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LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OF CROATIAN VOCATIONAL
SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARD THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Learning English as a second language in vocational schools in Croatia is an interesting field for examining language attitudes. Since the introduction of the *matura* exam, many vocational school students have struggled with learning English and obtaining the desired grade and level of proficiency. Attitudes towards a language may reveal a lot about the problems students encounter. Expressing positive or negative feelings towards English can be related to their intentions of improving language skills for work-related purposes or learning the language for its own sake. In this paper, attitudes of students of three different vocational schools are examined through a questionnaire in order to relate their attitudes to their use of English. The initial hypothesis is that vocational school students, even though most of them show a strong desire to improve their knowledge, have negative attitudes towards English, due to problems encountered during the learning process. However, the results show that vocational school students have quite positive attitude toward English and perceive it as a crucial factor of their future development. On the other hand, the findings also point to some problems vocational school students encounter in class – e.g. dissatisfaction with the traditional way of teaching and lack of communication. These findings might help us understand the way these students perceive the language learning process and might offer ideas about how to improve English teaching/learning in vocational schools.

Keywords: English as a second language; second language acquisition; language attitudes; vocational schools

Introduction

English is the leading foreign language in many countries, including Croatia. It is neither a national nor an official language in Croatia but it is the most widely taught foreign language at all levels of the educational system. Most Croatian learners start learning English as early as primary school, or even pre-school. Yet, problems seem to occur at the high school level. In Croatia, there are two main types of secondary schools: grammar schools and vocational schools. It seems that in vocational schools students tend to attain a lower level of proficiency and have lower grades, which is an interesting matter to investigate, since Croatian students have many opportunities to use English outside the classroom: they can use it with foreigners since Croatia is a tourism-oriented country; they can read publications in English; *YouTube* is nowadays the main source of music from all over the world; various sitcoms are offered both on national and foreign television channels. English has become, as Jasone Cenoz and Ulrike Jessner (2000: 5) put it, “the *lingua franca* for trade, tourism, air travel, popular media, sport, science, technology and many other fields of importance in contemporary life”, and is also “a *sine qua non* if one wants to gain access to international electronic information networks”.

English is a compulsory subject for all students mostly from the first grade onwards. What is even more important is that it is a compulsory subject on the *matura* exam and is of high importance in the school curriculum. At a university level, the knowledge of the language is set as a requirement for university graduation. In this sense, it would seem logical that Croatian vocational school students will have instrumental (Gardner and Lambert, 1972) incentives for learning English.

What inspired the writing of this master’s thesis is the real-life experience of preparing vocational school students for their basic *matura* exam. The student job I took at Algebra Open University helped me understand the problems that vocational school students encounter. The preparation for the basic-level *matura* exam consisted of 30 lessons, i.e. 90-minute classes which were held every Saturday. The syllabus was created according to the guidelines issued by the Croatian National Center for External Evaluation of Education. Under the impression that the enrolled students needed only a brief revision of their knowledge, I was surprised to learn that more than half of them (the group consisted of 12 students) had never written an essay such as the one required at the basic level of the exam, which basically consists of answering questions in the form of a letter or an e-mail. They

struggled with both writing and speaking. I realized that the estimated time would not be enough to prepare them for one of the most important exams in their lives and that they would have to do a lot of work on their own. When I asked them about their learning experience, they were both glad and surprised that someone wanted to hear what they had to say. They generally complained about their teachers; lack of communication in class; teachers' paying attention only to students who had no problems in English; classes that usually numbered up to 30 students and in which an individual could not be heard; using traditional ways of teaching; fear and anxiety while using a foreign language, etc. The problems were numerous. Yet, all those students (with few exceptions) attended classes regularly and tried hard to make the best of them. It was difficult to understand why the students (or their parents) had to pay extra money for the things they could/should have learned at school. While trying to figure out what could be done to help them prepare for the exam, I realized that three students were from the same school, *Škola za medicinske sestre Vinogradska*. They told me why they struggled so much – their five-year program enables them to learn English only for the first two years. All of this, especially the situation at Vinogradska, encouraged me to find more about how vocational school students learned English and what was their attitude towards English.

My intention was to establish whether students harbor positive or negative feelings about English, since the students who I worked with had a lot of difficulties preparing even for the basic level of the *matura* exam – in spite of their hard work in my classes. This situation, i.e. the discrepancy between the level of proficiency and the effort these vocational school students put into preparing for *matura* exam in my classes, seemed to provide a useful context for the study of language attitudes. The aim of this master's thesis is to inspect the attitudes of such students towards English and to find out whether the problems they talk about affect their positive/negative attitude. The questions that the study will try to answer are the following: **Do Croatian vocational school students like English? Do they evaluate it positively? What do they think about their classes? What problems do they encounter in the learning process? How can we help them develop greater proficiency?** The initial hypothesis that this paper will test is that vocational school students have negative attitudes towards English, as a result of various problems they encounter during the learning process.

Theoretical Background

Language Attitudes

The *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* provides the following definition of *language attitudes* (2010: 314):

The attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Language attitudes may have an effect on second-language or foreign-language learning.

For this paper it will later on be important to inspect the relationship between positive or negative feelings toward English and the difficulty of learning and the social status of English. Gardner (1985: 9) defines *attitude* as “an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent”. Gardner and Lambert (1972) differentiate three categories of language-learning attitudes – the ones related to the target-language community, ones related to learning a particular language, and those related to language learning in general. When discussing attitudes toward foreign language learning, Gardner (1985) mentions social and educational attitudes. He perceives motivation and attitudes through the notions of instrumentality and integrativeness. According to Gardner, a language learner who possesses integrative attitudes will have positive attitudes towards learning because they want to feel as close to the target-language community as possible. In other words, the learner is socially motivated to proceed with the language-learning process. On the other hand, an instrumentally motivated learner is concerned with the outcomes of the learning process – achieving a qualification, enhanced career prospects, etc.

