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## **IMPLEMENTATION OF A CROATIAN TEACHING ABROAD PROGRAMME IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES**

### **1 CROATIAN TEACHING ABROAD**

The Republic of Croatia has a long history of emigration. The push factors for this can be sought in specific historical, social, and political opportunities and difficulties that often, throughout history, influenced migration waves from the area of today's Croatia (Nejamšić 2014: 409). One of the biggest waves of migration that hit the Republic of Croatia is the one that occurred after Croatia acceded to the European Union in 2013. This was when many of the young population left the country due to the desire and need for continued education and/or employment and better living conditions (Jurić 2018). Even though there is no exact data on the number of Croats outside the homeland, it is

quite certain that it is higher than the number of living in the homeland (Komušanac & Šterc 2022).

The Republic of Croatia undertakes to protect the rights and strengthen the ties of Croats outside the country with their homeland with its *Constitution* and a special law – the *Law on Relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia* (Official Gazette 124/11, 16/12). This law emphasizes the importance of preserving and strengthening the identity of Croats outside the Republic of Croatia through, among other things, language learning, culture, and education (Official Gazette 124/11, 16/12, Article 7). In addition, in 2022, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the *National Plan for the Development of Relations between the Republic of Croatia and Croats Outside the Republic of Croatia until 2027*, which mentions education is seen as one of the elements connecting such individuals with their homeland. Since education is one of the most important areas when it comes to preserving and strengthening the Croatian identity, since the 1990s Croatian Teaching Abroad (CTA) has been organized and carried out outside the country as a form of schooling specially designed for the children of Croatian emigrants aged from 6 to 18 years old (Bušljeta Kardum, Bura, Skender 2022: 89; Bušljeta Kardum, Župančić, Plaza Leutar 2021: 83). Today, according to data from the Ministry of Science and Education, CTA is carried out in 23 countries of the world, in 346 teaching places, where 97 teachers perform educational work for over 5,000 students (Bušljeta Kardum, Bura, Skender, 2022: 95-98).

The purpose of CTA is to nurture and promote the Croatian language and culture, and thus strengthen the Croatian national identity. Since 2004, CTA has been conducted based on the *Curriculum for Croatian Teaching Abroad* (Official Gazette 194/2003), which integrates content from the fields of Croatian language and literature, history, geography, music, and art culture, and in addition to the content, it also prescribes educational expectations for students based on the level of education. The basic document organized in this way certainly prepares CTA teachers to deal with certain challenges, both professional and pedagogical, didactic and methodical. In order to fully understand the complexity of performing CTA, it is necessary to point out that according to the *Ordinance on the conditions and procedure for selecting teachers for work in Croatian teaching abroad* (Official Gazette 87/08, 41/09, 55/15, 41/22), CTA can be performed by classroom teachers, Croatian language teachers or history teachers. With regard to the aforementioned contents determined in the *Curriculum* (Official Gazette 194/2003), which represent the integration of contents and learning outcomes related to different teaching subjects, the question arises of sufficient competencies, both professional and pedagogical, didactic and methodical, of teachers who are obliged to implement all the contents and learning outcomes prescribed by the *Curriculum* (Official Gazette 194/2003). Specifically, the question arises as to whether and to what extent, for example, history teachers are trained to teach the contents and learning outcomes related to the Croatian language and literature, as determined by the *Curriculum* (Official Gazette 194/2003). The same question applies when it comes to

