

# Correlation between extracurricular, curricular exposure to English and FLA success in students learning English for more than 13 years

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## Abstract

Today's generations have been introduced to foreign language (FL) learning from an early age. In fact, in Croatia, English as a foreign language is mandatory from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of the primary school and in some European countries even from kindergarten (Poland, Cyprus, some communities in Spain). However, children are also acquiring foreign language unintentionally through the exposure to different media such as TV, Internet and social networks as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok. Successful L2 acquisition is often contributed to the age factor and individual differences between L2 learners (social, cognitive, affective), but contextual factors that include wider community, language policy, education system and formal, non-formal and informal opportunities for L2 development should not be neglected. Three different contexts of acquiring second language can be differentiated: *at home context*, where the new language is studied as foreign language, *immersion context*, which is characterised by the immersion in the language of the environment, and *study abroad context*, which takes place in the L2 setting (Collentine and Fred, 2004). Since at home context refers to formal learning of language in a formal environment, the terms such as local context and local environment in which a language is learned are used more often. In the present research, a questionnaire was administered to 40 university students of food technology with the aim of determining the correlation between curricular, extracurricular and students' success in FLA based on the secondary school<sup>1</sup>, secondary school leaving certificate and the university grades. The following conclusions that will be discussed later in the paper have been reached: the students' final grade in English on the secondary school exit exam and at the 1<sup>st</sup> year of studying does not differ to a great extent (although there was a 38 % decline in the final grade in English

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<sup>1</sup> After the finished primary school (duration - 8 years), children enroll the secondary school, which lasts for 4 years

at the university level); the students have been exposed to English primarily through watching films with the English subtitles, listening to English songs, using social networks, listening to podcasts, playing video games and reading books; most of the students think that their success in mastering English can be contributed to both curricular and extracurricular exposure to English; students mostly spend up to 10 hours weekly being exposed to extracurricular contents; most of the students started learning English in the first grade of the primary school; weak correlation was found between very early exposure to English (kindergarten) and the highest grade (A) in English; stronger correlation was found between the exposure to extracurricular contents and the final grade in English (A in English on secondary school exit exam and 1<sup>st</sup> year of studying), leading to the conclusion that extracurricular exposure to English is a factor contributing to higher achievements (when final grade is concerned) in English and as such should not be neglected.

**Keywords:** foreign language acquisition, age factor in SLA, contextual factor in SLA

## Introduction

Success in the second language acquisition (SLA) is often contributed to the age factor and individual differences between learners (social, affective, cognitive). However, contextual factors such as wider community, language policy, educational system and formal and informal opportunities for learning a language should not be left aside as they interact with the above-mentioned factors and modify them to a great extent (DeKeyser, 2012; Erk, 2021; Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Collentine and Fred (2004) differentiate between three basic contexts of second language learning: *at home context*, where new language is learned as foreign language in formal, institutional conditions, then *immersion context*, characterized by an immersion into the language of a community, and *study abroad context*, which is temporary when compared to immersion context, but takes place in L2 setting. Since at home context implies learning a language in a formal context (environment), terms such as local context of learning (Ushioda, 2013) or local environment where a language is learned are used more often (Benson, 2017). Previous studies of foreign language acquisition (FLA) were based on a formal context of language learning, neglecting thus the experiences and the exposure to language in a non-formal, out-of-school context. However, informal context is an important factor interacting with the age factor and formal way of teaching, contributing to the heterogeneity of the final outcome in the language learning.