Chambers (1999: 27) provides the following definition of *attitude*:

Attitude is taken to mean the set of values which a pupil brings to the foreign language learning experience. It is shaped by the pay-offs that she [*sic*] expects; the advantages that she sees in language learning. The values which a pupil has may be determined by different variables, such as the experience of learning the target language, of the target language community, experience of travel, the influence of parents and friends, and the attitudes which they may demonstrate and articulate.

This definition will be of great importance for forming the questionnaire that will be presented to the students because it will focus primarily on their experience.

When talking about second language learning, the connection between sociolinguistics and language learning has to be established, because for every second language learner it is important to be able to interpret the meaning behind the choices speakers make. In their book *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition*, Kimberly L. Geeslin and Avizia Yim Long (2014: 6) talk about different aspects of communicative competence which are important for language acquisition: *grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence*. Grammatical competence refers to the ability to use the lexical items, as well as the rules constraining morphology, sentence structure, and the sound system. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to interpret an utterance for its social meaning. Learners must be able to understand the intended meaning of the speaker, especially when the intended meaning is not identical to the literal one. Communicative competence includes an ability called strategic competence, “which refers to the ways that learners compensate when there are breakdowns in communication” (Geeslin and Long 2014: 5). Communicative competence is especially important for second language learners, since they need to learn to paraphrase when they do not know a form that is needed to express a given meaning (grammatical competence) and who will also need to learn how to interpret the social situation in order to use language appropriately (sociolinguistic competence) (*ibid.*). Moreover, Geeslin and Long (2014: 10) point out the importance of the relationship between sociolinguistics and motivation: every second language learner who is able to establish connections is more likely to be successful in the target culture and more likely to be motivated to continue living in that environment and/or acquiring the language. On the contrary, “a speaker who cannot make connections and foster interactions will not receive the necessary input to continue on the path to acquiring the second language”. The whole point of the questionnaire presented to the students was to reveal whether they are satisfied with their knowledge of the target language and motivated to continue acquiring the language.

Attitudes toward English in Croatia

English is the most popular foreign language taught in Croatian schools and many studies have been written on various aspects of English. Mihaljević Djigunović (1998: 22) points out that recently there has been more interest in dealing with students' attitudes toward learning because of the awareness about the importance of students' attitudes and also because there are few findings concerning the nature of attitudes. Another study she conducted in 1992 reports that learners of English in Croatian schools do not attain the desired level of proficiency in English even though they have, in most cases, been learning it for over a decade. Still, they do not lack motivation for language learning. Mihaljević Djigunović (1992: 20) reveals what might have caused such a situation – the conditions for foreign language teaching in Croatia are poor and the complexity of foreign language learning can hardly be successful unless the teacher can devote enough attention to the student as an individual. As far as this paper is concerned, of great importance was Mihaljević Djigunović's study from 2007 on affective profiles of EFL learners, in which secondary schools were categorized into three groups: grammar schools, catering/economics/medical and electrical engineering/vocational-art schools. In addition to that, the results showed that the most positive profiles were found among grammar school learners and the least positive with the learners from catering/economics/medical schools. Mihaljević Djigunović's study also contained of the open-question part in which the students pointed out positive and negative sides of English language classes. They liked the communicative approach to teaching, possibility of expressing one's opinions, interesting and cooperative activities, while negative sides were traditional teaching methods, not enough communicative tasks and a lot of grammar tests. Tamara Kolar wrote a graduation thesis on affective profiles of vocational school EFL learners in 2014, in which she focused on affective variables: language anxiety, motivation and attitudes. The findings of her study will be relevant for my work since she also examined vocational students' attitudes toward English, but her sample included students from a smaller urban/rural school. Her results, which show relatively high motivation, positive attitudes toward English and low language anxiety, will be compared to the ones attained in this paper.

Vocational school students in Croatia are generally perceived as being academically inferior to those attending grammar schools. Although no specific research has been conducted on this matter, various newspaper and online articles have recently raised the issue of vocational school student discrimination – especially since the introduction of the *matura* exam. Petar

Bezinović (2009: 175–176) claims that while for grammar school students *matura* is the final exam of their secondary education, it has a completely different meaning for students of vocational and art schools – it is a difficult and particularly demanding qualifying exam. Hence, the prospect of enrolling in higher education is made difficult for such students. This primarily concerns the possibility of enrolling in studies which, before the introduction of *matura*, had their own requirement adapted precisely to the students of vocational schools, but now these students have to reach grammar school requirements. Moreover, because of the general perception of vocational schools in society it is difficult to attract young people to opt for careers in the industry. Vocational education does not adapt to changes in the economy quickly enough and does not provide students with the skills they need in modern society. It seems that teaching English as a foreign language in such an environment faces many obstacles and challenges.

Method

The aim of this study was to inspect the attitudes of Croatian vocational school students towards English and to inspect whether the grades they attain and their estimated level of proficiency correlate with their positive or negative attitude.

The data was collected through a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire required personal information: gender, the age when the students started to learn English, the grade they have in high school and the grade they received in primary school. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of nine qualities of English, based on the five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale is, according to Dörnyei and Csizér (2012: 76), the most famous type of closed-ended item format, since it does not require the respondents to produce any free writing. What was evaluated is the students' opinion/attitude toward English – whether it is 'an international language', 'rich in vocabulary', 'important in today's society', 'simple', 'musical', 'has difficult grammar', 'interesting', 'complicated' and 'the language of technology'. Each of these statements was supposed to be ranked on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 meaning 'completely disagree', and 5 meaning 'strongly agree'. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of 25 statements related to the use of English, also based on the five-point Likert scale. Each statement was, again, supposed to be ranked on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 meaning 'completely disagree', and 5 meaning 'strongly agree'. The statements, which were organized into sections based on the Firdevs Karahan's paper listed in the references section, are included according to the following points:

