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**A comparative study of Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders'  
performances in English**

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## **A comparative study of Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances in English**

### **Abstract**

This comparative research aims to provide insights into Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances in English as a foreign language (EFL). A total of 717 14-year-old students participated in the study in two neighboring regions and towns of Croatia and Hungary. The study examines how Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances compare on EFL tests; how they compare by groups, within groups, by length of instruction, weekly classes, and size of group; and the relationship between Croatian and Hungarian students' achievements on tests in their mother tongue (L1) and EFL. The findings show that Croatian students performed significantly better on the EFL proficiency tests than their Hungarian counterparts; larger differences have been found between groups' performances in Hungary than in Croatia, whereas no significant differences characterize within-group variations. Learners who started EFL earlier tend to achieve higher scores than later starters, whereas the findings on group size and weekly classes are more controversial.

## **Introduction**

The present study is part of a larger cross-country project carried out in Hungary and Croatia with the same constructs, measuring instruments, and procedures. A total of 717 14-year-old students participated in the study in two neighboring regions and towns of Croatia and Hungary. The project aims (1) to find out what Croatian and Hungarian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) can do at the end of year 8; (2) to compare learners' performances on EFL proficiency tests along some educational variables. The present study examines how Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances compare on EFL tests; how they compare by groups, within groups, by length of instruction, weekly classes, and size of group; and the relationship between Croatian and Hungarian students' achievements on tests in their mother tongue (L1) and EFL.

## **Background to study**

### *Theoretical background*

The most relevant theoretical underpinnings of the study relate to several second language acquisition (SLA) research areas: (1) how young learners develop (Cameron, 2001; Curtain & Pesola, 1994; Moon, 2000; Nikolov, 2002a) in foreign language classrooms, where they have limited access to the target language and it is one of the school subjects. As Johnstone (2000, p. 128) pointed out, there has been a lack of studies inquiring into how primary-school learners' achievements and other variables interact in foreign language contexts. (2) the assessment of communicative language ability (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and communicative language competence (*Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, 2001) (CEFR); and (3) the interdependence of L1 and L2 in emerging bilingualism (Baker, 1996; Cummins, 1991, 2000). The term "common underlying proficiency" (Cummins, 2000, p. 38) refers to cognitive academic proficiency underlying performance in both languages and the interdependence hypothesis states that proficiency transfer from one language to the other will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L2 in school as well as in the environment and adequate motivation to learn it. This means that the linguistic and literacy knowledge and skills students have learned in their L1 will bear on

the learning of academic knowledge and skills in L2 involving, for example, knowledge of how to approach a text and background knowledge of the world (Cummins, 2000, p. 190). In bilingual educational contexts research has shown that cross-lingual influence can operate in both directions (e.g., Verhoeven, 1991). A number of studies have supported the interdependence hypothesis across a variety of languages, though lower correlations have been found between linguistically distant languages (e. g., Chinese–English, Turkish–Dutch) than for languages that are relatively close to each other (e. g., English–French) (Baker, 1996; Cummins, 2000; Genesee, 1979).

A related but different hypothesis has been put forth in reading research conceptualizing the complex relationship between L1 and L2, and within L2, whether reading in L2 is a language problem or a reading problem (Alderson, 1984). Three types of data would be necessary to test this threshold hypothesis: reading ability in L1 and L2 and proficiency in L2 of the same individuals. Research in this area has resulted in contradictory findings (e. g. Lee & Schallert, 1997), as the separation of L2 proficiency and L2 reading skills is problematic. It is clear from the literature that L2 knowledge and reading knowledge interact: “the evidence is that, in second-language reading, knowledge of the second language is a more important factor than the first-language reading abilities” (Alderson, 2000, p. 23). However, testing the threshold hypothesis has so far proved impossible. As to the extent to which these factors interact, Bernhardt (2000; 2003 cited in Brantmeier, 2004, p. 53) found that 50% of L2 reading was accounted for by L1 literacy (20%) and L2 knowledge (30%), but the remaining 50% of variance was unexplained.

### *The two educational contexts*

Although Croatia and Hungary are neighbors and share many educational aspects and problems, important characteristics are different in their language education. In our view, the most significant areas relate to the following: (1) language levels and language learning traditions, (2) language teacher education, (3) teacher supply in schools, (4) quality of teaching, (5) the amount and quality of exposure to English available to students and teachers outside the classroom, and (6) the relationship between these factors and learners’ socioeconomic status. Also, (7) linguistically, the official languages

spoken by the vast majority in the two countries belong to different language families: Croatian is a Slavic language, whereas Hungarian, a Finno-Ugric language, does not belong to the Indo-European language family.