Croatian language and literature teachers and their competence for teaching the prescribed historical content. Learning and teaching the Croatian language outside of Croatia has its own peculiarities, which primarily relate to the fact that acquiring the Croatian language abroad is approached as a process of learning a foreign language, not a mother tongue, where it is necessary to satisfy general and specific glottodidactic factors. Acquiring a foreign language within the CTA does not mean acquiring a completely foreign language, but rather a heritage one. A heritage language speaker is prototypically considered to be someone who has adopted the spoken language, most often through reception, and who at the same time considers it the language of cultural and national identity. While the acquisition of spoken idioms takes place in the family environment, learning the standard Croatian language most often starts with entering educational institutions, where the predominant language of communication becomes the language of the environment (Pavličević Franić 2012: 182). In such circumstances the teacher is an extremely important link that not only shapes the educational process but is very often the link between the local and educational community of Croatian speakers. A separate issue related to the knowledge and competencies for learning and teaching the Croatian language at an early age. Language acquisition and learning at an early age primarily refer to preschool and elementary school, and include language adapted and aimed at children, age-appropriate teaching materials, and learning through play. Although the basics of language are acquired by the age of five, language development continues and is influenced by the child's cognitive stages of development, and the teacher, in addition to the parents, has the most important role here and is a speech model (Pavličević Franić, Gazdić Alerić, Aladrović Slovaček 2011: 165-166). The process of acquiring a foreign or heritage language, in addition to linguistic factors, also includes numerous non-linguistic factors "which influence the formation and level of acquisition of the target language, e.g., student motivation, prior knowledge of language, cognitive development, exposure to language communication, the socio-cultural environment in which the child grows up, and as a separate component – the structure of the Croatian standard language" (Pavličević Franić, Gazdić Alerić, Aladrović Slovaček 2011: 167). It is clear that the CTA is a very specific process under the influence of numerous factors, whereby Pavličević Franić (2012: 183) especially emphasizes the importance of the presence of horizontal and vertical multilingualism in communication, the creation of interlanguage and respect for the principle of interculturality. Consequently, within the framework of the CTA, and in addition to having the much-needed Croatian and cultural knowledge, teachers should also be excellent glottodidactic experts familiar with the peculiarities of the process of acquiring a foreign language. and experts familiar with the peculiarities of first language acquisition and language acquisition at an early age. Unfortunately, not a single institution in the Republic of Croatia trains future teachers of the Croatian language for the specifics of the profession of teaching Croatian as a second, foreign or heritage language. Finally, it should be pointed out that CTA teachers, in addition to teaching the integrated content of different subjects, are also faced with

other challenges in their educational work, such as teaching in heterogeneous groups and combined classes, insufficient teaching materials and textbooks, and the increased need to organize various extracurricular activities (Bušljeta Kardum, Burai, Skender 2022: 91-93). Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, and Klasnić (2023) conducted research on the pedagogical competencies and needs of CTA teachers. The study included teachers from 23 countries where the CTA is taught. The main results of this research indicate that the CTA teachers consider their pedagogical competencies acquired through formal education to be sufficient. However, their biggest challenge is working with heterogeneous classroom groups. Some teachers find it difficult to create the teaching process and select teaching strategies, while “the most concerning finding is that only about half of them state that they achieve the outcomes prescribed by the Curriculum of Croatian Teaching Abroad (Official Gazette 194/2003)” (Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, Klasnić 2023: 166). It is particularly indicative that almost all teachers mention the lack of textbooks and didactic-methodological materials as a complicating factor. In addition, teachers undergo preparations for working abroad, such as receiving information about the recipient country’s school system and documentation procedures, but they emphasize that such preparations “should not depend on the individual engagement of the teacher” but should be institutionalized (Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, Klasnić 2023:166). Finally, Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, and Klasnić (2023) conclude that at the graduate level there is a need to introduce a programme that would prepare future teachers for working in the CTA programmes.

All the prominent features of the CTA certainly require the teachers to have additional knowledge and skills that exceed those acquired through formal higher education, which, first and foremost, prepares future teachers for the process of working in the Republic of Croatia.

## **2 CROATIAN LANGUAGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

Language is one of the fundamental characteristics of personal and collective identity. The mother tongue is prototypically adopted from one’s parents in the prenatal period, and its development continues throughout life in informal and formal (institutional) circumstances. Language is a living organism whose persistence is reflected in the use of local idioms and standard language within the educational, political, economic, social, legal, and religious circumstances of a country. The question of the use and persistence of the Croatian language in the Republic of Serbia (RS) is very complex. Croats are considered a national minority in the RS and represent a heterogeneous national community. According to official data from 2011, Croats comprise 0.81% of the population of the RS, with the largest number living in Vojvodina (81%) and the City of Belgrade (14%) (CNC 2021: 15). The languages and scripts of national minorities in the RS are mostly in use at the local level, and it should be noted that, in addition to Croatian, numerous other