Educational and social status of English

English is the most commonly used foreign language in Croatia. (1)
English should be taught from the first grade of primary school onwards. (21)
I am satisfied with the textbooks used for learning English. (23)

Social and instrumental value of English	<p>The knowledge of English is important for personal growth/development. (2)</p> <p>Aknowledge of English is important to evolve professionally. (3)</p> <p>Using English in everyday life is considered pretentious. (11)</p> <p>Communicative skills in English are more important than writing skills. (22)</p>
Orientation toward English	<p>I learn English because of my parents. (4)</p> <p>I like reading books and magazines in English. (5)</p> <p>I feel awkward and lack confidence when speaking English. (6)</p> <p>I would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject at school. (7)</p> <p>I like to watch English speaking films. (8)</p> <p>I like talking to foreigners in English. (10)</p> <p>I often use English as a means of communication on social networks. (12)</p> <p>I listen to music in English. (13)</p> <p>I prefer American and British music to Croatian. (14)</p> <p>I wish I could speak English fluently. (15)</p> <p>If I had the ability, I would travel to English speaking countries. (16)</p> <p>I prefer American English to British English. (17)</p> <p>When speaking English, I try to sound more like native speakers. (19)</p> <p>I don't like speaking English because I am afraid that the speaker could hear my 'accent'. (20)</p> <p>I have problems with writing skills in English. (24)</p> <p>I speak English well, but grammar and spelling are still a problematic area. (25)</p>
The intrinsic value of English	<p>English grammar is difficult. (9)</p>

In the fourth part of the questionnaire the students were asked to think about English in general and write down what they think about it¹. Some questions were posed in order to help them answer, but the fourth part was meant to be more of a free form, so the students could write whatever came to their mind.

The questionnaire was presented to students in Croatian, due to the fact that a questionnaire in English could have affected their responses – I did not want them to misunderstand some of the statements or to feel restrained by their level of competence in English when writing about how they perceived the teaching/learning process.

Participants

The sample included 80 vocational school students. The study was conducted in three vocational schools: *Upravna škola* in Zagreb, *Škola za medicinske sestre* Vinogradska in Zagreb and *Komercijalno-trgovačka škola* in Split. In *Upravna škola* Zagreb the questionnaire was presented to the fourth grade students, in Vinogradska it was presented to the second grade students² and the respondents from Split³ were the third grade students. As the figure below shows, 21 of them were male students, making the 26.3% of the group, while 59 were female, making the 73.7% of the group.

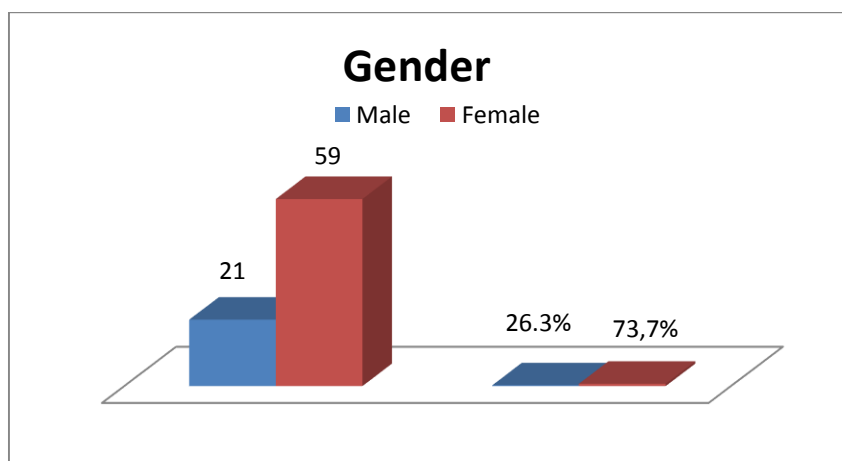


Figure 1. Table showing gender percentages

¹ Even though reference books propose that most professional questionnaires should primarily be made up of “closed-ended” items, without any free writing, for this study I wanted to see the reactions of students when they are asked to write freely.

² The situation in Vinogradska is quite specific, since the school is the only vocational school that has a five-year program, but English is taught only during the first two years.

³ The school offers two educational programs – for sales executives (four-year program) and sellers (three-year program). The questionnaire was presented to students of the three-year program.

When the age they started to learn English is considered, 13.8% started to learn English before the age of 7, i.e. before primary school, and 86.2% started to learn English at the age of 7. As far as the marks, the average in high school equals 3.53, showing that the participants achieved better results in primary school, with the average mark being 4.01.

As to age, 22.5% (18 students in total) were at the age of 16; 57.5% (46 students in total) were at the age of 17 and 20% (16 students in total) were at the age of 18, as the figure below shows.

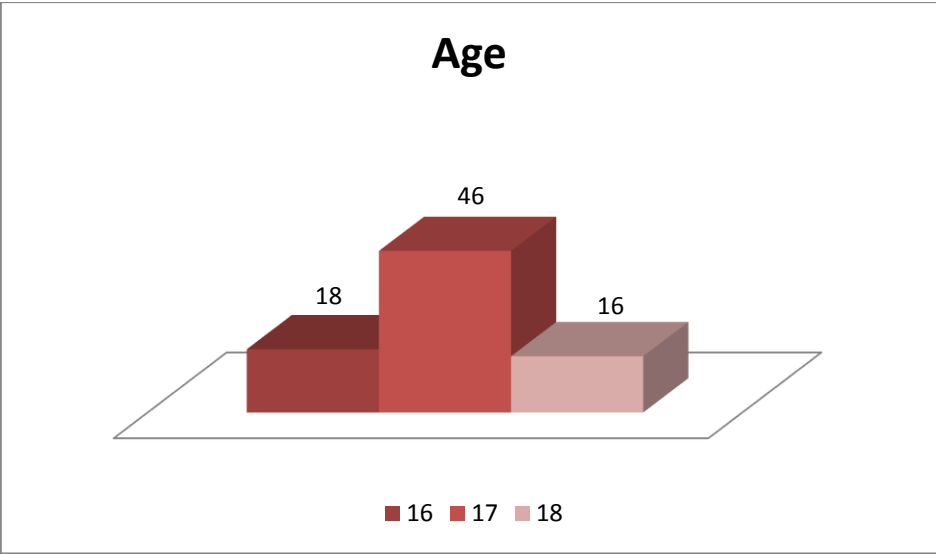


Figure 2. Table showing age span

Even though this study is limited to a small number of subjects when the whole population of students enrolled in vocational school education is considered (114.341 according to the statistics of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports for the 2015/16 school year), it might provide a starting point for some further research.