Croatia has gone through major changes in FL education policies in recent history. For political reasons, after 1948 Russian stopped being the compulsory FL in schools in Croatia (as part of former Yugoslavia); the repertoire of the first FL was enlarged to include also French, German and English. In the 1960s German became the preferred FL due to economic reasons: large numbers of Croats went to live in Germany and Austria as guest workers. In the '70s the popularity of German was reinforced as Croatia came to be recognized as an attractive tourist country and the majority of tourists came from Germany and Austria. English was making its way slowly during these decades and soon became a popular FL. As Croatia was more open to foreign influences, cultures and products than other countries from behind the Iron Curtain, it was easy to keep in touch with the trends in the world in all areas of life. American and British films, music, and magazines were available. With English becoming an international language, it turned into the most popular FL in the country. For a time, Croatian officials struggled to keep different foreign languages on offer in schools, sometimes insisting that the four languages (English, French, German and Russian, or Italian in regions bordering on Italy) be secured within a set of local schools. This idea was, however, soon abandoned due to the pressure of parents and pupils who insisted on English. Those learners who could not get English started with another FL but were offered English either later or as an optional school subject.

The majority of Croatians can use foreign languages, most importantly English, to communicate with foreigners for personal or professional purposes. Unfortunately, this statement is based on anecdotal evidence, as no studies have been conducted on Croats' command of FLs and census data are not available either. It is only in 2003 that systematic data collection on Croats' FL competences was undertaken but results have not been published.

In Hungary German used to be perceived as the most useful foreign language for historical and economic reasons and access to it was the privilege of the exceptional few. For a long time, however, tourism and business relations were on a significantly lower

level than in Croatia. Thus, the Hungarian population's levels of proficiency in modern languages have been extremely low: the ratio of citizens claiming to know at least one foreign language, according to data in the most recent National Census (2002), is 19 percent, lagging behind all nations in the European Union (*Europeans and languages: A Eurobarometer special survey*, 2001). These data are based on self-reports; actual levels may be even lower. Recently, English as a world language has become the most prestigious and useful foreign language, whereas German has been losing some of its appeal in schools and in society (Csapó, 2001; Halász & Lannert, 2003; Nikolov, 1999a).

One of the reasons why language levels are low is that in Hungary Russian was the mandatory foreign language for over four decades and although all students studied it from age ten, few achieved a functional level as Russian was not taught for communicative purposes. In addition to Russian, students in grammar schools were taught another modern foreign language. The situation changed overnight in 1989: since then, students may choose a foreign language they wish to study.

As for foreign language teacher education traditions, the two countries contrast in important ways. Croatia, generally speaking, has had qualified language teachers for a long time. It was only after English started to gain in popularity around the 1950s when teachers of German and, especially, French had to be retrained in fast-track programs to meet the growing demand due to increasing numbers of students enrolled in English programs.

In Hungary, the 1990s witnessed major innovations in language teacher education. Because of the serious shortage of modern language teachers, Russian teachers and other majors were retrained on the job as teachers of English and German to meet demands. The majority of retrained teachers kept their tenured posts in state schools; as a result, 65 percent of teachers of modern languages in primary schools are retrained graduates (Halász & Lannert, 1998, p. 273). During the first half of the 1990s international organizations contributed to the teaching of foreign languages and training teachers. However, despite the fact that the number of English and German majors in both fast-track and traditional programs increased significantly, even today ten percent of English and German teachers are unqualified (Halász & Lannert, 2003), as young language major graduates find better paid jobs on the market.

In Croatia university-level teaching degrees have been required for decades. Teachers' overall proficiency is high because of a longer tradition in language teacher education, more exposure to authentic language in the media and in everyday life, and stronger instrumental motivation to know languages because of tourism and business opportunities. In Croatia teacher education has kept up pace with the professional demands. For more than 60 years now, Croatia has had access to qualified native speakers who came to teach at Croatian universities through international organizations and exchange of academic staff with English-speaking countries. In-service seminars for teachers have been held on a regular basis involving teacher trainers from English-speaking countries.

The quality of teaching is extremely difficult to tap into, but some empirical studies provide insights into this area. In Hungary classroom observation projects (Nikolov, 1999b, 2002b) and a nation-wide survey into the frequency of typical classroom activities in primary and secondary schools revealed that teachers most often apply techniques of the audio-lingual and grammar-translation method both in English and German classes (Nikolov & Csapó, 2002; Nikolov, 2003a) and school achievements tend to be generally low. Another important feature of foreign language education relates to major differences between schools, classes and language learning groups within schools (Csapó, 2001; Józsa, 2003; Nikolov, 2003b). Schools try to respond to parental pressure and stream children from an early age in lower primary grades when foreign language programs are launched. Learners with highest achievements in math, the mother tongue, and other subjects are placed in groups starting earlier than mandatory, while the rest of the students either start in grade 4 (age 10), the age prescribed in the National Core Curriculum, or are offered German. Thus, no wonder Medgyes and Öveges (forthcoming) are right stating that „much less has been achieved since the change of regime than has been hoped for: the average Hungarian youth still does not speak foreign languages”.