languages are also in official use (Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Macedonian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Montenegrin and the Bunjevci dialect), which makes this area extremely multilingual and multicultural. Although the right to use the Croatian language (CL) was mentioned as early as 1993, its official use increased in 2004 with the establishment of the Translation Services in the Croatian Language in the City of Subotica. Today, the CL is in official use mostly in the area of the City of Subotica and the bodies and organizations of the Autonomous Province (AP) of Vojvodina (CNC 2021: 25). However, the most significant part of exercising the right to the official use of the language and script is realized through the system of education in the Croatian language in the RS through two models: 1) Model A, which includes a complete programme in the CL according to the curriculum of the RS, and 2) Model C, which includes teaching in the Serbian language along with the teaching of the elective subject of Croatian Language, with elements of national culture. In figures, there are about a thousand students in the system of education in the Croatian language (CNC 2021: 50). The Croatian language came into unofficial use for the first time in the school system of the RS through Roman Catholic religious education in 2001. The first complete primary school programme in the CL started in 2002, by which the status of the Croatian community as a national minority was recognized and the first Croatian language department in the RS was opened (CNC 2016: 16). In addition to primary schools, classes in Croatian language are also held in the Svetozar Marković Gymnasium and in the Polytechnic and Medical High School in Subotica. If you look at a more detailed analysis, it is clear that the percentage of students who finished primary school and then continued their education in the Croatian language is relatively low (36.8 %) (CNC 2016: 32). In the period from 1961 to 2011, the number of Croats in the RS decreased by 65%, which greatly affects the employment of qualified personnel of Croatian nationality (CNC 2021: 90). The latter is particularly evident in the selection of teachers as a key prerequisite for quality education, which is a direct consequence of a small number of linguistically qualified staff, insufficient professional development of teachers or professors, lack of interest and lack of motivation among teaching staff with regard to using the Croatian language and Croatian terminology in teaching, and the influence of school principals who show less interest in the issue of using Croatian in teaching (CNC 2016:42). It should be emphasized that the small number of language teachers was influenced by the decline in the number of students who want to study in Croatia and then return to the RS, the absence of a Department of Croatian Language and Literature at university in the RS where future teachers can receive their education, and the lack of involvement of the Croatian National Council (CNC) in the selection process of teaching staff for classes in the Croatian language (CNC 2016:42). According to Serbian laws, “language experts are all those who completed their studies in Serbo-Croatian before 1991 or 1992, as well as teachers who were educated in the Republic of Croatia and sought refuge in the Republic of Serbia during the war and hold a diploma in Croatian language” (CNC 2016: 42).

It should be pointed out that in Croatian language teaching and programmes 59.4% of the staff is of non-Croatian nationality, with insufficiently developed language competencies in the Croatian language, and these individuals are chosen by school principals in the RS (CNC 2016: 43). On the other hand, teaching the Croatian language in schools in Vojvodina is also conducted by teachers from the Republic of Croatia, who are selected by the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), and within the framework of the Croatian Teaching Abroad (CTA) programme. They are involved as teachers who teach the Croatian Language subject (Model A) and the Croatian Language with Elements of National Culture elective subject (Model C) in individual schools. In addition, they participate in connecting with schools from Croatia, projects, procurement of teaching materials and various extra-curricular activities under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Croatia. It is interesting to mention that the employment status of teachers within CTA in the RS has not been resolved for more than twenty years. The Education and Teacher Training Agency (ETTA) from Croatia provides support in many difficult and very challenging circumstances surrounding linguistically (un)trained staff through various professional training in the fields of Croatian language, literature, history, geography, religious studies, art and biology, and in the academic year 2018/2019 the Lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad started working to implement the Programme for Acquiring Competences in Croatian Language, Culture and Literature with Work Methodology within the Centre for Teacher Training. An additional aggravating circumstance is the textbooks, which have been affected by numerous changes and differences between the curriculums of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia. Although the first textbooks for classes in the CL were imported back in 2002, due to numerous changes to the curriculum the translation of the Serbian editions of the textbooks was started later. The issue of textbooks was finally resolved in 2022, and in accordance with the reform, all necessary textbooks for elementary school and, for the first time, all textbooks for high school were translated.

The issue of the status of the CL in the RS is very complex and influenced by numerous political and socioeconomic factors. For example, among the Croatian population regional dialects have predominantly persisted, while the Croatian standard language has been mainly present among the elites, and this is because Croatian “was never the language of socialization in a part of the educational system of the Republic of Serbia, and additional resistance against it was built through negative public-opinion representations and designations (‘non-existent language’, ‘language created in the Independent State of Croatia’)” (CNC 2016: 60). In addition, the results of research from 2011 indicate that “the discrepancy between mother tongue and nationality among Croats in the Republic of Serbia is greater than 70% and that more than 50% of Croats recognize the Serbian language as their mother tongue” (CNC 2016: 60).

