].

When it comes to research on transfer and CLI, research conducted in the past focused mainly on forward transfer (specifically transfer from L1 to TL). Recent studies, on the other hand, prove that there is more than one direction of transfer. It can be both forward and reverse, as well as bidirectional (when two or more languages influence each other at the same time). It is important to note that there is "a growing interest in the interaction between three or more languages and the identification of lateral transfer, that is transfer between languages learned later than the first" (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008, p. 212).

Even with an increase in the research on transfer (e.g. Jarvis, 2000; Pavlenko, 2000; Cenoz et al., 2001; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002; Cenoz et al., 2003)[2], the concept of psychotypology, that is the perceived similarity of languages, is not yet researched enough. The little research that is done is mostly based on related languages such as, for example, Finnish and Estonian (Kaivapalu & Martin, 2013) or Swedish and English (Utgof, 2008).

Kaivapalu and Martin (2013) researched the perceptions of morphological similarity between Estonian and Finnish, two related languages. They provided their participants with 48 pairs of noun forms and asked them to decide whether these were similar, somewhat similar of different and explain their choices. The results they obtained showed that only the pairs with the highest degree of morphological similarity were seen as similar.

Utgof (2008) researched the perception of lexical similarities in international students of Swedish as L3 who had a good proficiency in the English language as L2. In the first part

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[1] For more see Aronin & Hufeisen (2009).
[2] For more information about research of transfer and CLI consult Jarvis & Pavlenko (2008).

of the questionnaire, the participants were given 26 word pairs with example sentences in both languages. The test items varied in the degree of similarity, and the participants were asked to mark (on a scale from totally different to absolutely the same) the degree of perceived similarity of the provided word pairs. Their ratings were later compared to the expected similarity ratings.

Utgof's results showed that perceived similarity is lower when grammatical differences are more prominent (such differences triggered the participants' metalinguistic knowledge, and, in turn, reduced transfer). Based on her results, Utgof concluded that the participants were influenced by their L2 even when their L1 was closely related to the L3. However, the students need to reach a certain level of proficiency before they can become confident enough to transfer from one language into another.

4. Study

4.1. Aim

The aim of the present study was to see how learners of English as L3 perceive the similarities between English, Croatian and Italian. We wanted to explore the way the participants explain the relationship between Croatian (L1/L2), Italian (L1/L2), and English (L3), and the types of relationships they perceive between these three languages.

The three languages in our study belong to three different groups within the Indo-European language family: Croatian is a Slavic language, Italian belongs to the Romance family of languages, and English is a language of Germanic origin. Germanic and Romance languages generally tend to have contrast relations (and not a similarity or a zero relation to each other). In this type of relation the learner sees a target language element as differing from an L1 form or pattern, even though there is also an underlying similarity between them (Ringbom, 2007). This particular combination of languages was chosen because, even though typologically unrelated, two of them (English and Italian) are obviously more similar than the third one (Croatian).

The study aims to answer two main research questions:

1) Which language do the participants find to be more similar to English and why?
2) Does the learners' L1 affect their perception of language similarity?

4.2. Sample

The participant sample in this study consisted of 200 Croatian high school students. Out of them, 83 (41.5%) were male and 117 (58.5%) female. They were all third- (n=117) and fourth-graders (n=83) in high school. Ninety-five percent of them (n=190) attended grammar schools and 5% (n=10) vocational schools (strukovne škole) in Buje and Rovinj. All participants had English as their L3, while Croatian was the L1 for 139 participants and 61 participants spoke Italian as their L1.

According to Letica Krevelj (2014), these participants can be described as "sequential (consecutive) multilinguals who acquired their first non-native language after the age of three" (p. 91). In addition to their L1 (either Italian or Croatian) and L2 (again, Italian or Croatian), and with English as their L3, there were some participants with an L4 (French, German, Spanish, or Russian). At the time the research was carried out, all of the participants were still learning all of the languages in a formal context.

The participant whose L1 was Croatian started learning Italian as L2 in the second grade of primary school, and English in the fourth grade. On the other hand, the participants who spoke Italian as their native language started learning Croatian in the first grade of elementary school as their "national language", and English as their L3 in the fourth grade.

