



The influence of drama-based pedagogical techniques on younger school children's vocabulary development

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Abstract

Any educational content acquisition, the linguistic one included, has its initial and its final phase. At the beginning of education, a child's source language is most often based on the organic idiom, whereas the target language refers to the level of acquisition of the standard language idiom at the end of primary education. Various linguistic and extralinguistic factors determine the formation and the level of acquisition of the target language and consequently vocabulary development, i.e. lexical competence. Since primary school children are exposed to a great variety of different media today, it has been observed that their communication is lacking on different levels and their vocabulary is becoming inadequate. Therefore, it is crucial, especially in the mother tongue (Croatian) teaching, to use various techniques that will not only help develop communicative skills, e.g. listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also enrich students' lexis in written and oral mode. Accordingly, experimental research is conducted in the third and fourth grade of primary school. In one class, Croatian language content is presented to students with the help of drama techniques during a two-week period, whereas another group is taught using traditional methods. Both groups are tested twice: before and after conducting the experiment. The results are analysed in the SPSS programme for statistical analysis. It is confirmed that drama-based techniques significantly improve vocabulary development and that students who had two weeks of experimental teaching show better results in understanding deeper meaning of words in various contexts. The richness and broadness of their vocabulary improved as well by measuring of lexical density and diversity.

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1. Introduction

The fundamental goal of teaching the mother tongue (Croatian) is developing linguistic-communicative competences including acquisition of all four language skills in an equal measure: listening, speaking, reading and writing. That particular requirement is defined in all education documents of the Republic of Croatia: *National Curriculum Framework* (2010) (hereafter NOK), *Teaching Plan and Programme for Elementary School* (2006) and *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019) (hereafter *Kurikulum*). Developing vocabulary is one of the requirements of the school subject Croatian Language as part of the linguistic-communicative competence since the size of vocabulary is directly related to the complete language competence, not just on the grammatical but also on the stylistic, content and strategic level. If we consider vocabulary development to be the key for forming a linguistically competent person, it is important to include fostering its development in education documents and then its realization and implementation in the teaching process.

Therefore, adopting a new education document was of utmost importance – *Croatian Language Curriculum* (2019) in which a new outcome was added in the language and communication domain related to acquiring and learning vocabulary, brought changes in educational process and process of learning also Croatian as a school subject. It is a big step forward if we consider previous documents in which this requirement was mentioned only in general terms and rather unsystematically, i.e. fostering vocabulary development was included in all the teaching goals but it was never defined or assessed as a separate outcome. When it comes to developing vocabulary, it can definitely be stated that it is the most dynamic of all the processes of linguistic development. The process of learning a language never stops in the course of our lives as we improve in different ways and both vocabulary development and learning new words are continuous processes.

In traditional teaching, more time is spent teaching grammar, whereas vocabulary is to a certain degree neglected (Duan & Da, 2015). Acquiring vocabulary includes learning all meanings of a word, understanding its grammatical structure but also understanding its use, which very often depends on extralinguistic factors. The acquisition of a word often depend on linguistic factors, such as the number of letters, i.e. sounds, difficult or easy pronunciation, orthography morphological features, syntactic role in a sentence, and connection to other words and the context. However, the acquisition of a word also depends on extralinguistic factors, such as parents' education, the child's gender and environment and the dialect that he/she is exposed to, i.e. his/her mother tongue idiom. It is, therefore, the goal of this research to examine to what extent implementing target strategies, drama-based techniques to be precise, can contribute to vocabulary enrichment and its consolidation in the process of early mother tongue (Croatian) acquisition.



Why use drama-based techniques? In the next section it is shown that using drama-based techniques has a long tradition in Croatia. Numerous practitioners recognize their value in mother tongue teaching but they rarely write and publish texts about them.

1.1. *Early learning of Croatian language as the mother tongue*

The language acquisition process⁴ that starts in the prenatal period continues when a child starts school. It is influenced, especially when it comes to forming a child's primary language, by the child's inherent abilities, various environmental factors (such as family, peers, etc.), the vernacular that the child is exposed to from an early age, other languages that the child acquires or is exposed to through media but also the language of textbooks. Starting school brings crucial language changes and novelty to children's lives: a) the beginning of systematic learning⁵ of the standard form of the mother tongue, b) the beginning of acquiring reading and writing skills and the continuation of the development of listening and speaking skills, c) language becomes the primary means of and an intermediary in acquiring new knowledge, i.e. learning, d) children use language to express themselves and for social interaction (e.g., Aladrović Slovaček, 2012; 2019; Cvikić, 2002, 2007; Kuvač Kraljević & Hržica, 2016; Pavličević Franić, 2005). One should emphasise the fact that language development does not finish at the age of starting school (6 or 7), but it continues, especially when it comes to acquiring morphology (Kuvač & Cvikić, 2005) and syntax (Jelaska, 2005). A complete language automatization becomes evident around the age of twelve (Jelaska, 2005). In conclusion, "language acquisition process in preschool education is the foundation for the language acquisition process" (Aladrović Slovaček, 2019, p. 67).