If one takes into account the small number of language teachers, the numerous administrative obstacles in hiring teachers, the difficulties with textbooks, the decreasing number of Croats in the RS, and the perception of the typologically related Serbian

language as the mother tongue among Croats, the poor position of the Croatian language in the RS is not surprising. Nevertheless, the fact that since 2002 more than 2,000 students have attended full classes in the Croatian language, or at least taken the Croatian Language with Elements of National Culture as the optional subject, is encouraging, and will certainly contribute to a better status and acceptance of the Croatian language.

### **3 AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study is to get an insight into the experiences of teachers with work within the CTA programme in the Republic of Serbia (RS). It is preliminary research that is being carried out as part of the *Peculiarities of Croatian Teaching in the Republic of Serbia* project, which aims to gain a more comprehensive insight into the complexity and challenges of teaching the Croatian language in the RS.

### **4 METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Participants**

Only teachers from the Republic of Croatia selected by the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE) and within the framework of the Croatian Teaching Abroad (CTA) programme participated in the preliminary research. A total of six teachers who have experience teaching Croatian in the Republic of Serbia participated. All teachers teach according to Model A, which includes a complete programme in the Croatian language according to the plan and programme of the Republic of Serbia. The sample includes four men and two women between the ages of 28 and 40. They obtained the title of Master of Education or Professor of Croatian Language and Literature at the faculties of humanities and social sciences of the universities of Zagreb, Osijek, and Rijeka, with four of them having had further training after formal education. The number of years of total work experience varies between two and seven, where it is important to emphasize that three teachers have four years of experience in the CTA programme, two have two years and one has two months. Five teachers teach Croatian language and literature in high school, and one teaches Croatian language in elementary school.

#### **4.2 Research instrument and implementation**

Preliminary research was conducted through an anonymous survey among teachers who work or have worked within the CTA programme in the RS during the school years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. The survey is divided into several thematic units:



- 1) Didactic and methodical part – the goal is to examine the training and education of teachers for work through the analysis of specific and general competencies and the suitability of available textbooks in Croatian teaching in the RS.
- 2) Cultural and historical heritage – the goal is to examine the teacher's ability to deliver content related to the cultural and historical heritage of Croatia.
- 3) Croatian (as a foreign) language and literature – the aim is to examine teachers' awareness of the processes of acquiring foreign languages and the peculiarities of acquiring Croatian as a heritage language.
- 4) Open-ended questions – the goal is to enable teachers to independently describe the needs and problems of Croatian teaching in the RS.

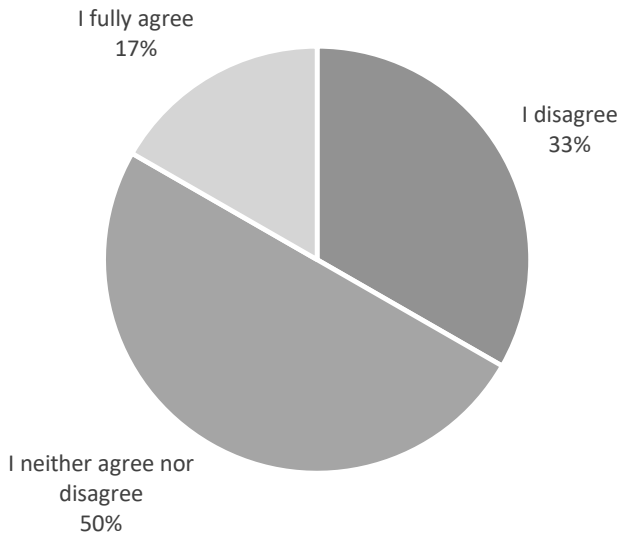
The respondents answered by choosing a value on a 5-point Likert scale of agreement for each item within a particular thematic unit (1 = I fully disagree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I fully agree). The results were analysed qualitatively.

## **5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 The teachers' didactic and methodological competencies and textbooks in the Croatian language**

The first part of the survey refers to the didactic and methodical part, i.e., the question of qualifications and formal education of teachers for working in the CTA in the RS. The results of the analysis show that half of the teachers believe that they are prepared for work as a CTA teacher in the RS, that during their college education they learned to implement various extracurricular activities (which are not always easy for them to come up with), that they have acquired competencies for the application of information and communication technology in teaching and that they are trained in the use of language technologies. The majority of teachers believe that during their college education they learned different teaching strategies and methods, that they acquired the necessary communication and organizational skills and the necessary general skills (e.g., creative and innovative thinking). On the other hand, only one teacher believes that they acquired the intercultural competences necessary to work in the CTA programme at the university (Graph 1).