These findings need to be interpreted in the light of data reflecting exceptionally favorable attitudes towards and motivation to learn foreign languages, most importantly English and German (e.g., Csizér, Dörnyei & Nyilasi, 1999; Nikolov, 2003a). Also, Hungarian schools offer language instruction in groups: classes are divided into groups for language lessons.

Students in Croatia benefit not only from better teaching, but they are also exposed to a wide range of subtitled TV programs, while on Hungarian television all intrinsically motivating programs are dubbed and few students benefit from international channels (Nikolov & Csapó, 2002). Croats have been found to make good use of the English language input they are surrounded with on a daily basis (Mihaljevic & Geld, 2003).

The Croatian national curriculum of modern languages has been stable over a long period, whereas in Hungary the National Core Curriculum has gone through various changes over the last 15 years reflecting functions of an interface between political and professional preferences and exerting little influence whatsoever on classroom processes (Medgyes & Nikolov, 2002). In Croatian schools instruction does not enhance individual differences but helps students develop along more similar lines than in Hungary where learners are streamed into groups according to their abilities from an early age (Andor, 2000; Csapó, 1998, 2001; Halász & Lannert, 2001, 2003).

Less variety in the TEFL curriculum in Croatia makes it easier for schools to offer courses matching learners' levels, while in Hungary a range of weekly hours, starting year and other factors cause greater differences between groups and schools and make transfer and continuity difficult (Vágó, 2000). Learners are often put in false beginner groups and this practice may result in their loss of motivation (Nikolov, 2001).

#### *Previous large-scale surveys of foreign language levels in Hungary*

Hungarian students' foreign language skills were assessed to monitor the levels and efficiency of foreign language education in state schools in 2000 and 2002 (Csapó & Nikolov, 2002; Nikolov & Csapó, 2002) and in 2003 (Józsa, 2003; Nikolov, 2003b) similarly to major Hungarian educational research projects in other school subjects (Csapó, 1998; 2002). Besides language skills tests, questionnaires were also administered to the participants to collect data on their social and language learning background and plans, attitudes, motivation, and classroom activities. To estimate their general cognitive abilities, a standardized inductive reasoning skill test was used (Csapó, 1998).

Representative samples of Hungarian students participated in three projects assessing their English and German language skills in 2000, 2002 and 2003. The units for

sampling and data collection involved school classes of grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 from approximately 300 state schools, including close to 50,000 FL learners. Some findings of these large-scale assessment projects are relevant for the present study: (1) students' language performances showed a lot of variation in all cohorts: learners in some groups achieved top scores, while other groups performed on extremely low levels; (2) learners of English outperformed learners of German; (3) the best performances were found in listening, partly, because the tasks were pitched at a lower level in light of classroom observation data: listening comprehension is the least frequently developed skill in Hungarian schools; (4) students' achievements were the lowest in writing; (5) all learners' language learning attitudes, motivation, and long term plans with language study were extremely positive, but slightly more favorable for English than for German; (6) modest to strong correlations were found between the size of settlement, learners' socio-economic status, cognitive skills, weekly language classes, and type of school for secondary schools. These results indicate that in an educational context like Hungary, where access to the examined target languages is mostly limited to the classroom, students' socioeconomic status and developmental level of cognitive skills strongly influence their choice of and achievements in a foreign language. Similar findings characterize achievements in other school subjects (Andor, 2000; Csapó, 1998; 2002).

#### *Previous surveys of foreign language levels in Croatia*

An attempt to look into the FL levels as well as into ways of making teaching and learning more efficient was made by Filipović and associates (Filipović, 1971, 1974) as part of Yugoslav Serbo-Croatian – English Contrastive Project (YSCECP). Results of the project were used as the basis for designing new teaching materials (Vilke, 1975).

In the 1970s an early FL learning project was implemented in order to find out what levels school children could achieve if they started in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (age eight) (Vilke, 1976, 1976a, 1978). A more comprehensive project, initiated in the '90s, offered research-based insights into the ways and conditions necessary to achieve useful levels of FL competence by the end of primary education (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993, 1995). Although the project was sponsored by ministries, the results were ignored when

compulsory FL instruction was introduced in 1<sup>st</sup> grade (age six) on a national scale in 2003.

In 2003, as part of a national project aiming to find out about the levels Croatian learners of English achieved by the end of primary and secondary education, more than 2,000 learners' competence was tested using communicative tests developed and validated in Hungary in 2002 and piloted in Croatia to check their validity in the new context. A smaller sample of learners of German was administered the same type of measuring instruments. These tests were used because they were considered valid for the Croatian context and to allow comparisons between the two countries.

The findings of a comparison between Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' results in 2002 indicated that while there were no significant differences in the listening comprehension skills (because of a ceiling effect), Croatian learners were significantly better than their Hungarian counterparts at reading comprehension and writing skills. A comparison of the results obtained by learners of English and learners of German revealed that English learners were better at reading comprehension and writing, while in listening there were differences only in the secondary groups (learners of English being better than learners of German) (Mihaljevic Djigunovic, in preparation).