According to participants' self-assessment of proficiency in English on the scale from 1 to 5, they were most proficient in reading in English, closely followed by listening. Speaking, on the other hand, is a skill they were least proficient in. However, it is also assessed to be rather high, with a median of 3.7 (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1 Participants' self-assessment of proficiency in English

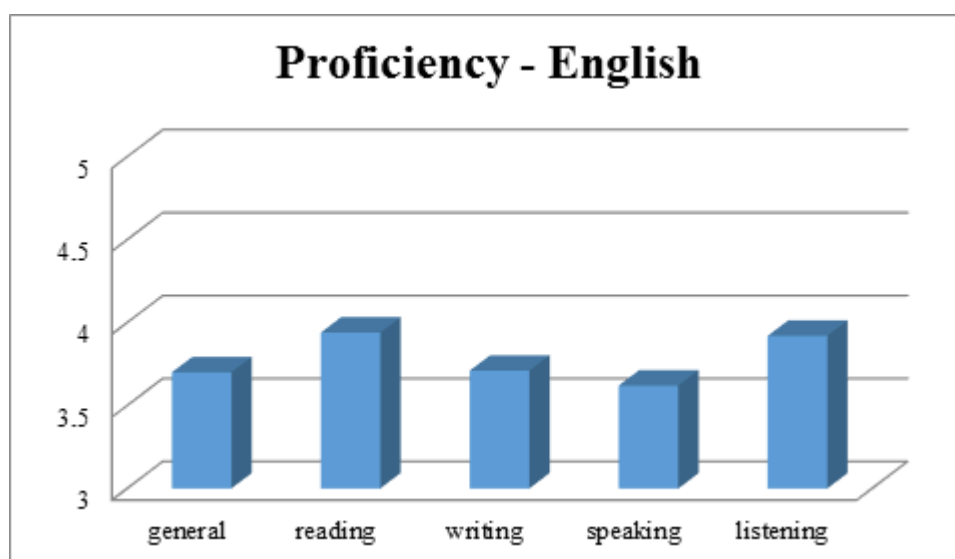| English language					
Grade	**general**	**reading**	**writing**	**speaking**	**listening**
1	2	1	1	/	1
2	11	9	18	21	8
3	66	45	59	66	52
4	80	86	76	75	78
5	36	54	41	33	55
Median + SD	3.70±0.87	3.94±0.85	3.71±0.92	3.62±0.87	3.92±0.90

Figure 1 Students' proficiency in the English language

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection took place in January 2013 and was part of the data collected for the purposes of Letica Krevelj's study (2014). The data were collected during English and Italian lessons in high schools at the beginning of the second semester of the school year. After giving their written consents to take part in the study, the participants filled out a

questionnaire about their language biographies in their L1. The questionnaire consisted of questions about the socio-demographic profile of the participants, their language learning histories and current language use. In addition, they were asked to assess their proficiency in all the languages, and provide school grades they received in each of the languages at the end of previous academic year. As a part of the language background questionnaire, the participants had to choose which language, in their opinion, was more similar to English – Croatian or Italian, and then explain their choice. Another question asked them to decide which language a native speaker of Croatian or Italian would learn more easily, and elaborate on their response.

The statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics v. 20 was used for the statistical analysis of the results. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to check the normality of distribution. Normally distributed continuous variables were displayed as mean values with the corresponding standard deviation (SD), while categorical variables were presented as absolute values and percentages. The differences between categorical variables were analysed using χ^2-test and Fisher's exact test. The differences between individual groups were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test, while the numerical variables between groups were tested using analysis of variance or the " one-way ANOVA " test, with post hoc Tukey test analysis. Pearson's correlation test was used to calculate the dependence between the groups. For the level of statistical significance p-value <0.05 was taken.

4.4. Results and discussion

4.4.1. Which language is more similar to English?

When asked which language was more similar to English – Croatian or Italian, 45 participants (23.2%) chose Croatian, while 149 participants (76.8%) thought Italian was more similar to English (out of 194 participants who answered this question) (see Table 2 / Figure 2).

Table 2 Which language is more similar to English?

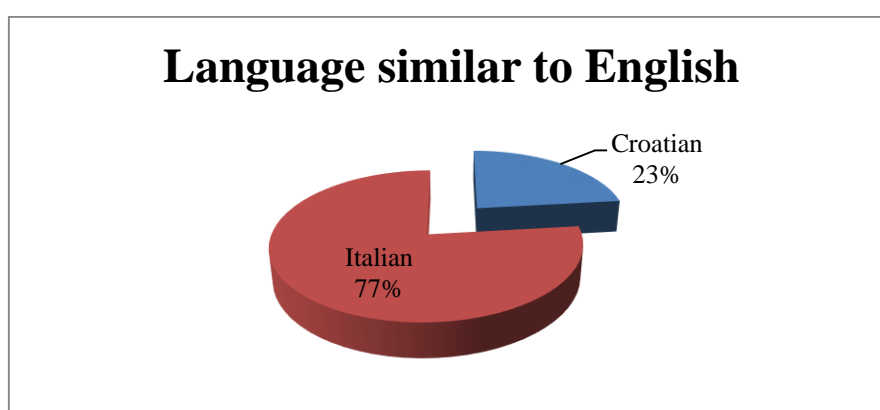| Language similar to English	number	percentage
Croatian	45	23.2
Italian	149	76.8

Figure 2 Which language is more similar to English?