Findings

Attitudes towards English in general are shown in the figure below, according to the five-point Likert scale statements presented in the questionnaire.



Figure 3. Attitudes towards English language in general

The attitude of these Croatian vocational school students toward English is generally quite positive (3.97).⁴ The figure was obtained by taking five positive statements about English (English is 'rich in vocabulary', 'simple', 'musical', 'interesting' and 'important in today's society') and calculating their average value based on the Likert scale. This correlates with the results of Tamara Kolar's (2014: 42) research study, whose respondents showed a mostly positive attitude: positive attitudes to learning English, to English and to anglophone culture (movies, music), and to English speakers.

The respondents of this study generally think that English is the language of technology; they agree that it is very important in today's society and they do think that it is an international language. Even though they recognize the importance of learning English and the position of English worldwide, they do not find English easy to learn: grammar is described as complicated and difficult to understand.

⁴ I would like to give special thanks to my friend Peter Šulc, who put all the data I had collected into an Excel table and calculated all the figures used in this paper.

Regarding gender differences, female students have more positive attitudes than male students. Although the overall attitude was quite positive (3.97), female students showed a more positive attitude (4.04) than the male students (3.44). The students who started to learn English before the age of 7 (13.8% of the respondents) find English more beautiful than the others who started to learn English when they were 7 and above. Generally, respondents who started to learn English earlier have more positive attitudes (4.14) than the ones who started to learn English later (3.74).

Generally, vocational school students from Komercijalno-trgovačka škola Split were less prone to taking the questionnaire seriously, especially regarding the fourth part of the questionnaire. Their answers were short, mostly irrelevant to the matter investigated and they did not put much effort into articulating their opinion. On the contrary, vocational school students from Vinogradska seemed intrigued by the questionnaire and actually appreciated the fact that someone was asking for their opinion. Moreover, almost all of them wrote a lot in the fourth part of the questionnaire, expressing their disappointment with the way of teaching and the very concept of their curriculum – learning English for only two years. Students from Upravna škola generally showed the most positive attitude, but this can be related to the fact that this school is not a vocational school in the same way the two previously mentioned ones are – it is more similar to grammar schools: it has a four-year program; four Croatian language and three English language classes per week throughout the whole period.⁵

The third part of the questionnaire, which consisted of 25 statements based on the five-point Likert scale, will now be thoroughly analyzed and linked to the responses the students gave in the fourth part, which was a type of free form writing.

73.8% of the students evaluate English as the most frequently used foreign language in Croatia and 78.8% think that English is the most frequently used language in the whole world. This attitude was also shown in their responses in the fourth part of the questionnaire, in which some of the respondents state the following:

Respondent no. 7: “Engleski je izuzetno bitan jezik jer se u ostalim zemljama ne bismo mogli sporazumijeti. Netko tko ne zna engleski neće se ni moći sporazumijeti.”

Respondent no. 11: “Smatram da bi svi trebali učiti engleski jezik, zato što je svjetski jezik i za razliku od drugih jezika je jednostavniji po gramatici.”

⁵ Compared to the teaching curriculum of I. Gimnazija in Zagreb which can be found on the school's website.

Respondent no. 26: “Mislim da je engleski jezik najrašireniji jezik svijeta i mislim da je jako važan i potreban.”

Respondent no. 39: “Engleski jezik mi se sviđa, samo što mi se ne sviđa što je on postao svjetski jezik.”

It is interesting that respondent no. 39 actually does not like the fact that English has the status of an international language even though she likes the language. Respondent no. 3 even claims that the time will come when people all over the world will speak only English. Just one student (respondent no. 42) strongly disagrees with the statements about English being the most frequently used language both in Croatia and worldwide, but they did not take the fourth part of the questionnaire seriously so the statements cannot be linked to his opinion articulated in the fourth part.

As far as the social and instrumental value of English is considered, the respondents generally think that English will help them in their future, whether in finding a job or in travelling around the world. 66% of the respondents believe that English is important for their career advancement, but only 48.8% think that English is also important for their personal growth:

Respondent no. 4: “Moj posao, posao tajnice, dosta ovisi baš o poznavanju engleskoga jezika.”

Respondent no. 17: “Smatram da će mi pomoći jer se danas gotovo nemoguće zaposliti bez znanja engleskoga jezika.

Respondent no. 20: “To je jezik koji će dvoje stranaca, potencijalnih poslovnih partnera, koristiti pri komunikaciji i sporazumijevanju.”

Respondent no. 56: “Učim engleski kako bih se snašla van države, ai želim postati profesorica engleskog jezika.”

Respondent no. 73: “Engleski mi se ne sviđa, ali ga smatram nužnim za uspjeh u poslu na širim područjima.”

Respondent no. 77: “Engleski jezik je svjetski jezik. Iako nam ne ide, ne možemo ga izbjeći. Po mom mišljenju mislim da je važno bar znati osnove jer nam pomaže u daljnjem životu.”