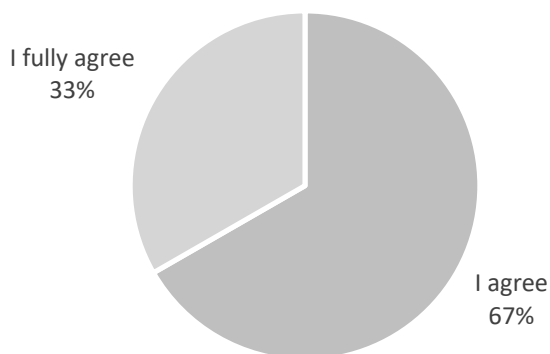




*Graph 1: Answers in percentages for the statement: I believe that I gained the necessary intercultural competences (knowledge of different cultures and cultural differences, the possibility of working in different cultural contexts) in the existing study programme.*

Although recent times have been marked by numerous migrations and the constant interweaving of different cultures, which is particularly visible in the RS through the coexistence of numerous national minorities (CNC 2021), the insufficiently developed intercultural competence of teachers is not surprising given that the existing formal education programmes are focused on working with students of the dominantly Croatian-speaking area. Consequently, teachers who work in the CTA are faced with numerous challenges, given that work in intercultural environments is primarily based on the acceptance of cultural and linguistic differences and efforts to provide equal conditions for growth and development to all students. In the absence of acquiring intercultural competencies during formal education, teachers are focused on attending various seminars, participating in international projects and cultivating personal contacts with members of different cultures.

The teachers state that they are familiar with the legal regulations and management of pedagogical documentation, but all, except for one teacher, believe that the CTA in the RS requires special knowledge and skills and implies the use of different strategies and work methods, which is in accordance with Pavličević Franić (2012). All teachers agree that in order to implement the CTA more successfully in the RS it is necessary to introduce additional pedagogical, didactic and methodical training for future teachers (Graph 2)



*Graph 2: Answers in percentages for the statement: For the sake of more successful implementation of CTA in the RS, additional pedagogical, didactic and methodical education of future teachers is needed.*

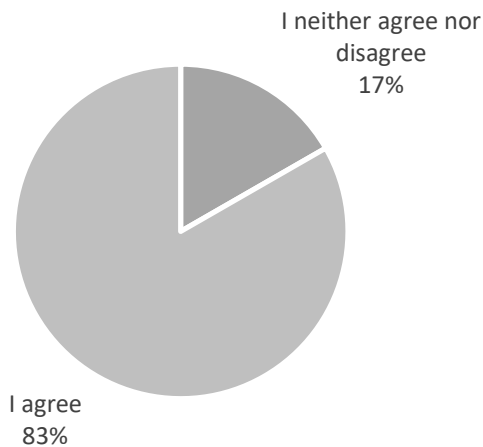
The analysis of open-ended questions shows that teachers need more practical work, examples of extracurricular activities and content that will additionally instruct them in formative evaluation, innovative methods, and digital forms of work in teaching, and in the general and local circumstances (social, cultural, political, etc.) of recipient countries, which is also confirmed by Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, Klasnić (2023) and Bušljeta Kardum, Burai, Skender (2022). The latter results are indicative because they point to the teachers' awareness of the differences in the implementation of the teaching process in the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia, the partial lack of competencies and the needs of teachers with regard to working in a politically, economically and linguistically very challenging environment. Accordingly, the teachers highlight that the problem of the prior knowledge and motivation that students come with and the differences between the Croatian and the Serbian languages. The first of these is not surprising considering the Croatian language in Serbia is often seen negatively, it has never been the predominant means of communication among Croats, and more than 50% of Croats consider their mother tongue to be Serbian, not Croatian (CNC 2016: 60). The influence of various factors, such as motivation, prior language knowledge, exposure to linguistic communication and the socio-cultural environment within which s language is acquired, was also confirmed in Pavličević Franić, Gazdić Alerić, and Aladrović Slovaček (2011: 167).