The participants were then asked to explain their responses. Out of 45 participants who said that Croatian was more similar to English, 40 explained their responses, and the greatest number of them (n=15; 37.5%) said that Croatian had a lot of words borrowed from English. The results showed that half of the participants in this study perceived the similarity of the two languages at the lexical level (more specifically, the existence of English loanwords in Croatian). As can be seen from Table 3 and Figure 3, there are some explanations that show the reasoning behind their choice (similar words, loanwords, similar syntax). Ten participants said that they did not know the reason for the similarity of the two languages or provided answers that did not make sense. Some answers do not tell us anything about the perceived similarities between the languages – the choices made based on their personal knowledge of the particular languages.

However, two participants, for example, said that they chose Croatian because they did not notice the similarities between Italian and English. These are rather interesting answers in the context of our study seeing that they are based on the participants' perceptions of similarity – or on the lack thereof.

Table 3 Reasons why Croatian is more similar to English

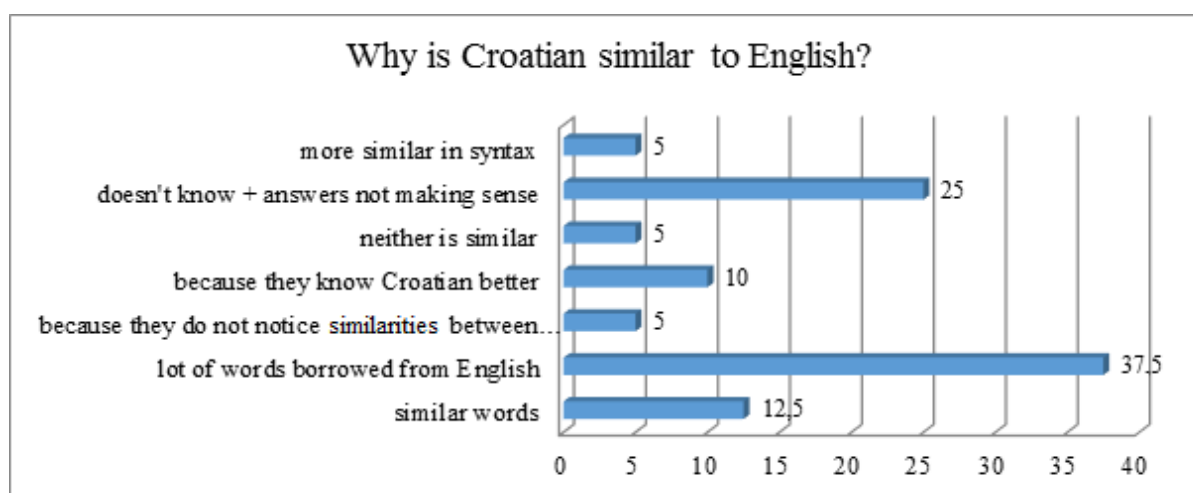| Why is Croatian similar to English?	number	percentage
similar words	5	12.5
lots of words borrowed from English	15	37.5
because they do not notice similarities between Italian and English	2	5.0
because they know Croatian better	4	10.0
neither is similar	2	5.0
doesn't know + answers not making sense	10	25.0
more similar in syntax	2	5.0

Figure 3 Reasons why Croatian is more similar to English

The participants who chose Italian to be more similar to English mainly thought that this was so because they had similar words (n=90; 65.2%). This could, perhaps, be attributed to the words of Latin origin that today exist in both Italian and English. Even though the most common explanation for both languages was the lexical similarity of the languages, the percentage for Croatian was much lower (37.5%) (see Table 3). The second most popular answer (but with a greatly lower number: n=14) was the similarity between English and Italian at the level of syntax – more precisely, no cases in grammar.

Also, six participants noticed a certain level of similarity at the phonological level - the fact that words in both languages are not written in the same way they are pronounced. A couple of participants based their perceived similarity on the fact that the Italian and the English cultures were in contact - the answer that did not appear among the participants who chose Croatian. The results in more detail are shown in Table 4 and Figure 4.