It seems that, from the responses listed above, many of these respondents can be described as being instrumentally motivated because they do realize that the knowledge of English might help them get a better job or different opportunities, even though they do not necessarily like it. Respondent no. 6 even states that English is not as important as it is presented nowadays but it will help attain a better qualification. So, even though some of the respondents show negative or mildly positive attitude toward English, they do realize it is a necessity of a modern society. Similar results were presented in Kolar's (2014: 43) study – her respondents showed quite a high level of motivation to learn English; they were highly aware that today it is crucial to know English and that the language will be useful in their future (e.g. better career opportunities).

When it comes to the participants' orientation toward English, the situation differs based on the type of media. 70% of the respondents enjoy watching American and/or British movies, but as far as reading publications in English the results show that only 30% read books or magazines in English. The result concerning reading habits is actually quite expected – the participants are more exposed to digital media such as TV and/or the Internet than books. The findings would probably not be much different even if they had been asked whether they read books in Croatian, since numerous studies show that the number of high school students that read for fun or their personal satisfaction keeps declining.

Only those who clearly state they love English and learn it because they want to, declare that they read books in English, like respondent no. 51, who states that they learn English because it is interesting and that they read bestsellers in English. Some respondents even mention computer games and video blogs as a means of improving their proficiency in English:

Respondent no. 28: “Čitam članke, gledam videe, filmove, koristim fore i poštalice na engleskom, itd.”

Respondent no. 41: “Sviđa mi se i lako je za naučit ga, bar meni jer ga koristim od malih nogu u igricama. Ne čitam knjige ni na hrvatskom, sve sam naučila preko igrica, filmova i glazbe.”

80.1% of the respondents listen to music in English. Interestingly, only 9 respondents strongly disagree with the statement about listening music in English – respondent no. 43 even crossed the statement and wrote ‘*cajke!*’ instead of it. These results are quite surprising, since it seems that to this respondent it was important to emphasize what type of music they prefer. Crossing

the statement can actually be interpreted a message and can be linked to other results from this student's questionnaire, who does not find English easy and musical and thinks the grammar is difficult. Those might be the reasons why he does not listen to music in English and opts for a completely different music genre. As to social networks communication, only 25% state they use English.

30% of the respondents state that they do not feel comfortable speaking English and that they are, in a way, afraid to use it. Some of them articulated the problem further in the fourth part of the questionnaire:

Respondent no. 13: "Koliko god se trudim nemam 'fah' za jezike i neugodno mi je pričati na engleskom."

Respondent no. 17: "Voljela bih da imam više samopouzdanja i da mogu bolje komunicirati."

Respondent no. 21: "Volim jako gledati filmove na engleskom, ali također koliko ga volim toliko me i sram razgovarati da nešto ne bih fulala."

Respondent no. 74: "Mislim da dosta znam, ali me jako sram/strah pričati da ne ispadnem 'glupa'."

This is not to be put aside – shame and fear can prevent students from being more interested in language learning and improving their proficiency, resulting in a negative attitude towards a language. The question of how language anxiety develops was investigated by Gardner and MacIntyre (1993). Their idea is that anxiety might eventually impede learning of the language in the future. In other words, multiple negative experiences, build up to permanent language anxiety. The key of coping with language anxiety is, as Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986: 125) point out, "the teacher's awareness of the fact that language anxiety can greatly influence a student's performance and take this into consideration before concluding that a student lacks ability or is not motivated". These results do not confirm findings from Tamara Kolar's (2014: 42) study – she reports that language anxiety is relatively low and claims that the students in her sample seem to be quite self-confident about their language speaking abilities in English classes.

According to Trudgill (2000: 108), language is not only "a means of communicating information", but plays an important role in "establishing and maintaining relationships with

other people”. Therefore, students should learn not only the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of the language, but they should also learn how to use the language in conversational interaction (*ibid.*). Holmes and Brown (1976: 430) point out that second language learners are constrained by the limits of their knowledge of the language and will often therefore produce what they can say rather than what they want or ought to. In order to improve this aspect of sociolinguistic competence, Holmes and Brown (1976: 427) propose that students should “practice contributing material to a conversation and taking responsibility themselves for developing a conversation”. But this can hardly be achieved when, according to the answers given by the respondents, the only thing that they do in school is grammar. They mostly emphasize their disappointment with learning purely grammatical facts without properly communicating in English. 66.3% of the respondents think that oral skills are more important than grammatical competence, and only 10% strongly disagree with English grammar being described as difficult to learn. Many of them want this to be changed in the educational system and even put forward their proposals for making the classes better:

Respondent no. 9: “Ne ide mi baš najbolje jer mi gramatika nije jača strana.”

Respondent no. 10: “I think that it’s more important to know how to speak with people in English and find your way through a conversation than know English grammar in details.”⁶

Respondent no. 17: “Meni je gramatika teška te mi upravo ona predstavlja najveći problem.”

Respondent no. 18: “Gramatika je zbilja komplicirana pa bi možda mogli napraviti neke udžbenike i radne bilježnice koji će nam pomoći da ju što bolje razumijemo. Bilo bi bolje i da više učimo neke stručne nazive.”

Respondent no. 33: “Mislim da bi trebali više i bolje učiti jer većina učenika baš i ne zna engleski.”

Respondent no. 41: “Promijenila bih profesoricu. U osnovnoj sam imala 5, sad jedva 2 samo zato što je tiha, testove pišemo svaki tjedan, ni ne znamo šta se piše. Jas am kao zadovoljna.”

⁶ This respondent from Upravna škola Zagreb is one of the two respondents who actually wrote their opinions in the fourth part of the questionnaire in English.

Respondent no. 44: “Mislim da bi trebalo više poraditi na govornom području kod učenja engleskog, nego toliko na gramatici.”

Respondent no. 45: “U nastavi bih promijenila to da se više radi na govoru nego na pisanju. Muči me gramatika pa često ne znam kako bi se točno izrazila.”

Respondent no. 51: “Učimo previše nepotrebnih stvari – više vokabulara iz svakodnevnog života.”