The first part of the survey included the question of the suitability of available textbooks, which was affected by numerous changes and differences in the curriculums of the Republic of Serbia and Republic of Croatia. Although the issue of textbooks was resolved in 2022, most teachers believe that the existing textbooks used in CTA in the RS follow the teaching plan and programme but are not fully adequate for achieving all the educational outcomes set with regard to learning the Croatian language. The teachers especially emphasize the insufficiency of content related to spelling and expression, and the absence

of chronological order when discussing literature. However, it should be pointed out that CTA in the RS is not an isolated case in this regard, and the lack of textbooks, materials and teaching sheets appears as a problem in other countries where the CTA is implemented (Burai, Bušljeta Kardum, Klasnić 2023; Bušljeta Kardum, Burai, Skender 2022: 91-93).

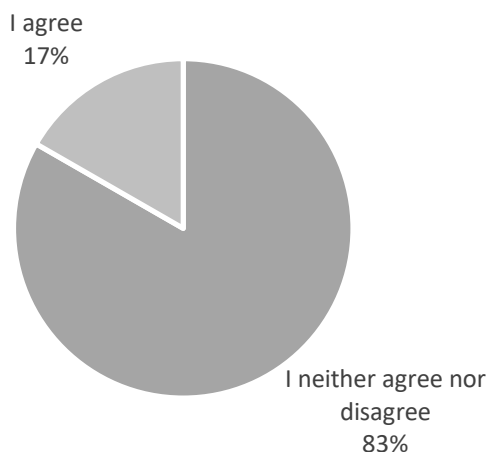
## 5.2 The teachers' professional competencies for cultural and historical content

In the second part of the survey, the aim was to examine the attitudes of teachers in the CTA programme in the RS regarding their ability to deliver content related to the cultural and historical heritage of Croatia. The results show that half of the teachers prepare and teach content related to cultural and historical heritage without significant difficulties and devote more time to that than to learning the Croatian language. The latter is not surprising considering that most teachers work in high school and discuss the cultural and historical heritage of the Republic of Croatia through literature. Although the majority of teachers believe that they are familiar with the methods and strategies of learning and teaching the cultural and historical heritage of the Republic of Croatia, it is notable that the teachers emphasize the need for additional training in this area and the wish that they had more courses related to the teaching of Croatian culture and historical heritage during their formal education. The biggest problem appears to be the lack of didactically and methodically prepared materials for teaching about the Croatian cultural and historical heritage, as confirmed by five out of six teachers (Graph 3).



Graph 3: Answers in percentages for the statement: *I do not have enough didactically and methodically prepared materials for teaching about Croatian cultural and historical heritage.*

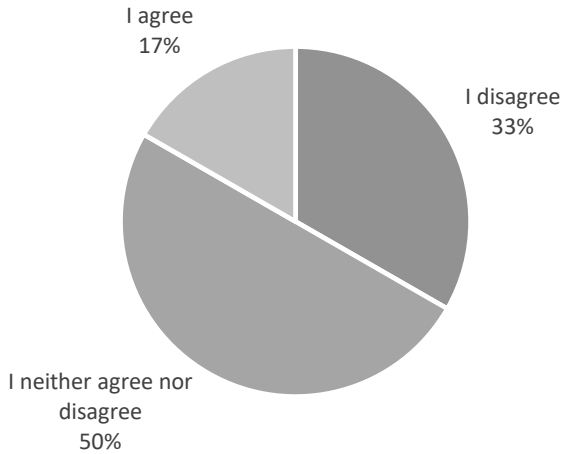
In addition, the difficulties in motivating students for cultural and historical topics are also evident (Graph 4).



*Graph 4: Answers in percentages for the statement: I can very easily motivate students to learn about Croatian cultural and historical heritage.*

### 5.3 The teachers' qualifications for teaching Croatian as a heritage language

The third part of the survey was dedicated to examining teachers' awareness of foreign language learning processes and the peculiarities of acquiring Croatian as a heritage language. The majority of teachers distinguish between the basic glottodidactic terms and are aware that learning and teaching the Croatian language outside the Republic of Croatia should be approached as a process of learning a foreign language, which is in accordance with Pavličević Franić (2012), and half of them are familiar with the peculiarities of the process of acquiring a foreign language. However, only two teachers are familiar with the psycholinguistic and applied-linguistic aspects of acquiring a foreign language, as well as with the peculiarities of first language acquisition, and only one teacher believes that they are familiar with how to teach Croatian language at an early age (Graph 5).