Linguistic competences are rooted in the very foundations of eight key competences for lifelong learning (*European Union Council* 2018/C 189/01), and in European strategic documents and public policy documents linguistic competences have been recognized as a crucial factor for achieving the equality and quality of education and educational success (CM/REC 2014/5, Beacco et al., 2016, DVIV/EDU/LANG 2009/5). It is therefore understandable and justified that the subject *Croatian Language* is, if we consider the planned number of classes, one of the most extensive subjects of primary and secondary education, and the importance of the mother tongue is recognized and emphasized in the basic documents of the Croatian educational policy (HNOS, 2005; *Kurikulum*, 2019; NOK, 2010). In these documents the importance of developing language competences is stressed and especially developing of "communicative competence" (Aladrović Slovaček, 2019, p. 70).

⁴ A spontaneous process going on without directed/systematized learning until language automatization which is, in the mother tongue, completed at the age of 11 or 12 (Piaget, 1977).

⁵ A process that starts with systematic language teaching; in the Croatian education system, it starts around the age of 6 or 7, i.e. at the beginning of school education.

The importance of the communicative (as well as creative) aspect of the mother tongue is evident in the division of the subject into the following subject areas: Language and Communication, Literature and Creation and Culture and Media. The main goal of *Language and Communication* is both to encourage developing the four language skills in an equal measure (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and also to facilitate acquiring grammar content and vocabulary.

Emphasis on the communicative competence in the lower grades presupposes fostering all language skills. However, already in the division of the education system into lower (up to the age of 10) and higher (up to the age of 14) grades, one notices a departure from Piaget's stages in cognitive development and so it is to be expected that students will have difficulties acquiring language content (Aladrović Slovaček, 2019). Namely, according to Piaget, the stage of formal operational thought starts at about the age of 12 and at the same time, apart from hypothetico-deductive reasoning, abstract thinking that is reflected on the linguistic level starts to develop as well (Kuvač Kraljević & Hržica, 2016).

According to Nippold (2004) there are three main factors that influence late language development – cognitive development, socialization and education, and with the development of strategies on the metacognitive level, a child's ability to understand language increases (Kuvač Kraljević & Olujić, 2015). Moreover, the ability to establish social relations and conversations with various interlocutors (peers, parents, teachers etc.) about various subjects facilitate language socialization and adjusting the acquired language to social conditions. Apart from that, “developing literacy and acquiring new content in formal education is the reason why school plays an essential role in later development of language” (Kuvač Kraljević & Olujić, 2015, p. 48).

New *Croatian Language Curriculum* (NN 10/2019) lists outcomes that students should achieve but it also gives teachers autonomy in the planning and realization of the suggested outcomes. It is therefore necessary that both teachers and textbook authors understand the process and stages in the language development in order to enable children to reach the expected outcomes in accordance with their individual abilities and help them acquire their mother tongue, since it is a prerequisite not only for academic success but also for growing up in a better way and with a sense of safety. Family has an important role in fostering language development, but teachers are equally important because they are competent professionals with knowledge, skills and education to guide language development and recognize deviations from the standard patterns. Finally, obligatory books for reading, textbook materials, workshops, media and all the different activities in a student's life have an important role in the process of language acquisition because their language and the selection of texts will influence students' language development significantly.

1.2. Acquiring lexical competence and vocabulary enrichment

The process of vocabulary acquisition implies acquiring words both on the linguistic and extralinguistic level, but it is also very closely connected with cognitive development and should be observed from that very perspective in the process of early language acquisition. In most world languages, a child



utters the first word around the age of one and this word is connected with his/her immediate environment, often used to name his/her closest relations in the household: mum, dad, grandpa, grandma or things in his/her immediate surroundings. Putting a child in appropriate communicative situations will foster vocabulary development as well as rich language input, i. e. motivating language environment (Aladrović Slovaček & Rimac Jurinović, 2021).

Adult speakers are most often the ones providing language input, but the media that a child is consuming are important, as well as written language that gradually becomes more present with time. A child first acquires the denotative meaning (first meaning of the word) of a word (individual mental lexicon) and with cognitive development he/she acquires other, i.e. connotative meanings of a word. The final phase is processing words into a general lexicon. More exposure to language input and frequent use of words in various contexts facilitates processing new lexemes and faster networking with other words in the mental lexicon. The process of forming the early lexicon has a number of stages: from recognizing (identification) of a word through its reception and understanding to correct use and eventually, at the end of this cognitive process, the production (creation) of other words and bigger language units (Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2018). There are different degrees of knowing a word. Being able to understand a word is known as receptive knowledge and is normally connected with listening and reading. If we are able to produce a word of our own accord when speaking or writing, then that is considered productive knowledge (passive/active are alternative terms) (Schmitt, 2022).