Respondent no. 55: “U učenju engleskog bi promijenila to da manje učimo lekcije napamet, a više komuniciramo na engleskom među sobom. Mislim da bi to bilo zabavnije i da bi naučili bolje govoriti.”

Respondent no. 59: “Meni se sviđa engleski jezik i voljela bih da je gramatika lakša jer bih se onda više trudila za naučiti taj jezik.”

Respondent no. 68: “Sviđa mi se engleski jezik, lijep je i jednostavan, ali ima tešku gramatiku i stalno pišemo testove.”

The problem of grammar is the one that was mostly elaborated on in the questionnaire and should not be ignored. Respondents' dissatisfaction with the way of teaching – insisting on purely grammatical facts without improving communicational skills – reflects the current situation in the Croatian educational system and the recent calls for a curricular reform. Young (1999: 119) stresses the importance of acquiring interactional competence, as a part of the theory of second-language knowledge. According to him, it is important for second language learners to participate in specific interactive practices with more experienced others – that would help them gain a practice-specific interactional competence. Students can improve their language skills only by participating in class, talking to each other.

Also, more than one third of the respondents stated that they were not satisfied with their textbooks, which should also be taken into consideration.

Even though they had many complaints regarding the way of teaching, 56% of the respondents claimed they would still learn English even if it were not a compulsory subject. Moreover, 87% of the respondents expressed their wish for speaking English fluently. In the fourth part of the questionnaire the students self-assessed their knowledge:

Respondent no. 9: “Vlastito znanje ne procjenjujem baš najbolje jer mi gramatika nije jača strana, a vokabular bi trebala više učiti.”

Respondent no. 22: “Voljela bih da se bolje znam služiti engleskim.”

Respondent no. 23: “Mislim da sam solidan u znanju engleskog. Nadam se da ću ga u budućnosti još više derat.”

Respondent no. 26: “Ponosan sam na svoje znanje jezika i jedan je od predmeta gdje se osjećam opušteno i sigurnim u svoje znanje.”⁷

Respondent no. 37: “U osnovnoj školi sam imala dobre ocjene, a sad kad profesorica cijelo vrijeme govori na engleskom malo je teže, a pogotovo njeni testovi – užas.”

Respondent no. 40: “Ma moje znanje engleskog je super, prejakom znam sve, pamet je to.”

Respondent no. 42: “Svoje znanje procjenjujem vrhunskim pošto ga španam ko materinski.”⁸

Respondent no. 47: “Ne služim se engleskim jer ga ne znam baš dobro, ali bi ga htjela znati kao i hrvatski.”

Respondent no. 58: “Nisam zadovoljan sa svojim znanjem engleskog pa ću poslije srednje škole upisati tečaj engleskog jezika.”

Respondent no. 70: “Iako moje znanje nije odlično, trudim se poboljšati ga.”

The respondents' desire to improve their language skills should be taken seriously. They feel that they are not acquiring the right skills in the classroom – they want more face-to-face communication and interaction. As Mihaljević Djigunović (2007: 110) reports, at the end of secondary education students' goal appears to be fluency in the language, but at the same time they still have certain difficulties and uncertainties. The students want to be successful in English in a way they can use English for concrete communication purposes.

⁷ Respondent no. 26 is the only student with such a statement, but this can be related to the fact that his parents have a good knowledge of English and encourage him to speak English in their mutual communication.

⁸ I took this statement as false and humorous, since in the first part of the questionnaire the respondent stated the grade he most commonly receives is D.

Discussion

The subject group of this study generally recognizes the importance of English and they do reveal a high level of orientation towards improving their language skills. They recognize the importance of English as an instrument for getting a better job, but not so much as an instrument for personal growth. Initially, it was expected that they would have negative attitudes towards English and using English but the results show that they have quite positive attitudes. Their quite positive attitude is in correlation with their grades – their grade point average is 3.5. Correlations were also found between the age of starting to learn English and their attitude. Based on the age of starting to learn English, the results show that the students who started to learn English before the age of 7 have more positive attitudes towards English and can, therefore, speak confidently and comfortably and show positive orientation towards English. However, the students who started to learn English after 7 showed the desire to speak a more fluent and accurate type of English. It might be claimed that starting to learn English at an earlier age has a significant effect on language learning. The respondents positively evaluate English as a frequently used foreign language both in Croatia and worldwide. The female students' rates are slightly higher than those of the male students, which can be evaluated as the effect of gender factor on attitudes towards language and its use. This correlates with the results that Mihaljević Djigunović (1993) attained in her study, which show that female students are more motivated and more successful in learning English as a foreign language than the male students.

Generally, respondents enjoy watching American and/or British movies, but as far as reading publications in English the results are expected – they do not read much. Regarding their orientation toward English, some of them report discomfort and anxiety when using English, which needs to be addressed in the teaching process.

This study revealed an interesting issue that should definitely be further investigated – the problem of Škola za medicinske sestre Vinogradska. All 24 respondents from that school expressed their dissatisfaction with the teaching methods and the curriculum. The school itself is specific because it is a vocational school with a five-year duration, but English is only taught in the first two years. They do have English classes three times a week, but the same holds for Upravna škola Zagreb. It has a four-year program, but English is taught during the whole period. Since the *matura* exam is taken at the end of secondary education, and English is a compulsory part of every *matura* exam, it leaves the students of Vinogradska with a three-

year gap and puts them in a delicate position. In January 2015 Emila Čvrljević, a student from Medicinska škola in Zadar, wrote an open letter about the position the students of her school are put into. The students of her school are forced to take extra English classes in order to prepare for their *matura* exam, which means spending more of their parents' money. Former Minister of Education Vedran Mornar reacted to her letter by saying that, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, some other models of education were being considered, because they were aware that the five-year system for medical schools was not the best solution. Unfortunately, so far nothing has changed.