Table 4 Reasons why Italian is similar to English

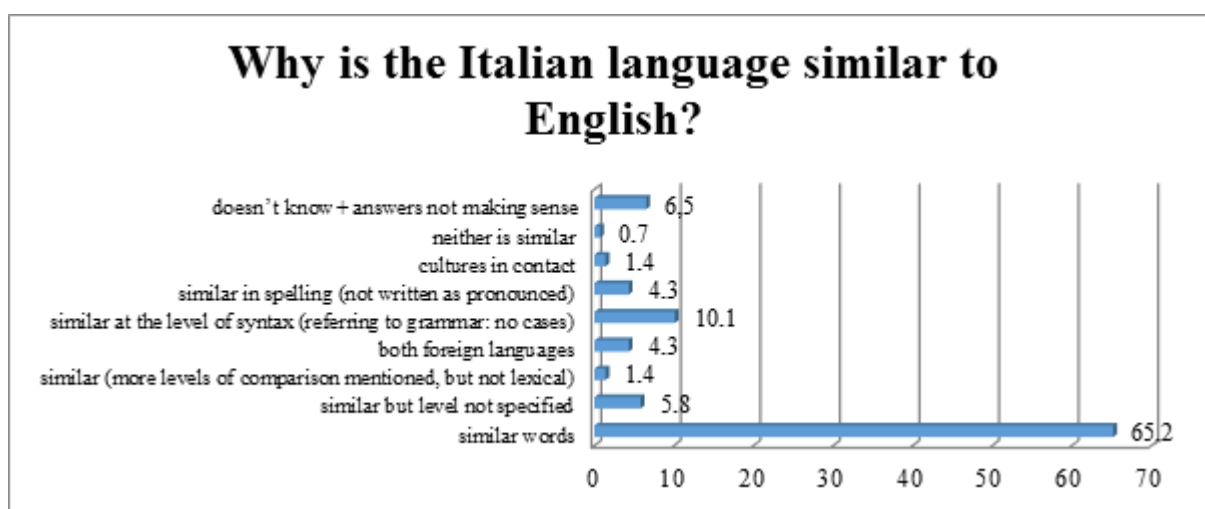| Why is the Italian language similar to English?	number	percentage
similar words	90	65.2
similar but level not specified	8	5.8
similar (more levels of comparison mentioned, but not lexical)	2	1.4
both foreign languages	6	4.3
similar at the level of syntax (referring to grammar: no cases)	14	10.1
similar in spelling (not written as pronounced)	6	4.3
cultures in contact	2	1.4
neither is similar	1	0.7
doesn't know + answers not making sense	9	6.5

Figure 4 Reasons why Italian is similar to English

From these results, we can see that, although the languages are typologically unrelated, the participants saw that English and Italian were more similar, and they were able to recognise the objective similarity between the two languages at the lexical level.

These results confirm the findings reported in Ringbom (2007) and Letica Krevelj (2014) who state that there is "a tendency to assess relative distance between languages primarily in terms of similarity at the lexical level" and that "the perception of relative distance between languages is perceived on the basis of formally similar words, or cognates, shared by two languages" (Letica Krevelj, 2014, p. 125).

4.4.2. The most similar combination of languages

The participants were also given the possibility to choose the most similar combination out of these three languages, that is: English and Croatian, English and Italian, or Italian and Croatian. The majority chose English and Italian (68.5% in comparison with 13.2% for English and Croatian, and 18.3% for Italian and Croatian) (see Table 5, Figure 5).

Table 5 Similarity between the three combinations of languages

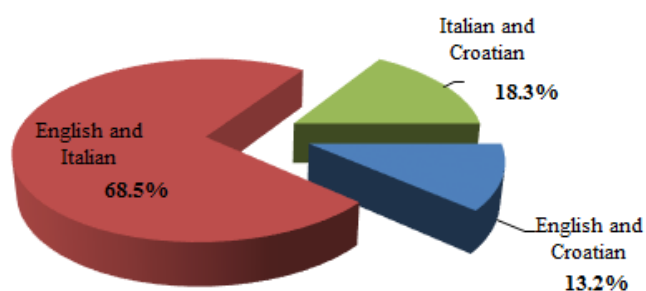| Similarity between the three combinations of languages	number	percentage
English and Croatian	26	13.2
English and Italian	135	68.5
Italian and Croatian	36	18.3

Figure 5 Similarity between the three combinations of languages

Since the majority of participants chose Italian to be more similar to English, it was expected that the majority of them would again choose English and Italian as the most similar languages. Once again, the participants elaborated on their responses (Table 6 – English and Croatian, Table 7 Italian and Croatian, and Table 8 English and Italian).