Estimates differ from language to language and the speed of the vocabulary acquisition process depends on the structure and both grammatical and orthographical complexity of a particular language. If we consider Croatian, it is estimated that a three-year-old has about 3 000 words in his/her mental vocabulary, and then the number starts growing exponentially so that a four-year-old already has about 4 000 new words in his/her mental lexicon, a child starting the third grade of a primary school (six or seven years old) has about 10 000 words in his/her lexicon and an adolescent around the age of 18, has from 17 000 to 19 000 words (Pavličević-Franić, 2005).

Every day, a child acquires two to three new words, which amounts to about 1 000 words in a year, and this process is influenced by a number of various factors, some of which have already been mentioned and some of which require a comprehensive research in order to precisely examine the kind of influence that they exert. Reading is, nonetheless, one of the key factors for acquiring new words and expanding the mental lexicon, and its importance is emphasized in the process of early language acquisition and language learning in numerous studies (Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2018). Some of the mentioned authors agree with Scott (2005) who claims that the process of vocabulary acquisition depends on two types of context: local and global, but also with Laufer (2005) who argues that, in order for a student to learn a new word, he/she should be exposed to it more than seven times, preferably even ten times. Although these ideas refer to learning a second language, experience has shown that they can be implemented when it comes to

acquiring and learning the mother tongue. Moreover, it was determined that age is a more significant predictor of vocabulary size than the school grade of students (Coxhead et al., 2015). Knowing a word implies first of all knowing its form, then its meaning and both its active and passive use (Nation & Hu Hscuh-chao, 2000; Udier, 2009).

Considering the above, there are a number of important factors when it comes to broadening vocabulary: language environment, i.e. exposure, cognitive maturity, i.e. a child's age, primary meaning of a word, i.e. individual lexicon and connecting a word with other words, and processing into the general lexicon, i.e. complete acquisition of all the word's categories (grammatical, orthographic, usage-related). Vocabulary richness can be measured in a number of different ways which all have their limitations. On the other hand, there is the measure of vocabulary diversity that represents the type-token ratio but depends on the quantity of text and is not, in fact, a completely objective measure. On the other hand, there is the measure of vocabulary density that represents the ratio between content and function words in the text that also depends on the quantity of text and is, thus, also to some extent subjective.

Since vocabulary richness is the predictor of language development, lexical competence plays an important role within the framework of linguistic-communicative competence and is defined as knowing the vocabulary of a language and being able to use it (ZEROJ, 2005). Vocabulary most often refers to knowing the meaning of a certain word, i.e. lexical competence denotes knowledge about the word meaning and the ability to use the word in the sociolinguistic, linguistic and cultural context (Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2018). Research has shown that one can "survive" without grammar in communication but not without vocabulary (Din & Ghani 2018). Moreover, a research by Aladrović Slovaček (2019), conducted using primary school students' written work has shown that the number of words and lexical density in students' work increase with age but the increase is not statistically significant. The same authors compared lexical density of literary works that students have to read in different grades and the results showed that they differ significantly if we consider the lexical density and that they are very often not in accordance with the students' psycho-cognitive abilities due to numerous archaisms and complex sentence structure that they exhibit.

On the other hand, the results of the lexical competence research (Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2018) show that in transition from the first educational period (first to third grade) into the second one (fourth to sixth grade), there is a significant increase in lexical diversity, i.e. the number and the type of words that students use in their sentences, whereas lexical density statistically significantly increases in the third educational period (seventh and eighth grade). The authors conclude, from all the above stated, that children acquire language differently, due to their stratified language development. The fact is that they process words, acquire their meanings and form their mental lexicon differently than adult speakers.

Therefore, it is important to foster vocabulary enrichment in various ways at an early age, not just through formal teaching but also through informal learning and teaching processes and through different strategies not only in the school subject Croatian Language, but in other school subjects and



extracurricular activities as well. One of the ways to encourage vocabulary enrichment could certainly be using drama techniques in and outside the classroom and forming an enticing environment for vocabulary development through drama activities so that it is interesting and relevant for students and done in such a way that they are not even aware of the vocabulary development process taking place.

1.3. *Drama activities in mother tongue teaching*

In this short overview the focus will be on various kinds of texts that are concerned with developing children's language competence, i.e. learning and teaching language, from the point of view of drama pedagogy. The term *play* will be used to refer to drama texts and the terms *drama in education* or *drama techniques* will be used to refer to drama activities implemented in teaching. Moreover, it is necessary to clarify the terms *drama technique* and *drama method*. They are used in accordance with terminological classification by Gruić et al. (2018), who defines *drama technique* as a pattern that is used to define and organize participation in an activity and *drama method* as a complex form of working with a set and complex methodical structure (with various work goals, of course).