Generally, the problem of grammar is the one that was mostly elaborated on in the questionnaire and should not be ignored. The respondents' dissatisfaction with the way of teaching – insisting on purely grammatical facts without improving communicational skills – reflects the current situation in the Croatian educational system and the recent calls for the curricular reform. Many respondents complained that the traditional way of teaching does not help them improve their language proficiency. Mihaljević Djigunović (2007: 113) obtained similar results: her respondents listed the traditional approach to teaching, lack of communication activities and too many grammar tests as a negative side of their English classes. Furthermore, vocational and art school students from her study especially criticized those teaching methods which could be characterized as part of the grammar approach: reading long texts and doing translations.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is clear that some changes should be made in the way English is taught in vocational schools. Farrell and Jacobs (2010) tackled the problem of language teaching and proposed Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a new approach. CLT enables students to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. Farrell and Jacobs (2010: 7) argue that „the CLT paradigm shift has not been implemented as widely or as successfully as it might have been because English language educators and other stakeholders have tried to understand and implement the shift in a piecemeal rather than a holistic manner.“ Therefore, they suggest that eight major changes should be made in teaching English as a second language.

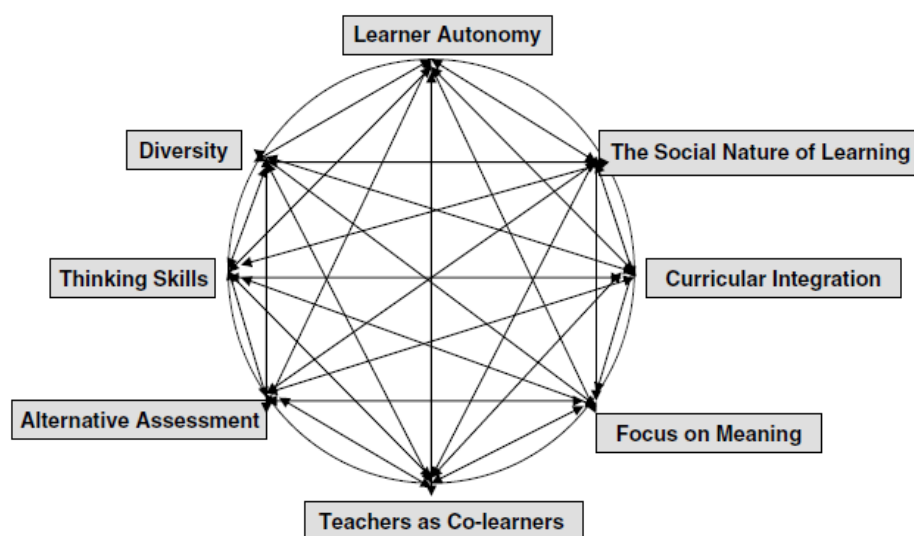


Figure 3. Eight essentials for successful second language teaching (Reproduced from *Essentials for Successful English Language Teaching* (p. 8), by Thomas S. C. Farrell and George M. Jacobs.

The essentials are presented in the circular figure form, which emphasizes that all the changes are parts of a whole and that the successful implementation of one is dependent on the successful implementation of others. The task of every second language teacher should be to encourage learner autonomy, emphasize the social nature of learning, develop curricular integration, focus on meaning, celebrate diversity, expand thinking skills, utilize alternative assessment methods and promote English language teachers as co-learners (Farrell and Jacobs 2010: 2). These essentials will not be explained in detail in this paper, but might serve as a good starting point for some further research. The implementation of these essentials might lead to a better organization of English classes and a move-away from the traditional approach to teaching English as a foreign language. Expansion of thinking skills and alternative assessment methods are surely something that vocational school students would welcome. The shift from traditional ways of teaching to CLT cannot be implemented at once because it takes time, but some effort has already been made. The move from teacher-centered teaching to learner-centered teaching is something that Renata Geld (2004) discussed in her paper. She suggests that, through the technique of asking the right questions, the teachers should accept the challenges and interact more with their students, which will stimulate the students' cognitive and affective potential and make them improve their knowledge.

Conclusion

Analyzing the results from this research study, we have come to conclusions that help describe attitudes of vocational school students toward English. First of all, the present study partially supports the general claim that positive language attitudes correlate with learners' positive orientation towards learning English. The respondents of this study showed quite positive attitude towards English, which is in correlation with the study conducted by Tamara Kolar in 2014. This means that the students, even though they may not be satisfied with the way of teaching and encounter various other problems in the learning process itself, recognize the importance of learning English and want to improve their knowledge. This also has to do with their out-of-class experience: listening to music in English and watching American and/or British movies. However, they hardly use English out of school for communication purposes. This can be interpreted in a way that the students do not yet feel the need of English in their daily life. That is why some of them delay learning English until after they finish high school, when they are actually forced to learn and use English in order to get a better job opportunity.

Secondly, participants in this study showed dissatisfaction with the way English is taught at school. Learning purely grammatical facts seems to be the main issue, which vocational school teachers should take into consideration. It is not surprising that, in modern society, students value communicational skills more and want to be prepared for the real life experience. Moreover, the results show that the students from *Škola za medicinske sestre Vinogradska* are left out in the cold – the actual program that the school offers does not provide them with enough knowledge and communication skills to face the *matura* exam. The program should be revised and a better solution for such students should be found in order to help them attain the desired level of knowledge.

Thirdly, a considerable percentage (30%) of the respondents state that they do not feel comfortable speaking English and that they are, in a way, afraid to use it. Teachers are advised to recognize the anxiety students experience and adapt the teaching process accordingly. Although the role of the teacher was not the main focus of this study, it might be an important factor in establishing a better environment for encouraging vocational school students to practice speaking English, which is what they stressed in their answers: more speaking and interaction, less rote-learning. Communicative Language Teaching as a method of teaching a foreign language may help create a better environment for learning English in

vocational schools. However, teachers cannot be the only ones to take full responsibility – both the state and the Ministry of Science and Education have to work on improving the conditions that some teachers still work in. For some time now there has been mention of a curricular reform, which would, hopefully, pay attention to vocational education. The goal is to develop national and sectoral VET (vocational education and training) curricula which will provide the students with general education and key competences as a basis for further education and lifelong learning.