Table 6 Reasons why English and Croatian are the most similar languages

Why are English and Croatian the most similar languages?	number	percentage
words borrowed from English	8	44.4
similar words	2	11.1
because they don't see similarity with Italian	3	16.7
doesn't know	4	22.2
similar in syntax	1	5.6

Table 7 Reasons why Italian and Croatian are the most similar languages

Why are Italian and Croatian the most similar languages?	number	percentage
similar words	9	33.3
both present in the dialect	6	22.2
pronunciation	1	3.7
geographically close	4	14.8
knows well both languages	3	11.1
similarity in syntax	2	7.4
doesn't know	2	7.4

Table 8 Reasons why English and Italian are the most similar languages

Why are English and Italian the most similar languages?	number	percentage
similar words	71	60.2
similarity in syntax	14	11.9
similar in writing and pronunciation	11	9.3
both are foreign languages	5	4.2
cultures in contact	4	3.4
Croatian is more difficult	2	1.7
none of the three combinations	1	0.8
doesn't know	10	8.5

Once more, similarity at the lexical level prevailed in the case of all three combinations. The highest percentage was present for the combination of English and Italian (60.2%), and the lowest for English and Croatian (11.1%). However, the loanwords from English (with 44.4%) constituted once again an important basis for the perceived similarity. Our participants, then, managed to find at least some similarities among these languages even though they are genetically unrelated.

Table 9 Comparison of native speakers' perceptions on similarities between English and Italian and English and Croatian

L1 (mother tongue)	Language more similar to English	
	Croatian	Italian
L1: Croatian	37	99
	27.2%	72.8%
L1: Italian	8	50
	13.8%	86.2%
p	**0.043 (*p>0.05)**	

Using the statistical analysis, we compared the participants' perceptions about the similarity of the Croatian and the Italian language with respect to the native language of the participants (see Table 9). Even though almost 73% of Croatian native speakers and 86% native speakers of Italian said that Italian and English were more similar, native speakers of Italian chose English and Italian to be more similar, and the difference was statistically significant (p=0.043) (see Table 9). This result was explained by Letica Krevelj (2014) as a sign of the higher linguistic competence the learners have in the Italian language.

Additionally, by comparing the responses to the question about the most closely resembling combination of languages with respect to participants' L1, we found a statistically significant difference (p = 0.006) (Table 10). However, subsequent T-test analysis showed that t is not statistically significant (t=1.406).

The combination of English and Italian was the most common response for the speakers of both Croatian and Italian, but Italian native speakers picked this option more frequently. The fact that more native speakers of Italian opted for the Italian-and-English combination, than is the case with Croatian participants who chose Croatian and English, might be due to the fact that, with Italian being their mother tongue, they are probably more aware of the historical influences of Latin and French on the English language, and, also, of the high rate of English loanwords in Italian daily use. On the other hand, a lot more (n=32) native speakers of Croatian, as opposed to only four Italian speakers (see Table 10) chose Italian and Croatian. The reason for this might be connected to the geographical area in question. Italy and Italian have a lot of influence on the dialects spoken in Istria, much more than Croatian has on Italian.

Table 10 Comparison of attitudes on similarities between the combinations of languages with regard to their native language

L1	Eng & Cro	Eng & Ita	Ita & Cro
Croatian	20	84	32
	14.7%	61.8%	23.5%
Italian	6	51	4
	9.8%	83.6%	6.6%
p	**0.006**		

4.4.3. Which language would a native speaker of Croatian / Italian learn more easily?

There are many factors influencing how easily learners acquire a new language. Apart from individual differences, the similarities (and the differences) between the target language and their native language also play a role.

In the present study the participants were asked to say which language a Croatian native speaker would learn more easily – English or Italian. The same was asked to a native speaker of the Italian language. The results are presented in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 11 Which language would a Croatian speaker learn easily?

Which language would a Croatian speaker learn easily?	number	percentage
Italian	52	26.3
English	146	73.7

Table 12 Which language would an Italian speaker learn easily?