### **The study**

The present study is innovative in several ways: (1) Participants are learners of neighboring countries in Central-Eastern Europe where language learning traditions and the educational context share a lot of similarities, but there are also significant differences which may impact on the outcomes. (2) The construct of language knowledge was the same for first languages (Croatian and Hungarian) and English as a foreign language. (3) The English proficiency tests were piloted and used with a nationally representative sample in Hungary in 2002 and later with a smaller sample in Croatia. In the present study they were used with new cohorts of Croatian and Hungarian learners. (4) A new instrument was developed to tap into participants' pragmatic competence both in Croatian and Hungarian and EFL, and a new version of an EFL oral test was also administered to a subsample in both countries. (5) The same questionnaire on background

was used in both contexts. (6) Schools were chosen from two neighboring regions and cities in Croatia and Hungary: Slavonia including Osijek and Baranya county including Pécs.

### *Research questions*

The aim is to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances compare on EFL tests?
2. How do Croatian and Hungarian students' performances compare on EFL tests by groups and within groups?
3. How do performances compare according to length of study, number of weekly classes, and size of group?
4. What is the relationship between Croatian and Hungarian students' achievements on the L1 and L2 tests? To what extent do L1 test scores predict L2 test scores?

### *Participants*

A total of 717 8<sup>th</sup> graders (distributed in 39 groups) participated in the study in Slavonia and Osijek in Croatia and in Baranya and Pécs in Hungary (see Table 1).

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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The two samples (one in Hungary and one in Croatia) were drawn from year 8 (age 14) primary school EFL learners. This particular age group was chosen for two reasons: (1) In both countries year 8 represents the end of primary school (and compulsory education in Croatia) and it is the time when learners either end their formal education or transfer to a secondary school (as the majority do). (2) By year 8 all learners have had several years of EFL learning, regardless of when they started, and are able to perform on proficiency measures. The participants were year 8 learners who represented small village, small town and big town school EFL learners. These types of schools were considered relevant from the point of view of the socio-educational context and, also, quality of instruction.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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### *Instruments*

#### EFL tests

For English as a foreign language a battery of tests consisting of two test booklets (one on reading comprehension and one on listening comprehension, writing and pragmatics) and a speaking test were used. The tests in the two booklets had been designed and validated first in Hungary in 2002 and later in Croatia. The speaking test was adapted from a validated speaking test for Hungarian EFL learners for the purpose of this project. All the tests were meaning focused and were based on the CEFR levels the EFL learners were expected to reach at end of year 8 (A1 and lower band of A2 level). The structure and content of the two test booklets are presented in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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The topics as well as task types were familiar to the participants: they were not built on or borrowed from any particular teaching material but they were highly similar to the ones in the course materials they used in school. The vocabulary and structures of the texts were expected to be on or a bit beyond the level of the target population. The estimated level was hypothesized to cover a relatively wide range (A1 and lower band of A2) as EFL learners in year 8, in both countries, include learners who started learning English at the mandatory start in year 4 and those who had started earlier in one to three classes per week. The length of the texts in the items ranged from a word, an expression, or a sentence, to a short passage. All tasks focused on meaning, not form, and reflected the achievement targets defined in the national curricula for these age groups in both countries. The texts were authentic, except for the listening tasks, where scripted materials were used. The reading booklet was produced in two versions: the sequence of the tasks was different, but the actual tasks were identical. The rubrics were given in English and all listening and reading tasks started with an example to ensure that even if the instructions were slightly beyond test-takers or they skipped them, they could understand what to do.

In Reading task 1 participants were supposed to match 10 basic vocabulary items with ten definitions; for example, «hospital-a place where you visit someone sick or ill»; «postman-a person who delivers letters». In Reading task 2, there were 10 public notices to be matched with the clause/sentence that explains its meaning: for example, «use before 01.02.2002-after this date you must not eat this food»; «return books here-this is the library desk». In Reading task 3 participants had to read a short interview from a British youth magazine and match nine questions and answers: for example, «What do you do?-I go to Pinewood School.»; «Your favourite food?-Anything sweet, I love cakes and ice cream.». Reading task 4 contained eight quiz questions that had to be matched with appropriate answers: for example, «Why do some flowers smell sweet?-It's a way of attracting bees, flies, butterflies and other insects»; «Which is the biggest bird of prey?-The Andean condor measures up to 110 cm long and weighs up to 12 kg. Its wingspan is over 3 metres.». In Reading task 5 participants were to match nine advertisements with missing words.

Listening task 1 required participants to listen to a conversation between two friends describing a picture and fill in the appropriate numbers in the table provided for the persons in the picture next to the names. Although the listening text was scripted, the dialogue and the situation sounded highly authentic. In Listening task 2 participants listened to 10 short texts and worked on multiple choice items: with seven texts they were supposed to decide where the dialogue took place, and the rest resembled standard listening comprehension questions.

In the Writing task participants had two pictures that looked the same but included ten small differences. They were told in the instructions which parts of the picture the ten differences concerned, so they were not tested for their perception of the differences.