Implementing drama techniques in educating children and young people was recognized as a valuable educational strategy very early in Croatia. Ladika (1970) writes that, as early as in the course of the 16th century, school theatres performing in Latin (associated with Jesuit convents) start appearing in Europe, with plays that served an additional purpose of practicing Latin. Between the 18th and 19th century, Latin was replaced by the mother tongue (Krušić, 2018).

The idea that drama techniques can be used in learning and teaching children and young people was adopted by prominent individuals like Juraj Dijanić in the 18th century, about whom Krušić (2018, p. 55) says that he found himself "at the beginning of the history of ideas from which drama pedagogy was born". However, after a brilliant beginning, there were periods, even centuries that were less fortunate. Antun Truhelka published *Plays for Young People* in two parts in 1866. He is the author of three plays himself and his plays are, apart from being intended for children, also written to be performed by children. It should be pointed out that all the characters in those plays set an example with their speaking skills (Krušić 2018). Truhelka was an advocate for drama techniques and would often explain their benefits to an interested audience, creating games for children for improving mnemonics, imagination, vocabulary, concentration and social skills (Krušić, 2018). At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, texts were published that were not intended for public performances in front of an audience but were rather a form of classroom drama (Krušić, 2018), and, from 1870 they appear as a methodical approach. Apart from plays, one should mention declamations that were performed at school festive occasions and could also be a part of teaching "with the purpose of perfecting speaking and public performance" (Krušić, 2018, p. 114). At the time, there is an increase of articles about drama in education and the consequences of implementing it in Croatian journals of pedagogy, and Krušić (2018) emphasizes the actuality of educational results that were mentioned in literature. It can be assumed that

those articles influenced teachers so that they implemented contemporary knowledge in their work.

However, considerable time passed until the publication of the first textbook for the mother tongue teachers that was drama-based in every sense. The textbook *Igram se a učim! (dramski postupci u razrednoj nastavi)* (Playing and learning! (Drama techniques in classroom teaching)) was published in 2007 and was intended for teachers of lower primary school classes, providing methodical examples of drama-based pedagogical activities in teaching. Only a year later, a textbook *Zamisli, doživi, izrazi! (Imagine, experience, express!)* (Fileš, 2008) for teachers in higher primary school grades was published and it offers, as its title implies, suggestions on how to implement drama-based methods in Croatian language teaching. Drama-based pedagogical approach in mother tongue teaching is described in the textbook *Igrom do (spo)razumijevanja. Izbor oglednih primjera dramskopedagoških radionica u nastavi hrvatskoga jezika (Through play to understanding. Selection of drama-based pedagogical workshops in Croatian language teaching)* (Breber, 2020). In the chapter *How to use the textbook?* the authors point out that drama-based pedagogical approach to teaching fosters “creative drama, cooperative learning, developing critical thinking and opportunities for students to acquire, often difficult and abstract, language content in a carefree way and in familiar, lifelike situations” (Breber et al., 2020, p. 8).

The mentioned textbooks are primarily intended for mother tongue teachers, but one other valuable textbook that should be mentioned is *Prolaz u zamišljeni svijet. Procesna drama ili drama u nastajanju (Passage into the Imaginary World – Process Drama or Emerging Drama)* by Gruić, published in 2002. Although it targets a wider audience of pedagogic and education workers (kindergarten teachers, teachers and other professionals employing drama pedagogy with children and the young, as the author herself explains in the subheading), it does not offer complete methodological material that is applicable in mother tongue teaching, but at the same time systematically and thoroughly deals with the process drama method and offers a comprehensive list and description of drama techniques that can be implemented in a classroom, working with children and the young.

Apart from textbooks, there is substantial research about positive correlations between implementing drama pedagogy into language teaching (student’s results, vocabulary growth etc.). Ines Škuflić-Horvat (2004) analyzed the Croatian language curriculum and extracted elements of drama pedagogy from it. The authors of the research *Igorkaz u razrednoj nastavi (Class School Sketch)* are concerned with teaching (Nemeth-Janjić & Dvornik, 2008) and conclude that a sketch is the most common form of drama pedagogy in classroom teaching, suitable for encouraging students’ speaking skills and creativity.

Gjuran (2008) is concerned with the school play as motivation and learning through drama, and brings methodological examples for such teaching work. It promotes implementing the school play for motivation because this method of learning is encouraging and suitable for all students (introverted students find it easier to participate, and hyperactive ones can put their abundant energy to good use). Bogdan (2008) provides examples of interpretations of Kajkavian plays and concludes that with the help of a drama



text as a linguistic and methodological template which is brought to life by teachers and students in drama improvisation, children acquire language facts and develop their communicative competence. In their work, which is primarily concerned with implementing drama activities in the motivational stage of a lesson, Slavić and Treščec (2012, p. 1198) point out that students develop their speaking skills and competences and react positively to drama techniques in Croatian language classes. Rudela (2013) states that as many as 65,8% of the examinees think that drama in education should be systematically introduced in schools because it improves, among other things, students' speaking and linguistic abilities. Stanisić (2015) emphasizes the holistic approach of activities that are used in drama pedagogy and especially the possibility to connect drama techniques with the following teaching areas: media culture, literature, and, language and language expression, the last area being especially interesting for this research.