Which language would an Italian speaker learn easily?	number	percentage
Croatian	24	12.4
English	170	87.6

As can be seen from Tables 11 and 12 (and Figures 6 and 7), English was more frequently chosen to be the easier language for speakers of both Italian and Croatian as L1. For a native speaker of Croatian, 73.7% of the participants chose English as an easier option, and 87.6% of them did the same for an Italian speaker.
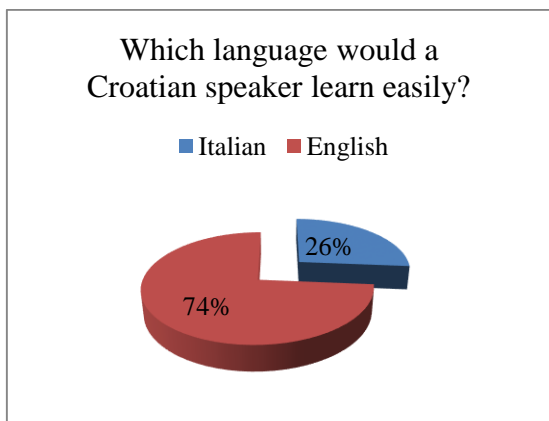
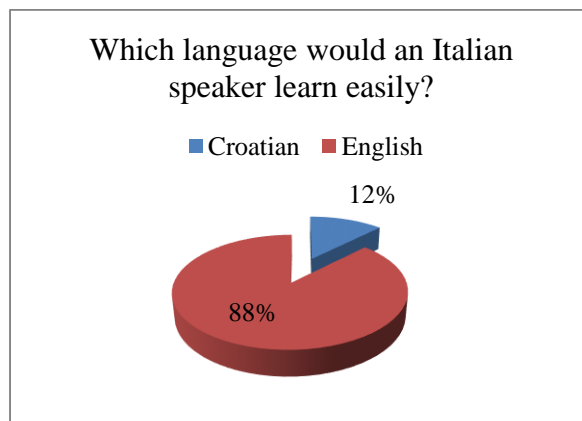*Figure 6* Language a Croatian speaker would learn easily

Figure 7 Language an Italian speaker would learn easily

When it came to explaining their choices, the participants in our study provided a variety of different answers (see Table 13 / Figure 8). In the Croatian society, the English language is widely present, and this amount of exposure to a language can facilitate acquisition. Therefore, it is not surprising that the most common response was the presence of English in the media (35.7%).

Table 13 Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn English?

Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn English?	number	percentage
presence in the media	50	35.7
global language (motivation to learn)	23	16.4
easier	34	24.3
global and easier	18	12.9
doesn't know	4	2.9
from experience (either personal or other people's)	11	7.9

Figure 8 Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn English?

On the other hand, the participants who chose Italian said that the reason for that was its presence in the community (35.4%) (Table 14 / Figure 9). Therefore, it can be seen that in both cases it was the amount of exposure that they perceived as the most important factor for acquisition. However, it is important to note here that it might be that, when asked about native speakers of Croatian, the participants who chose Italian had in mind only the Croats from their community. Their responses might have been different if they were asked to answer the same question regarding a native speaker from Zagreb or Slavonia.

The second most common response for both Italian and English was the fact that each language was perceived to be easier than the other one.

Table 14 Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn Italian?

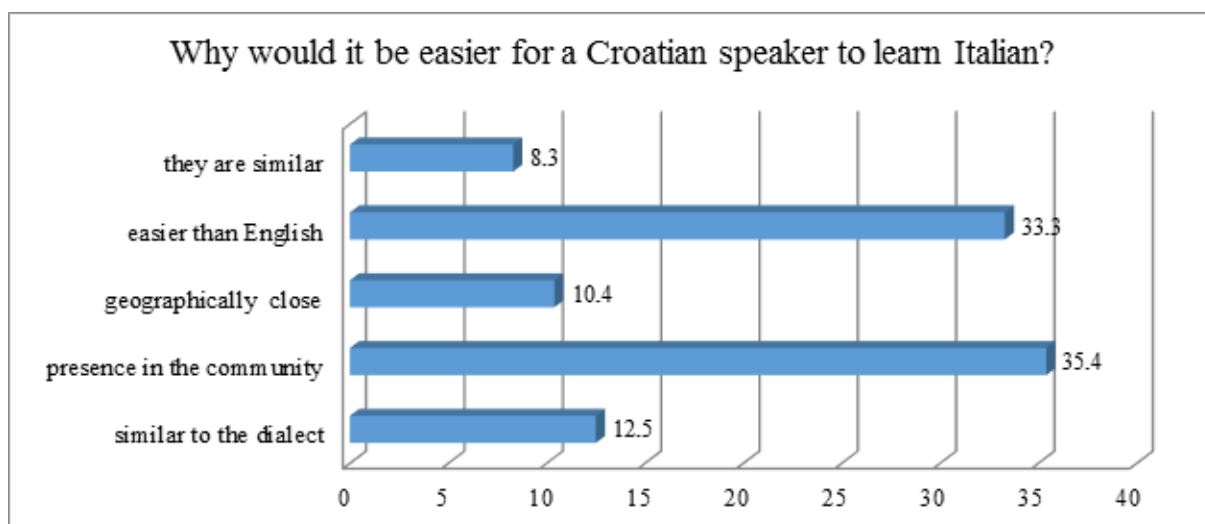| Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn Italian?	number	percentage
similar to the dialect	6	12.5
presence in the community	17	35.4
geographically close	5	10.4
easier than English	16	33.3
they are similar	4	8.3

Figure 9 Why would it be easier for a Croatian speaker to learn Italian?