The Pragmatics test contained twelve examples of everyday situations that were described verbally and illustrated by a picture. Participants were to answer a question about each situation by choosing the appropriate answer from the multiple choice items offered. For example:

You've had dinner with an English family and you are now leaving because it's very late in the evening. What do you say to them?

- A "Thank you for the food. It was really good."
- B "Thank you for inviting me. I really enjoyed the dinner."
- C "It was a good dinner. Good evening."
- D "Enjoy your meal."

The Speaking test was administered to six, randomly chosen, students from each school. The interlocutors were trained prior to going to the schools. The interviews were carried out individually and all were audio taped. The test lasted for up to 15 minutes and was strictly structured. It consisted of three tasks. Task 1 lasted 2-3 minutes and consisted of the interlocutor asking nine questions: the first three were general questions (What's your name? Could you spell your name, please? How old are you?), the other six could be selected from the remaining nine. In Task 2 participants were first to choose one of six pictures spread out on the table, describe it and explain the similarities and differences between the scene in the picture (e.g. a busy street or messy kitchen) and the same place in their own life. The task lasted 4-5 minutes. In Task 3, which also lasted 4-5 minutes, participants were to choose two of six situations and act them out with the interlocutor. For example:

Your friend is coming to visit you. Give him/her directions from the nearest station or bus stop to your home.

You would like to cook something nice with your friend. Discuss what you like or dislike and why.

In the first situation the interlocutor initiated conversation, while in the second one the interviewee was invited to initiate it.

#### L1 tests

L1 tests booklets (both Hungarian and Croatian) included tasks in listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, and pragmatics. These were new tests designed and piloted on a similar population in both countries specifically for the purpose of this project. The reading and listening comprehension tests followed the same format

in the two languages, but included different authentic input texts. The task types were also the same and included either multiple choice items or short answers to be supplied by participants.

In the Listening tests, both in Hungarian and Croatian, there were three tasks. These were recordings of authentic national radio programs that 14-year-olds would be expected to listen to and find intrinsically motivating. The task types used in the tests tapped close listening as well as skimming.

The Reading tests included five tasks. In terms of content the tasks included popular science texts, tables, and news from daily papers, texts from encyclopedias and literary texts. Two tasks were the same: they were Hungarian tasks translated into Croatian. The reading subskills tapped were skimming, scanning as well as intensive reading.

The writing tests in both languages included the same two task types. Writing task 1 was the same in content too: it required participants to write about their opinion on allowing learners to draw graffiti on their local school wall. In Writing task 2 participants were asked to write a letter to a travel agent concerning a place where the participant and three friends could stay during holidays. The content was culturally appropriate for the two L1 writing tests as the names of the agents and places to stay were specific to the Croatian and Hungarian contexts.

The pragmatics test included one task with six multiple choice items. The same task was used in both countries, as from the socio-cultural point of view, they are highly similar. The items concerned such examples as asking politely for a bill in a restaurant, and reacting to friends being late for the cinema.

### Questionnaire

The same questionnaire was administered in the participants' mother tongue. Besides detailed background data, participants were asked about the time they started studying English and how many classes they had in a week.

### *Procedures*

The paper and pencil tests were administered to students in classroom-size groups in May, 2004. Participants had 45-minute class session for the reading booklets in each language, 45-minute class sessions for listening and writing tasks in each language, whereas a separate session was devoted to filling in the questionnaires. All tests and questionnaires were coded and assessed centrally during the summer of 2004. Schools were given their coded results in September. Oral tests, observations and interviews with EFL teachers were conducted during the week or the week following test administration. Six students were randomly chosen for the oral test; these tests were conducted with external interlocutors.

As is evident from the descriptions of the instruments used to measure proficiency in English and in L1, they included tasks that were simple to score and assess (e.g. multiple choice items), whereas others required some negotiation (short answers) and the construction of assessment tools and sophisticated training (writing and speaking tasks).

Assessment of short answers (in L1 reading and listening comprehension tasks) was tackled in the following way: (1) test designers put down expected answers for each item; (2) they read all papers and collected answers not matching their expectations; (3) they consulted with colleagues to decide what to include in the final key.

For the writing tasks (one in English and two in the L1) three separate assessment scales were constructed along four criteria: task achievement, vocabulary, grammar/accuracy and text with scales of four bands each.

Assessment of speaking performance was done by means of a specially designed assessment scale constructed along the following criteria: task achievement, vocabulary, accuracy and fluency, pronunciation and intonation with a scale including five bands.

The assessors of both writing and speaking were trained. Since such training has to focus on the actual tasks, four sets of training were conducted. Length of the training depended on how much time the assessors needed to standardize their criteria (between three to five hours). Standardization across the two countries was achieved in training workshops with a trainer from Hungary. As for the L1 writings, one of the Croatian assessors was a bilingual speaker of Hungarian. She had access to sample papers in Hungarian with the actual scores given by two Hungarian assessors after negotiations with one another and one member of the Croatian team.