*Graph 5: Answers in percentages for the statement: I am familiar with the ways of teaching Croatian language at an early age.*

The analysis of the results shows that teachers have become aware of the importance of individual factors (motivation, strategy, age...) in learning and teaching the Croatian language, which Pavličević Franić, Gazdić Alerić, and Aladrović Slovaček emphasize as very important factors within CTA (2011: 167).

Most of the teachers know how to select the contents of literature in the CTA programme in the RS and adapt them to the students, and consider them appropriate for teaching, whereas only one teacher has difficulties with evaluating and creating language tests. In addition, the teachers agree that before starting work in the CTA programme it is necessary to practice teaching the Croatian language. Almost all the teachers believe that the faculty did not prepare them well for work in the field of acquiring Croatian as a foreign or heritage language, and that they need additional education in this regard. According to the teachers, this should include linguistic and cultural peculiarities, the methodology of teaching Croatian as a foreign and/or heritage language, and, in addition to the theoretical part of teaching there would also be some practical experience, and it would last one semester. The constant need of teachers for additional education, especially in the context of acquiring Croatian as a foreign or heritage language, is not new and stems from the fact that not a single institution trains future teachers of the Croatian language for the specifics of the profession of teaching Croatian as a second, foreign or heritage language, but instead they are primarily trained for the teaching and educational process within the Republic of Croatia. The need for additional education for future teachers is also confirmed by Burai, Bušljeta Kardum and Klasnić (2023).

## 6 CONCLUSION

Croatia considers Croatian teaching abroad (CTA) to be a very specific programme characterized by student heterogeneity, cross-curricular connections (language in combination with literature, geography, history, fine arts, and religious content), horizontal and vertical multilingualism, the emergence of interlanguage and distinct interculturality. The latter is particularly evident in the context of CTA in the Republic of Serbia, considering the number of national minorities, the poor status of the Croatian language, and the political, socioeconomic, and religious cross-section of the population. Taking into account the aforementioned circumstances, as well as the numerous challenges faced by CTA teachers in the RS, the aim of this research was to examine the views on the teachers' work experience within the CTA programme in the RS. Although it is only preliminary research in which six (6) teachers in the CTA programme in the RS participated, it is still possible to draw the following conclusions:

- 1) The teachers are mostly satisfied with the competencies acquired through college education, but they emphasize the need for further training and education in order to become better acquainted with innovative methods and digital forms of work in teaching, the cultural contents, and the general and local circumstances (social, cultural, political, etc.) in Serbia.
- 2) The teachers need additional intercultural competencies that they did not acquire during formal education, and that only become known in the teaching process in an intercultural environment like the RS.
- 3) The teachers recognize that working in CTA in the RS implies the mastery of special knowledge and skills and the use of different strategies and work methods.
- 4) As a special challenge, the teachers mention the problem of students' prior knowledge and motivation, as well as the lack of distinction between the Croatian and the Serbian languages, which requires special education to familiarize teachers with the peculiarities of the Bunjevci, Šokci and Srijem cultural heritage and the linguistic differences between Croatian and Serbian.
- 5) The existing textbooks within the framework of CTA in the RS comply with the teaching plan and programme in principle, but the teachers emphasize the lack of content that includes spelling and expression, as well as the absence of chronological order when discussing literature, and the lack of materials for discussing cultural and historical topics.
- 6) The teachers recognize the importance of individual factors (motivation, strategy, age...) in learning and teaching the CL.
- 7) The teachers particularly emphasize the need for further training and practice in teaching the CL before participating in the CTA in the RS, especially in acquiring Croatian as a foreign or heritage language (linguistic and cultural content, teaching methodology...), which is primarily due to the lack of programmes for the education of teachers of Croatian as a foreign or heritage language at the formal level.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the results presented here on the experiences of teachers in the CTA programme in the RS provide only a general insight into the possible problems and challenges faced by teachers of the Croatian language in the RS, and they are exclusively descriptive in nature. This preliminary research included only teachers within the CTA in the RS (N=6) who are heterogeneous according to socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, work experience, additional education, etc.), which is why the possibility of generalizing the results is completely excluded, as well as that of making any final conclusions. Still, the results of this preliminary research provide insights into the real challenges faced by teachers in the RS and can serve as a basis for creating educational policies, and future programmes for the further education of teachers within the Croatian language programmes.