Vukojević (2016) claims that implementing drama techniques and methods in mother tongue teaching had a positive influence on developing the examinees' (4th grade students of a primary school from the City of Zagreb area) communicative competence. Moreover, the author points out that the initial testing of communicative competence showed that girls have better results, whereas in the final testing there was "significant improvement of the communicative competence if we consider both the boys' and the girls' results regarding the content and the language level" (Vukojević, 2016, p. 139). Kodrić (2012) emphasizes the importance of drama workshops in learning Croatian as a foreign language and also numerous benefits of such a methodological approach. Rimac Jurinović (2018) investigates to what extent various aspects of drama are present in national documents valid at the time and concludes that the area of drama in education is the least present one in them. Baldwin and Fleming (2003) also confirm the importance of drama in the process of learning and teaching mother and foreign languages. Also, the authors Ragnarsdóttir and Björnsson (2019) confirm the importance of using drama in teaching in general and its function in the formation of democratic values, i.e. the adoption of humanistic values and knowledge. The authors Kalogirou, Beauchamp and Whyte (2019) conducted research on the use of dramatic methods in the process of learning English as a foreign language, and with their research they proved the positive influence of dramatic techniques and methods on the process of vocabulary acquisition in the process of learning English as a foreign language, especially in speech production.

This short overview shows that drama pedagogy has long been a part of learning and teaching the mother tongue, recognized by professionals, systematized and valued as an efficient methodological approach to teaching, and that students have a positive attitude towards lessons in which drama techniques and methods are implemented.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted with 40 primary school students in Zagreb. Two fourth grades of primary school participated: one as the experimental and the other as the control group. In the experimental group, the students had five Croatian language lessons in which the teacher used drama techniques to develop students' vocabulary concentrating on about 22 defined words and

words that were connected with those defined words. Students were put in various situations in which they learned and revised the defined words in different contexts through drama activities and games. Students did a test before the research was conducted and after the five Croatian language lessons in which drama techniques were used (experimental group). The test was exactly the same before and after implementing games and drama techniques in classes so that the results could be compared. The same test was conducted in the control and the experimental group.

Students in the control group were also presented with the chosen words, but in the way that it is usually done in Croatian language classes, i.e. the meaning of the words. In both the control and the experimental group, classes were held by the same teacher and the groups were formed based on classes A and B so that class A was the control group and class B the experimental group. Classes A and B were formed at the beginning of the school year with respect to the students' results in the initial test and their behavioural and cognitive characteristics. This was done by an expert team consisting of a psychologist, pedagogue and a physician in such a way that there is about the same number of students with similar cognitive abilities in each class.

Each group had 5 lessons and the methods used to teach the content in each group were different with regard to the final objective. In the control group students worked on texts in which the selected words appeared and were explained after that students wrote them down with their meaning in their notebooks. The teacher mentioned each word seven to ten times while talking about the text in the experimental group and the selected words were taught through drama techniques and repeated during game activities seven to ten times. In both groups the same texts were first read but not in the same way. In the control group, the text was read in the interpretative way and in the experimental group the teacher used dialogic reading. The selected words were taught in the same chronological order and in each lesson, students acquired 4 to 5 new words, in the same order in both groups. The lessons were held two days a week in the morning, for the control group on Monday and Wednesday and for the experimental group on Tuesday and Thursday.

For the purposes of the research, a test was created which tested the students' knowledge of the previously chosen 22 words: 14 nouns, 4 verbs and 4 adjectives. The following words were included in the test – nouns: badger (jazavac), dressmaker (krojač), soldier (vojnika), attic (potkrovlje), thief (lopov), coins (novac/zlatnici), cave (spilja), trailer (prikolica), wizard (čarobnjak), diamond (dijamant), astronaut (astornaut), carriage (kočija), cottage (koliba), juice (sok); verbs in context: cat is looking; cat is sleeping; cat is crouching; cat is purring and 4 adjectives: angry, sad, happy, frightened. They were chosen because they appear in the stories that are obligatory for reading in the lower grades of primary school and they are low-frequency words in vocabularies of younger school children. We can see it in Croatian Dictionary (2004) which rarely appear outside of the context of stories (other texts in textbooks, children's magazines etc.). These words come from five obligatory literary works for lower grades of primary school.