All participating schools received coded statistical data from all schools and detailed information on their students' performances in November 2004.

## Results

Summary statistics for the participating students' L2 performance on various skills and for two total scores are included in Table 4. L2TOTAL includes data on listening, reading and writing, whereas L2TOTALS includes results on the speaking test in addition to the first three skills. As the data in Table 4 show, Croatian students outperformed their Hungarian counterparts in all skill areas and, consequently, their total scores are also higher. To test the hypothesis that these differences are statistically significant, we applied independent samples *t*-tests to the data. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5. As can be seen, the difference between Croatian students' English listening and reading scores turned out to be significantly higher than those of the Hungarian students. The same was true for the two totals (L2TOTAL and L2TOTALS) as well.

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Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here  
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To see how the performances of L2 groups in the two countries differed from one another on the total English score variable, we first computed the group means for every group in the two countries. Descriptive statistics for the obtained group means are displayed in Table 6. The mean for the lowest scoring group was 30.92 points for Hungary and 51.36 points for Croatia, while the mean for the highest scoring group was 84.33 points for Hungary and 83.82 points for Croatia. These results indicate that the range of mean scores between the lowest and highest scoring groups was much higher for Hungary (53.41 points) than Croatia (32.46 points). As a result, the variance of mean group scores (Hungary:  $s^2 = 423.29$ , Croatia:  $s^2 = 67.81$ ) was also significantly higher for Hungary ( $F = 36.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ), showing that there is significantly more between-groups variation in students' performance in Hungary than in Croatia.

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Insert Table 6 about here  
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In order to see whether within-group variation of students' English performance was also different for the two countries, we computed the within-group variances for each group in both countries, which we followed up with an independent samples *t*-test testing the hypothesis that the mean within-group variance was different for Hungary and Croatia. The test indicated that no such difference existed, suggesting that students performances within language groups were equally varied in the two countries.

We performed a multiple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between L1 listening, L1 reading, and L1 writing measures as the predictor variables and English total scores as the dependent variable. Two models were built, one for each country. All the predictor variables were entered into the model simultaneously. The standardized beta coefficients for the predictor variables in the resulting models along with the corresponding *t* statistics are displayed in Table 7.

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For the Hungarian cohort, all the variables in the regression equation significantly contributed to the prediction of students' English test scores with L1 listening being the best predictor ( $\beta = 0.408$ ), followed by L1 writing ( $\beta = 0.284$ ) and L1 reading ( $\beta = 0.194$ ). In contrast, L1 reading ( $\beta = 0.625$ ) turned out to be the only significant predictor of L2 performance in the Croatian model. The total variance in L2 performance explained by students' L1 performance was consequently higher for Hungary (55%) than for Croatia (32%).

We also collected data concerning the students' age at which they started learning English, the number of weekly classes, and the size of groups in which they study English. To compare the relationship between starting age and L2 performance, we first computed Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between each L2 measure and starting age separately for Hungarian and Croatian students. The resulting correlations are displayed in Table 8.

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Insert Table 8 about here  
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As data in Table 8 indicate, all coefficients turned out to be negative and significant at the  $p < .01$  level of significance, indicating that an earlier start might be beneficial in both countries. Another general observation is that the absolute values of the coefficients for the Hungarian subsample are all higher than the corresponding Croatian coefficients. To examine if the differences between the coefficients are statistically significant, we carried out a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs). To do this, first we standardized the variables that we correlated with each other. Using an ANCOVA, it is possible to test the homogeneity of two regression slopes, which in the special case of using standardized variables is equivalent to testing the equality of two correlations between two variables for the two countries. The results of the ANCOVAs supported the hypothesis that in Hungary there is a stronger negative relationship between learners' starting age and all aspects of their L2 performance measured in the study when compared to the situation in Croatia, since all results turned out to be significant at the  $p < 0.01$  probability level. That is, starting earlier seems to be more desirable in Hungary than in Croatia.

As for the number of weekly classes, the average of weekly classes was 2.94 in Croatia, and 3.52 in Hungary, whereas there were 22 and 14 students on average in Croatian and Hungarian groups respectively.

## **Discussion**

As the overall results indicate, Croatian students performed on a significantly higher level in EFL than their Hungarian peers. This is a remarkable outcome of our study in the light of three key factors. The first is the weekly number of classes indicating frequency: although Hungarian learners get more English instruction and a strong relationship was found within the Hungarian learners' cohort between hours of instruction per week and performance on the EFL tests, Croatian students achieved better results in only three classes a week. The results of Hungarian students coincide with findings in a nation-wide survey involving learners of English in years 6 and 10 where higher weekly number of classes resulted in higher achievements (Józsa, 2003; Nikolov,

2003b, with one exception to this pattern: learners of German in the highest weekly classes performed on a lower level than their peers in less intensive courses). Also, Alderson (2000b) found that the relationship between weekly classes and outcomes was more complex for a convenience sample of secondary-school EFL students.