In subsequent research, it would be necessary to increase the sample to get a more comprehensive view of the challenges, difficulties, and competencies of teachers working in Croatian-language departments in the RS, the process of selecting language-expert staff, and the environmental factors influencing the implementation of the CTA programme in the RS. On a broader scale, this preliminary research raises questions about teacher training and the adequacy of existing programmes and competencies for working within the CTA programme worldwide.

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## POVZETEK

### **IZVAJANJE PROGRAMA »POUK HRVAŠČINE V TUJINI« V REPUBLIKI SRBIJI: IZKUŠNJE UČITELJEV**

V Republiki Srbiji so prvi celovit program v hrvaškem jeziku začeli izvajati leta 2002. Tako je hrvaška skupnost dobila status narodne manjšine, a pouk je potekal v zelo zahtevnih okoliščinah, k čemur so prispevale številne ovire pri zaposlovanju učiteljev, težave z učbeniki, upad števila Hrvatov in pojmovanje tipološko sorodnega srbskega jezika kot maternega jezika Hrvatov. Namen raziskave je predstaviti izkušnje učiteljev, ki delujejo v okviru programa »Hrvaški pouk v tujini« v Republiki Srbiji. V raziskavo so bili vključeni le učitelji iz Republike Hrvaške, ki jih je izbralo Ministrstvo za znanost in izobraževanje. Raziskava je temeljila na anonimni anketi, s katero smo preverjali 1) strokovno usposobljenost učiteljev za delo s pomočjo analize njihovih specifičnih in splošnih kompetenc ter primernost razpoložljivih učbenikov v hrvaškem jeziku, 2) usposobljenost učiteljev za podajanje vsebin, povezanih s kulturno in zgodovinsko dediščino Hrvaške in 3) usposobljenost učiteljev za poučevanje hrvaščine kot dediščinskega jezika. Rezultati kažejo, da 1) učitelji potrebujejo dodatne medkulturne kompetence, ki jih niso pridobili v času formalnega izobraževanja, 2) obstoječi učbeniki niso povsem primerni za poučevanje jezika in književnosti, 3) učitelji pred odhodom na delo v tujini potrebujejo dodatno usposabljanje in prakso poučevanja hrvaškega jezika, zlasti na področju usvajanja hrvaščine kot dediščinskega jezika, kar je predvsem posledica pomanjkanja formalnih izobraževalnih programov za učitelje hrvaščine kot tujega oziroma dediščinskega jezika. Poleg tega učitelji kot poseben izziv navajajo težave, povezane s predznanjem in motivacijo učencev ter razlikovanjem med hrvaškim in srbskim jezikom.

**Ključne besede:** medkulturna kompetenca, splošne in specifične kompetence učiteljev, učbeniki, hrvaščina kot dediščinski jezik, hrvaški jezik v Republiki Srbiji

## ABSTRACT

**IMPLEMENTATION OF CROATIAN TEACHING ABROAD PROGRAMME IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES**

The first comprehensive programme in the Croatian language in the Republic of Serbia started in 2002, and the status of the Croatian community as a national minority was recognized, but teaching took place in very challenging circumstances, considering the numerous obstacles in hiring teachers, difficulties with textbooks, the decreasing number of Croats and the perception of the typologically related Serbian language as the mother tongue among Croats. The aim of this research is to get an insight into the experiences of teachers who work within the Croatian Teaching Abroad (CTA) programme in the Republic of Serbia. Only teachers from the Republic of Croatia selected by the Ministry of Science and Education participated in the research. The research was conducted through an anonymous survey that examined: 1) teacher education for work through the analysis of specific and general competencies and the suitability of available textbooks in the Croatian language, 2) the teachers' ability to deliver content related to the cultural and historical heritage of Croatia and 3) the teachers' qualifications for teaching Croatian as a heritage language. The results show that: 1) the teachers need additional intercultural competencies that they did not acquire during formal education, 2) the existing textbooks are not fully suitable for teaching language and literature, 3) the teachers need further training and practice in teaching the Croatian language before teaching Croatian abroad, especially in the area of acquiring Croatian as a heritage language, which is primarily due to the lack of programmes for the education of teachers of Croatian as a foreign or heritage language at the formal level. Moreover, the teachers note the problem of students' prior knowledge and motivation, as well as that of differentiating between the Croatian and Serbian languages, as great challenges.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, general and specific competencies of teachers, textbooks, Croatian as a heritage language, Croatian language in the Republic of Serbia