When it comes to Italian speakers, English was chosen as the easier option by 87.6% of the participants. Out of that percentage, 46.3% said it was because English was easier than Croatian. The second most common explanation (22.8%) was the perceived similarity between these two languages. The results of this part of the questionnaire are outlined in Table 15 and Figure 10. It is interesting to note that only 8% of the participants noted the presence of English in the media. This could be due to the fact that all films and all programs in the Italian media are dubbed in Italian (which is not the case in the Croatian context). One explanation that does not appear among the ones given for the Croatian language, and justifiably so, is the motivation to learn English because it is a global language (11.7%).

Table 15 Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn English?

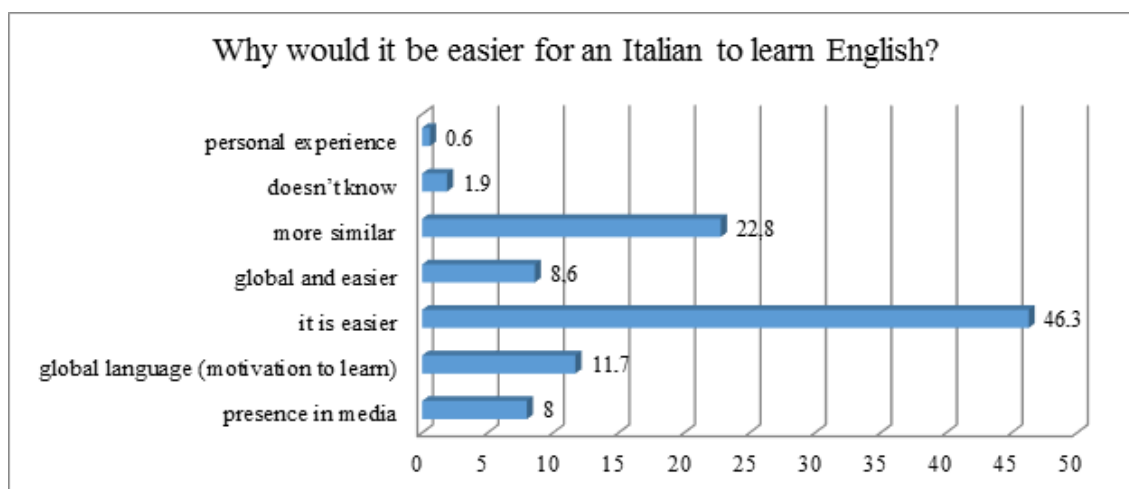| Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn English?	number	percentage
presence in media	13	8.0
global language (motivation to learn)	19	11.7
it is easier	75	46.3
global and easier	14	8.6
more similar	37	22.8
doesn't know	3	1.9
personal experience	1	0.6

Figure 10 Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn English?

On the other hand, for 12.4% of the participants that chose Croatian (see Table 16 and Figure 11), it was experience (either personal or other people's) that motivated 30% of them to answer as they did. Twenty percent of them chose Croatian because they thought it was easier than English. And the same number of participants based their choice on the similarity between the languages. Answers classified as "it is the official language" and it is "geographically close" are interesting if we have in mind the social context. They might indicate that the speaker the participants had in mind was an Italian speaker from their community.

Table 16 Why would it be easier for an Italian speaker to learn Croatian?

Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn Croatian?	number	percentage
similar to Italian	4	20.0
it is the official language	2	10.0
it is easier	4	20.0
geographically close	1	5.0
from experience (either personal or other people's)	6	30.0
doesn't know	1	5.0
because they are not exposed enough to English	1	5.0
English pronunciation is difficult	1	5.0

Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn Croatian?