The other indicator is the number of students in a group. Croatian learners study English in whole classes, while Hungarian students learn in small groups; however, fewer students in groups (an average of 14 versus 22) do not necessarily ensure better achievements. Finally, an early start does not seem to guarantee higher achievements in year 8, as the earlier starter Hungarian learners did not outperform their Croatian counterparts, though learners with more years of instruction achieved better results among the Hungarian participants. Therefore, the differences must be caused by the quality of English language teaching and influences outside the classroom in the two educational contexts.

An important finding may shed light on a different aspect of teaching and learners' development. As the results show, more variation was found between groups in Hungary than in Croatia, but there was no significant difference within groups in either context. This phenomenon is most probably a result of streaming in Hungarian schools into ability groups (Andor, 2000; Csapó, 1998, 2002), while this practice is not typical in Croatian schools. It must be borne in mind that most frequently schools skim classes in the lower primary years and place more able young learners in the early groups, thus it is impossible to tell whether it is the earlier start or learners' cognitive abilities, or these two in interaction, ensuring more favorable outcomes in year 8. How the time of start factor influences outcomes is presently unclear, but it is certain that the assumption underlying streaming - allow fast learners to develop at a higher pace and provide slow learners with more support - does not seem to work for the latter group in Hungary. Less able learners are often left behind. Therefore, the explanation of the strong relationship between weekly classes and better achievements is that more able students are streamed into more intensive groups, thus allowing them to develop even faster, while the less able are placed in "normal" groups (Nikolov, 2004).

As in the present study learners' aptitude was not measured, this assumption can be supported by evidence from other studies. Csapó and Nikolov (2002) found that

inductive reasoning had an impact on FL achievement, similarly to Kiss and Nikolov's (2005) findings.

As to the extent to which Croatian and Hungarian learners' achievements in L1 predict their achievements in English, in the case of Hungarian learners listening, reading and writing test results in L1 significantly contribute to the prediction of EFL results, while in the case of Croatian students only reading in L1 is a significant contributor. Several explanations offer themselves: this finding may result from streaming Hungarian learners into ability groups according to their achievements in L1, or the extensive use of translation in EFL classes may contribute to a stronger interdependence between levels in L1 and L2. As the findings of a nation-wide survey and classroom observations show (Nikolov, 1999b; 2003b), translation into L1 is the most frequently applied classroom technique of meaning making, practice, and assessment and it may influence outcomes. As for the Croatian learners, it makes sense to explain the results by pointing out that students with better L1 reading achievements can benefit more from exposure to L2 outside the classroom, most importantly from subtitled films freely available on television.

Our study found evidence for the interdependence hypothesis, as a linear relationship was found between L1 and L2 performances in both cohorts. Although teachers and school officials often voice concerns reflecting a threshold hypothesis, supposing that achievements in an L2 will be significantly lower below a certain level in L1, our findings do not indicate such a threshold for these participants.

### **Conclusion and further research**

Our study has indeed provided new insights into Croatian and Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> graders' performances. Croatian students in year 8 performed on a higher level in EFL than their Hungarian counterparts. Also, larger differences have been found between groups' performances in Hungary than in Croatia, whereas no significant differences characterize within-group variations. As for the relationship between students' performances in L1 and L2, the interdependence hypothesis has gained support in both cohorts. The findings of our study suggest that factors usually assumed to be the keys to success in FL learning, i.e. early start, more classes, and small groups, while extremely

important, do not guarantee higher achievements. The importance of these factors as well as their interaction should be considered against a host of other variables, the most important of which, in our opinion, are the quality of teaching and exposure to comprehensible input in the target language. Exposure comprises both classroom teaching and out of class contact with the FL. We believe that length, amount as well as quality of exposure to the FL need to be taken into consideration. While there are instruments for measuring the quality of teaching and the length and amount of FL classroom teaching are easy to measure, the methodology for a systematic study of out of class exposure is yet to be developed. In order to see the real impact of these variables studies that would include them are warranted.

Further research is necessary to find out about the relationship between learners' attitudes and motivation and achievements on the English tests; between their performances on EFL proficiency tests and the observed classroom practices in the two countries – not discussed in the present paper. It is particularly challenging to find out in what ways classroom processes contribute to outcomes: how Hungarian and Croatian teachers of English model the target language, what tasks they apply, how they scaffold their learning, how much peer interaction takes place, and how they integrate learners' extensive exposure to English outside the classroom. In other words, analyses of all data collected in our larger project will hopefully provide insights into how the quality of teaching may differ and, thus, offer learners in the two socio-educational contexts different opportunities for language learning. Interview data with the teachers will hopefully throw light on teachers' professional beliefs about how learners acquire English and benefit from classrooms tasks and outside class exposure, their motivation and awareness of how their practices may relate to learning outcomes.