The test is designed as a picture test in which the correct answers are written with the guidance of the teacher. In the first task, the teacher guides students through the pictures offering short explanations and students write



what is in the picture (e.g., “What do we call the space that is above our living space and is shown in the picture?” –attic; “What is the name of the animal in the picture?” badger). Students had one minute for writing their answers. In the second task, the teacher asked the students what the cat was doing in the pictures. They were asked to answer using a sentence. They had two minutes for each answer. In the third task, the teacher asked them how the person in the picture was feeling and their answer was supposed to be a word or a sentence. The teacher encouraged them to recognize the emotions they saw in the picture, and they had one minute to supply their answer. In the last task, students were asked to write a few sentences about a picture they were given and the teacher directed them with additional questions. They had 15 minutes for this part of the task. Before the research, the test was validated in a group of 15 students that were not taught the chosen vocabulary items.

2.1. *About drama techniques*

Drama techniques can be divided according to their purpose (cf. Gruić, 2002; Čubrilo et al., 2017 etc.): those for acting out a story, those in which participants remain on the brink of the drama world, those that foster individual expression and scenic design, as well as numerous other types. However, when using drama techniques in teaching, educational objectives and teaching content are considered the whole time. This criterion was essential for us when choosing a drama technique. Our primary goal was to choose techniques that will positively influence vocabulary enrichment. When implementing drama techniques, additional educational objectives are realized, but our focus is children’s language development, more precisely vocabulary enrichment. Therefore, we chose simple drama techniques like: *Name, adjective, movement*;⁶ *A minute, please!*;⁷ *Letter mix*;⁸ *A story from given words*;⁹ *Still images*;¹⁰ *Improvisation* (from Still images or Improvisation of a telephone conversation etc.) and *Hot seat*.¹¹

⁶ *Name, adjective, movement* – the first time around students pronounce their names loudly, then they add an adjective that starts with the same letter as their name (e.g., Brave Bernard), and finally they add a movement. Thereafter, each student says their name and adjective loudly and with his/her movement calls another student by his name, adjective and movement.

⁷ *A minute, please!* – students are to speak about a certain topic for a limited period of time. Even though the game has a definite time in its name, students were given only half a minute to speak about each topic. The topic was lexemes that were examined and that are mentioned in Section 6.

⁸ *Letter mix* – in groups of five, students are given three nouns and their task is to create five words in groups and mix the letters in them up, e.g. instead of the word jazavac the group writes cavjaza and the teammates try to find out which word it is.

⁹ *A story from given words (group work)* – each group is given a number of words (nouns and adjectives) and uses them to construct a story. In addition, every group gets the location and the time of the action and some of the characters. Once they have constructed and written down their stories, each group tells it to other groups.

¹⁰ *Still images* – after telling their stories, participants in the same groups present other stories (for example, group A presents the story that group B told etc.). Still images means that participants choose five key moments and show them frozen in space and time.

¹¹ *Hot seat* – maybe one of the best-known drama techniques. A student, sitting on a chair, answers the questions that other students ask him/her. For instance, if a student had the role of the magician in the Improvisation, he/she answers the questions as this character.

Since every class starts with an initial motivating phase, we used drama activities like *Fruit salad*, *Walk like* etc. in that stage. Moreover, all classes ended with drama techniques for relaxing.

2.2. Research goal, problems and hypotheses

The goal of this research was to examine if implementing drama techniques in Croatian language lessons influences vocabulary enrichment. In accordance with the primary goal, the following research goals were determined:

- to examine students' knowledge of the chosen lexemes on the semantic level;
- to examine students' knowledge of the chosen lexemes regarding the parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives;
- To examine whether the experimental group differs from the control group in this knowledge.

3. Results and discussion

At the beginning and at the end of the research, the same test was conducted so that the results can be compared. The first test was conducted both in the experimental and in the control group and the results are shown in Table 1 below. The maximum number of points in the test was 22, one for each correct word. The results are expressed as arithmetic mean, maximum and minimum result and spread measure, i.e. standard deviation.

Table 1

Results of the control and experimental group at the beginning of the research

	Mean	Max	Min.	SD
Control group	15	20	6	0.34
Experimental group	14	20	5	0.36

The first research goal was to examine students' knowledge of the chosen lexemes on the semantic level. As has already been mentioned, 14 nouns were chosen for the research: badger (jazavac), dressmaker (krojač), soldier (vojnika), attic (potkrovlje), thief (lopov), coins (novac/zlatnici), cave (spilja), trailer (prikolica), wizard (čarobnjak), diamond (dijamant), astronaut (astronaut), carriage (kočija), cottage (koliba), juice (sok). The intention was to choose noun which are as varied as possible in order to enrich the students' vocabulary and to examine to what extent a certain word has become part of the students' active lexis. A badger (jazavac) is an animal that lives in Croatian woods but is not often seen by students, nor will you likely find it in zoos. It appears in a phrase *like a badger* (kao jazavac) which describes a person behaving foolishly. A dressmaker is an occupation that is not very common anymore, but often appears in fairy tales, as well as a soldier, which is often found in stories, and an astronaut. We added the occupation/character of a wizard since students

The other students can ask questions both as characters from the Improvisation or as themselves.

are fond of reading science fiction and fairy tales in which they encounter it. A thief should be recognized for what he does (stealing) and two things are often connected with a thief in stories: diamonds and coins. Various spaces were chosen: an attic, a cave and a cottage. Trailer, carriage and juice were chosen. Carriage is not so frequent anymore and is mostly found in fairy tales and stories but it is still not an archaism.