English language is the language of international communication. It is, thus, learned as a foreign language in Croatia. Since the knowledge of English language plays a pivotal role in the realization of economic and political interests, especially in

countries where internationally non-recognizable languages are spoken, certain countries introduce a policy where the usage of English language in the media is encouraged (also known as unintentional language acquisition). It is evidenced in some European countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, where high levels of receptive knowledge of English have been witnessed, which is indirectly related to the presence of English in the media in such a great extent, so that the English has become an integral and indispensable part of every-day life. It was confirmed by a study conducted by Verspoor et al. (2011), which showed that a lack of exposure to English through media can exhibit negative, long-term consequences on the language development. Another study by Lindgren and Munoz (2013) showed that watching films in English was an important predictor for the development of receptive language skills. The best results were accomplished by Croatian and Swedish students, which was not a surprise considering long-term and extensive exposure to English through different media. However, such an extensive exposure can lead to a big gap between informal and formal (classroom) exposure to English. It would be ideal if these two sources of exposure could complement, since very early onset and extensive exposure, combined with formal learning of language may lead to faster and high level of language acquisition. That is why the present study aimed at estimating the correlation between extracurricular, curricular exposure to English and FLA success in students learning English for more than 13 years.

### **FL learning in Croatia**

Since English has been recognized as language of international communication, English language proficiency is generally regarded as a condition providing better education and opportunities. That is why English has been a mandatory subject in Croatia from the first grade<sup>1</sup> of primary school since the school year 2003/4. It is taught twice a week (one school hour lasting for 45 min). At the pre-primary level, there is a possibility of learning English as a foreign language in foreign language schools provided that the parents pay for a language course or the children may attend Helen Doron school once a week.

In other European countries, teaching FLs (mostly English) begins at the age of six (Austria, France, Italy) or later (Denmark – at the age of seven, Hungary – at the age of nine), whereas some countries have opted for an earlier start (Poland – mandatory formal learning of EFL to all children aged five from 2015/16 and was even lowered to the third year of the child's life in 2017, Cyprus – EFL mandatory for all three-year-old since September 2015, Malta – EFL has been mandatory since the age of five). However, a lot of studies have demonstrated that a FL start at a pre-primary (kindergarten) level fails to lead to the assumed long-term advantages compared to a later start, i.e. at the upper primary or secondary level (Garcia Mayo and Garcia

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<sup>1</sup> In Croatia, children start attending the first grade from 6,5-7,5 years of age

Lecumberri, 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov and Otto, 2008; Pfenninger, 2014; Erk and Ručević, 2021). That is why Murphy (2014) concluded that earlier is not better in settings of minimal contact with the target language (TL) where the learning is limited to formal instruction of the language as a school subject. Accordingly, the present study aimed at finding correlation between very early exposure to English through formal instruction and the highest grade<sup>1</sup> in English achieved by students (based on secondary school, secondary school leaving certificate and the university grades). On the other hand, correlation was also sought between the exposure to extracurricular contents and the highest grade in English. The students were also asked to express their opinion about what contributed to their English language proficiency, exposure to extracurricular, curricular contents or both.

### Methodology

For corpus analysis, a questionnaire (Table 1) was administered to forty 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students of food technology. Most of these students have been studying English for min. 13 years (Table 1). Their success in English was measured based on the grades in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school, secondary school final exam and the university grade (1<sup>st</sup> year of the undergraduate study of food technology). Students' success was estimated based on the grades under the assumption that their grades objectively measured their knowledge, which was confirmed by this study, since students' final grade on the secondary school final exam and the 1<sup>st</sup> year of studying does differ to a great extent (although 15 students were reported to have a lower grade at university which is due to the fact that they are taught English for specific purposes, which is more demanding).

**Table 1. Questionnaire – exposure to English**

Question	Answer
1. Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> male <input type="checkbox"/> female
2. Age	_____
3. How long have you been studying English? When did you start learning English (in kindergarten, 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of primary school or later?)	_____
4. Which grade in English did you have?	a) in the 4 <sup>th</sup> grade of the secondary school?  b) Secondary school final exam

<sup>1</sup> Croatian national grading system consists of five grades with numerical equivalents from highest to lowest grade as follows: 5 – excellent; 4 – very good; 3 – good; 2- sufficient; 1 – fail (insufficient)

	c) 1 <sup>st</sup> year of studying?
5. Do you think that	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The exposure to curricular contents contributed to your English language proficiency?</li> <li>b) The exposure to extracurricular contents contributed to your English language proficiency?</li> <li>c) Both</li> </ul>
6. How were/are you exposed to English in extracurricular environment/what affected your English language proficiency the most?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Watching film</li> <li>b) Listening to songs</li> <li>c) Playing video games</li> <li>d) Listening to podcasts</li> <li>e) Tutorials</li> <li>f) Reading books</li> <li>g) Online contents (social networks)</li> <li>h) Other _____</li> </ul>
7. How many hours a week do you spend being exposed to different media in English?	_____