Further analyses are necessary to explore in what ways students' speaking and writing performances reflect developmental sequences in SLA studies; the relationship between intended levels of difficulty of tasks in both L1 and L2 and students' performances on them and how the CEFR (2001) 'can do statements' and the actual spoken and written texts compare to one another. A different avenue of explorations into the written and oral products would need to find answers to the question how linguistic

distance (Croatian – English; Hungarian – English), often hypothesized to influence outcomes, interacts with other variables.

Finally, it is necessary to overview the implications of our comparative study for teacher education, so that teachers may benefit from a better understanding of the relationships between the wider social context and teachers' and students' classroom behavior, teachers' views expressed in the interviews, and students' achievements on tests.

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**Table 1:**  
**Participants in Croatia and Hungary**

	Croatia	Hungary	Total
Schools	10	10	20
Groups	21	18	39
Students	470	247	717
Teachers	12	13	25

**Table 2:**  
**Location of participating groups/classes in Croatia and Hungary**

	Croatia	Hungary	Total
City	8	15	23
Town	8	1	9
Village	5	2	7
Total	21	18	39

**Table 3:**  
**Structure and content of EFL test booklets**

Skill	Task	Input text	No. of items
Reading 1	Match word with appropriate sentence	Definitions of words	10
Reading 2	Match notice with meaning	Public notices and their meanings	10
Reading 3	Match question with answer	Interview from youth magazine	9
Reading 4	Match questions with answers	Quiz texts	8
Reading 5	Match advert with missing word	Advertisements	9
Listening 1	Multiple choice on pictures	Conversation (scripted)	10
Listening 2	Multiple choice on texts	Conversations (scripted)	10
Writing	Describing differences	Describing similarities and differences in two pictures	Marking scheme
Pragmatics	Multiple choice	Dialogues in various language use situations	12

**Table 4:**  
**Summary statistics for students' L2 performance in the two countries**

	COUNTRY	N	MEAN	SD
L2LISTENING	Hungary	216	17.62	3.43
	Croatia	416	18.38	2.86
L2READING	Hungary	231	26.94	11.67
	Croatia	353	32.34	9.84
L2WRITING	Hungary	216	17.15	11.05
	Croatia	320	17.62	9.08
L2SPEAKING	Hungary	35	29.09	14.21
	Croatia	95	29.69	12.12
L2PRAGMATICS	Hungary	230	7.18	2.68
	Croatia	379	7.40	2.28
L2TOTAL	Hungary	202	62.22	24.62
	Croatia	247	71.49	16.26
L2TOTALS	Hungary	25	89.00	39.01
	Croatia	67	109.31	20.31

*Notes:* L2TOTAL = L2LISTENING + L2READING + L2WRITING; L2TOTALS = L2TOTAL + L2SPEAKING

**Table 5:**  
**Comparison of students' L2 performance in the two countries**  
**(independent samples *t*-test)**

	<i>t</i>	df	P
L2LISTENING	-2.809	373.806	.005*
L2READING	-5.815	432.793	.000*
L2WRITING	-0.517	399.634	.605
L2SPEAKING	-0.225	53.282	.823
L2PRAGMATICS	-1.025	425.066	.306
L2TOTAL	-4.593	335.051	.000*
L2TOTALS	-2.481	28.992	.019*

*Notes:* Equal variances not assumed; \* = significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

**Table 6:**  
**Descriptive statistics for group means of L2TOTAL scores in the two countries**

	HUNGARY (N=16) <sup>a</sup>	CROATIA (N=21)
Minimum	30.92	51.36
Maximum	84.33	83.82
Range	53.41	32.46
Mean	58.88	70.71
Variance	423.29	67.81

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup>Two groups in the Hungarian cohort did not take the English writing test, therefore, the total scores were only available for 16 Hungarian groups.

**Table 7:**  
**Multiple regression analysis of students' L1 and L2 performance**

	Multiple <i>R</i>	Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		<i>β</i>	t	p
HUNGARY (N=183)	0.744	0.546	L1LISTENING	0.408	6.276	.000*
			L1READING	0.194	3.012	.003*
			L1WRITING	0.284	4.627	.000*
CROATIA (N=64)	0.590	0.315	L1LISTENING	-0.103	-0.950	.346
			L1READING	0.625	5.054	.000*
			L1WRITING	-0.033	-0.275	.784

*Notes:* \* = Significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

**Table 8:**  
**Correlations between L2 performance and starting age**

	HUNGARY	CROATIA
L2LISTENING	-0.504 (200)	-0.169 (412)
L2READING	-0.592 (216)	-0.259 (350)
L2WRITING	-0.675 (199)	-0.218 (317)
L2SPEAKING	-0.810 (32)	-0.285 (94)
L2PRAGMATICS	-0.421 (216)	-0.192 (376)
L2TOTAL	-0.656 (187)	-0.254 (246)
L2TOTALS	-0.827 (23)	-0.326 (67)

*Notes:* All coefficients are significant at the  $p < .01$  level. N sizes are given in parenthesis.