Finally, it must be stressed that the initial hypothesis – that students of vocational schools have negative attitudes towards English – was not confirmed. The students showed quite positive attitudes and, what is even more important, openly elaborated on some of the problems that all vocational students have to face. Their answers and suggestions should not be ignored, because they give us an insight into the actual situation in such schools. The results of this study may serve as a good basis for further research in this field. It would be interesting to compare vocational school students with grammar school students to establish whether their view on the way of teaching differs. Since the focus of the present study was put strictly on the experience and attitudes of vocational school students, for some further research it would be interesting to incorporate teachers' experience as a factor and examine if there are differences in teachers' experience in working with vocational and grammar school learners. We hope that this study has offered some interesting results concerning vocational school student attitudes and that it will provide a good foundation for further research involving vocational school students learning English as a second language.

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Appendix

1. The questionnaire presented to the students

STAVOVI O ENGLESKOME JEZIKU

(UPITNIK)

Istraživanje se provodi u svrhu izrade diplomskog rada na Odsjeku za anglistiku Filozofskoga fakulteta u Zagrebu.

Svi podaci anonimni su i koristit će se samo u svrhu ovoga istraživanja.

Hvala na sudjelovanju!

I. Opći podaci

Spol: M Ž

Dob: _____

Škola: _____

S koliko ste godina počeli učiti engleski? _____ (osnovna škola/srednja škola/ranije)

Koja vam je trenutno najčešća ocjena iz engleskog? _____

Koja vam je ocjena bila najčešća iz engleskog u osnovnoj školi? _____

II. Za sljedeće tvrdnje odredite stupanj slaganja. Pritom 1 (jedan) znači 'uopće se ne slažem', a 5 (pet) 'potpuno se slažem'. Zaokružite Vaš odgovor.

Engleski jezik...

... je svjetski jezik.	1	2	3	4	5
... ima bogat vokabular.	1	2	3	4	5
... je važan u današnjem svijetu.	1	2	3	4	5
... je jednostavan.	1	2	3	4	5
... je zvučan.	1	2	3	4	5
... ima tešku gramatiku.	1	2	3	4	5
... je zanimljiv.	1	2	3	4	5

... je kompliciran.	1	2	3	4	5
... je jezik tehnologija.	1	2	3	4	5

- III. Sljedeće tvrdnje odnose se na stavove o učenju i korištenju engleskim jezikom u Republici Hrvatskoj. Odredite stupanj slaganja s navedenim tvrdnjama. Pritom 1 (jedan) znači 'uopće se ne slažem', a 5 (pet) 'potpuno se slažem'. Zaokružite Vaš odgovor.

1	Engleski je najčešće korišten strani jezik u Republici Hrvatskoj.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Znanje engleskog jezika važno je za osobni razvoj.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Znanje engleskoga jezika važno je za profesionalni razvoj.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Engleski učim zbog okoline/roditelja.	1	2	3	4	5
5	Volim čitati knjige i časopise na engleskom jeziku.	1	2	3	4	5
6	Osjećam se nelagodno i nemam dovoljno samopouzdanja kad komuniciram na engleskom.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Učio/la bih engleski i da nije obavezan predmet u školi.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Volim gledati britanske i američke filmove.	1	2	3	4	5
9	Engleska gramatika je teška.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Volim razgovarati sa strancima na engleskom jeziku.	1	2	3	4	5
11	Korištenje engleskim u svakodnevnom govoru smatra se pretencioznim.	1	2	3	4	5
12	Na društvenim mrežama često komuniciram na engleskom jeziku.	1	2	3	4	5
13	Slušam glazbu na engleskom jeziku.	1	2	3	4	5
14	Američka i britanska glazba draže su mi od hrvatske.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Volio/voljela bih da mogu tečno govoriti engleski.	1	2	3	4	5
16	Engleski jezik je najčešće korišten jezik u svijetu.	1	2	3	4	5
17	Da imam mogućnost, putovao/la bih u zemlje engleskog govornog područja.	1	2	3	4	5
18	Američki engleski draži mi je od britanskog engleskog.	1	2	3	4	5
19	Kada govorim engleski, želim zvučati što bliže izvornim govornicima.	1	2	3	4	5
20	Ne volim komunicirati na engleskom jer se bojim da se čuje moj 'naglasak'.	1	2	3	4	5
21	Engleski bi se trebao učiti od prvog razreda osnovne škole.	1	2	3	4	5
22	Usmena kompetencija na engleskome jeziku važnija je od one pismene.	1	2	3	4	5

23	Zadovoljan/na sam s udžbenicima koje koristim pri učenju engleskoga jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
24	Imam poteškoća u pisanju engleskoga jezika.	1	2	3	4	5
25	Dobro se služim engleskim jezikom u govoru, ali mi gramatika i pravopis predstavljaju problem.	1	2	3	4	5

IV. Razmislite i kratko napišite **što mislite o engleskome jeziku**. Sljedeća pitanja mogu Vam pomoći pri formuliranju odgovora.

Sviđa li Vam se engleski jezik? Što mislite o učenju engleskoga jezika? Služite li se engleskim jezikom i izvan škole? (npr. čitanje knjiga na engleskom, gledanje filmova bez titlova itd.) Zašto učite engleski jezik? Smatrate li da će vam učenje engleskoga pomoći u budućnosti i kako? Kakvo je Vaše iskustvo učenja engleskoga jezika dosad? Biste li nešto promijenili? Kako procjenjujete vlastito znanje engleskoga jezika?