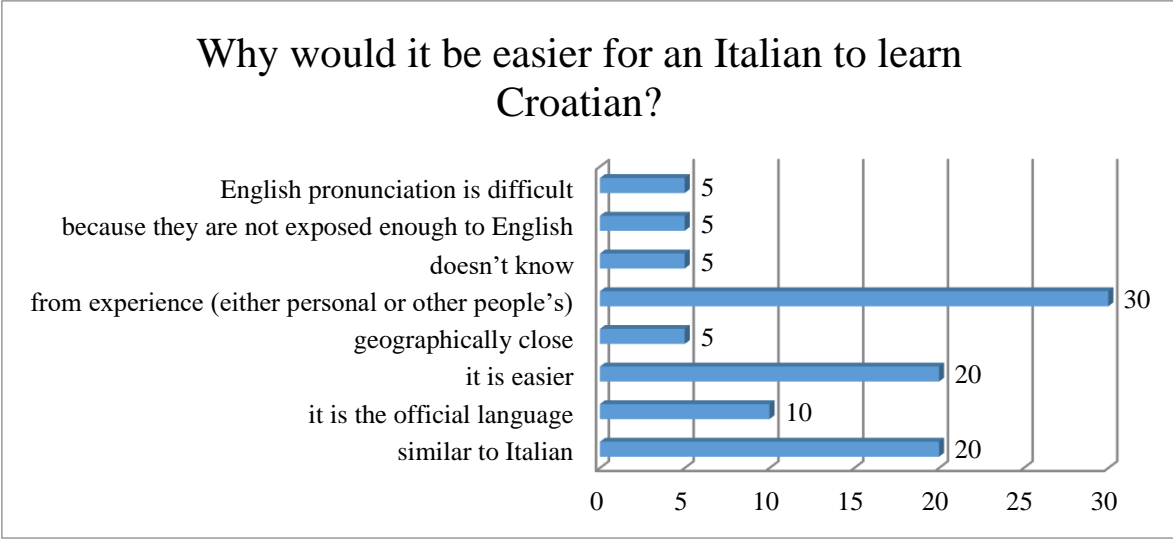| Reason	Value
English pronunciation is difficult	5
because they are not exposed enough to English	5
doesn't know	5
from experience (either personal or other people's)	30
geographically close	5
it is easier	20
it is the official language	10
similar to Italian	20

Figure 21 Why would it be easier for an Italian to learn Croatian?

To sum up, the results show that the participants were aware that English and Italian are more similar than Croatian and English. In addition, they saw that the reason for this similarity lies in the vast number of words of Latin origin present in the English language. Even the participants that chose Croatian and English to be more similar opted for the lexical level when explaining their choice. That is, they recognised the presence of many words borrowed from English in the Croatian language.

5. Conclusion

There is an increasing number of people who know more than two languages, and when they undertake the task of learning another foreign language, their background language knowledge is of indispensable importance. This is so because they can rely on all the languages they know, and not just on their native language, and these languages can influence the learning process. The learning process is facilitated even more if learners perceive the languages as similar.

Cross-linguistic similarity is not the only factor influencing SLA and TLA, but, as can be seen from this and previous research, it is extremely important. Similarities between languages, even if only assumed, can greatly facilitate transfer of previous knowledge and learning a new language, and even knowledge of unrelated languages can result in positive transfer. When asked to evaluate which languages were more similar, most of them chose the languages that are, objectively, more similar.

In our study, Italian was seen as more similar to English, and lexical similarity was the most common explanation. The participants that chose Croatian as more similar also explained their choice with similarities on the lexical level. The results regarding the acquisition of a new language showed that participants believed that both Italian and Croatian native speakers would more easily learn English, and this was explained by the presence of English in the media and the fact that it was perceived as easier than the other language.

The results of this study, and previous research in this field, could be used as a basis for future research and in the area of teaching. Teachers often underestimate learners' background language knowledge, so more emphasis should be put on cross-linguistic similarities, which could help with developing students' metalinguistic awareness and, hence, facilitate all language learning.

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Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada bio je istražiti kako višejezični govornici koji uče engleski kao treći jezik percipiraju sličnosti i jezičnu udaljenost između engleskog, talijanskog i hrvatskog. Teorijski se dio bavi čimbenicima koji mogu utjecati na proces učenja kao što su transfer i percepcija sličnosti među jezicima, a donosi i kratak pregled razlika između usvajanja drugog i trećeg jezika. Predmet interesa ovog istraživanja bio je utvrditi koji su jezici percipirani kao sličniji, ali i kako su ispitanici objašnjavali odnose među njima, te je li njihova percepcija bila pod utjecajem njihovog materinjeg jezika.

Ključne riječi: višejezičnost, usvajanje trećeg jezika, percepcija sličnosti među jezicima, psihotipologija