Figure 1 shows the results of the word recognition test at the beginning of the research. Apart from standard words that were accepted as correct answers, students also used dialectal words or descriptions and these answers were also accepted as correct answers. It is interesting that all students named the soldier, coins, wizard and cottage without any difficulty and most aberrations occurred in relation to the word badger (jazavac), followed by attic (tavan) and cave (spilja). Those results indicate that the first hypothesis is correct, i.e. that students have better results recognising words that have one primary denotative meaning and describe their near context and environment, i.e. words that they encounter reading and being read to, whereas worse results are related to words that do not belong into their natural environment: badger (jazavac), cave (spilja) and often attic (tavan) as well.

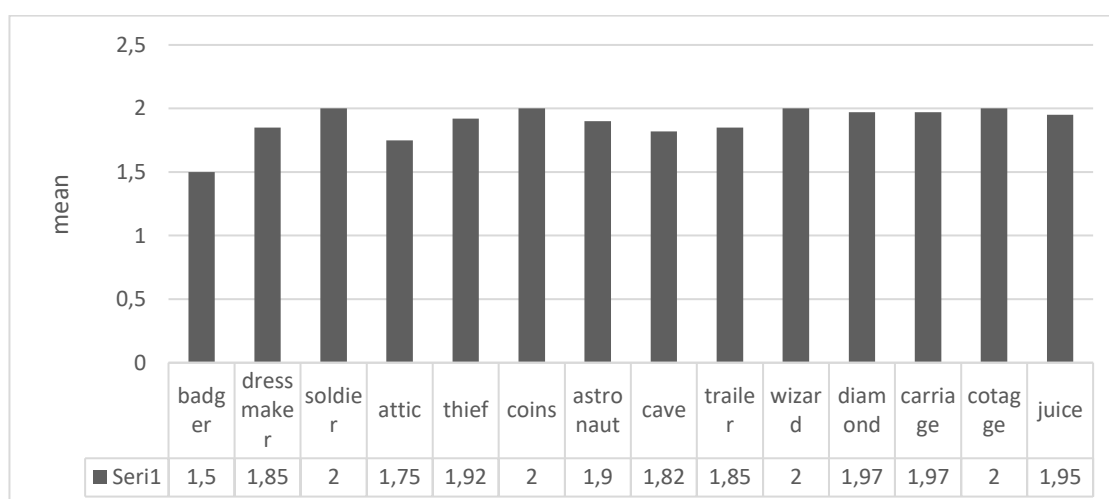


Figure 1. Results for the nouns in both groups at the beginning of the research

The second research goal was to examine students’ knowledge of the chosen lexemes regarding the parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives. As already mentioned, students are good at naming things and occupations that are found in their environment, whereas they do not do so well when it comes to words that are more archaic or less frequent in their active lexis and their language environment. Students were presented with four pictures with four different activities done by a cat and were asked to recognize the activity answering the question: “What is the cat in the picture doing?” If child answer that cat is jumping but she is sleeping, it was not correct answer. And that means that child does not know meaning of this word (verb). Most of the participants recognized the cat sleeping without difficulty but it was a little

more difficult to recognize the cat purring (while sleeping)¹² and looking (behind the fence). These are expressions related to the world of cats, used also in different contexts, e.g. a man spins wool if he is producing textiles and a cat purrs showing that it is enjoying itself (produces sounds that are different and gentle). Figure 2 represents the results of the verbs in both groups (experimental and control) at the beginning of the research.

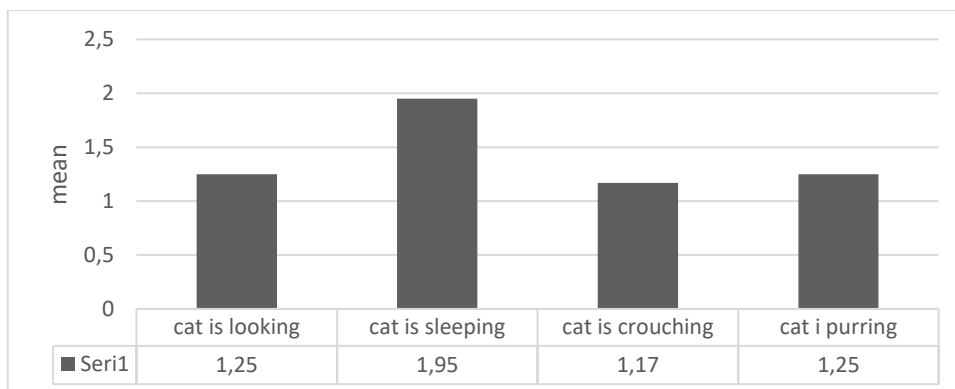


Figure 2. Results for the verbs in both groups at the beginning of the research

Apart from that, the examinees were asked to recognize the expression on a waiter's face from a picture. They were most successful in recognizing the feeling of happiness and least successful in recognizing fear. Most of them recognized feelings of sadness and anger without difficulty. Figure 3 represents the results for the adjectives in both groups (experimental and control) at the beginning of the research.