## Results and discussion

The results of this study reveal that most of the students (26 out of 40 students) have been learning English from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of their primary school, which means for 13 or more years. The others have been learning English from the kindergarten (10 of them) or from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of the primary school (3 of them). Most of them had the same grade in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of their secondary school, secondary school final exam and the 1<sup>st</sup> year of studying (17 students). Most of the students think that both, formal instruction and exposure to English in non-formal environment through media, contributed to their proficiency in English (26 students – 65 %), followed by 11 students (28 %) who think they are good at English owing to the exposure through media, and only 3 students (7 %) think that only formal instruction contributed to their English language proficiency. Students mostly watch films in English (with the Croatian subtitles) – 37 answers, then listen to English songs – 32 answers, followed by using social networks – Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, listening to podcasts, playing video games (mostly male students) and then reading books. Students mostly spend up to 10 hours weekly being exposed to different media.

Furthermore, this paper also aimed to determine correlation between very early exposure to English (kindergarten) and the FLA success. Only two out of ten students (20 %) who started learning English in the kindergarten (pre-primary level) have been reported to have obtained the highest grade in English. It can be noticed that the FL context of the participants failed to adequately support their EFL development in the long run. On the other hand, five out of eight students (63 %) who have been reported to spend more than 6 hours a day being exposed to extracurricular contents have obtained the highest grade in English (in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of their secondary school, secondary school final exam and the 1<sup>st</sup> year of studying). This study, thus, revealed that the informal exposure to English through media (unintentional language acquisition) contributes more to the FLA success than very early onset. However, in this study, English language proficiency was only measured by the grades achieved in the secondary school or university and in order to obtain better insight into FLA success, it would be recommendable to test the students' knowledge measuring different language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, use of English). Consequently, it would be interesting and relevant to conduct research about the efficiency of teaching other FLs in the Croatian context (Italian, German and French) to determine whether the instruction itself contributes to FLA success since the students are not exposed to other foreign languages to such a great extent as they are to English.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research was to determine what is of prime importance when acquiring English as foreign language. Is it the non-curricular or curricular (formal, classroom environment) exposure or both or is it maybe the age of onset? The success in FLA was estimated based on the grades the students have achieved in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of their secondary school, on the secondary school final exam and after 1 year of university studying. It was assumed that the grades the students have achieved during their education have been objectively formed, which was confirmed by the results indicating that their final grade did not change to a great extent (although there was a 38 % decline in the final grade in English at the university level, which can be ascribed to the fact that English for specific purposes is taught at university, which is more demanding). The results of the study reveal that the students who have been exposed to English for more than six hours a day were the most successful regarding their final grade (A on all three levels tested). They reported to have been exposed to English through different media, mainly through watching films and listening to songs in English. On the other hand, only two out of ten students who started learning English as a foreign language in the kindergarten have obtained the highest grades in English, which is accordance with the study conducted by Erk and Ručević (2021) who concluded that there is no evidence to confirm that the low-intensity EFL programmes at pre-primary age lead to a lasting positive impact on EFL acquisition in Croatia. The question is then what ensures English language proficiency. This study demonstrated that an extensive exposure is

one of the factors contributing to EFL acquisition success, but it should be paired with the formal instruction, which leads to the faster progress and higher level of acquisition. However, due to the fact that FL is learned in an environment which is monolingual, and considering the local circumstances of EFL, there seem to be no significant gains for very early learners of EFL in comparison to young learners. To conclude, the age of onset, formal instruction and informal exposure to English as well as individual differences of learners interact and should be considered when trying to predict FLA success.

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