Regarding parts of speech, examinees were most successful recognizing things and people from their environment, as expected, and had most difficulty naming activities, which confirmed the second hypothesis.

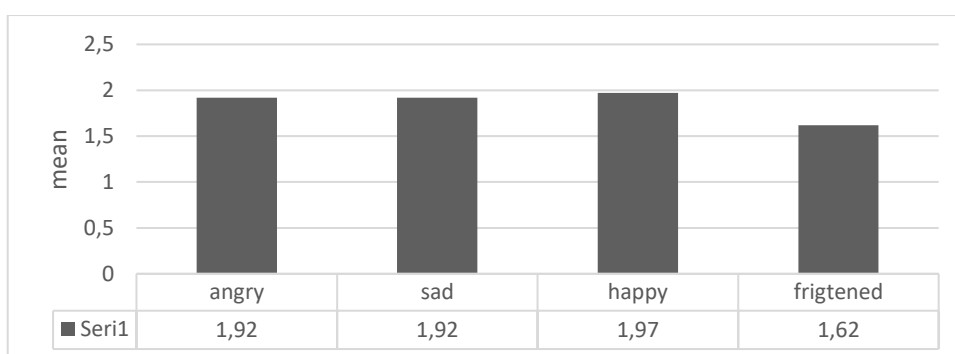


Figure 3. Results for the adjectives in both groups at the beginning of the research

¹² In Croatian *spin* and *purr* are one and the same word (*prede*), so this example translated into English does not show how the same word is used in different contexts (because two different words are used).

The third goal of the research was to examine how and to what extent drama techniques implemented in the course of one week will influence vocabulary enrichment. At the start of researching we compare results between experimental and control group. We did not find any statistical difference between this two groups in every tested word ($p > 0,05$). It is interesting that the difference in recognizing words was not evident among all the students but only among those who had difficulty recognizing less familiar words at the beginning. There was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and the control group in recognizing the noun badger (jazavac) and the adjective frightened (uplašen) (Figure 4) – the students in the experimental group had significantly better results.

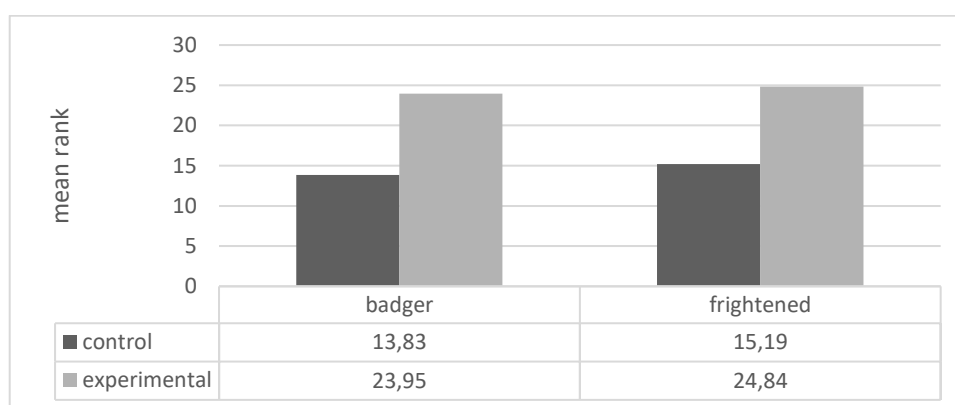


Figure 4. Differences in the results of control and experimental group for jazavac ‘badger’ and [supply Croatian word for frightened] ‘frightened’

Moreover, the results showed that students in the experimental group achieved significantly better results in their written descriptions of a picture guided by questions than the students in the control group at the end of the research with regard to lexical diversity¹³ and density.¹⁴ The t-test clearly showed that there was a statistically significant difference both in lexical diversity and lexical density in the experimental group if we compare the beginning and the end of the research ($p < 0,05$). In the control group there was not a statistically significant difference even though the results were to some extent better than at the beginning of the research ($p > 0,05$).

Table 2

Results of the control and the experimental group in lexical density and diversity

	Control group	Experimental group
	The beginning of the research	
Lexical density	0.45	0.46
Lexical diversity	0.56	0.53
	The end of the research	
Lexical density	0.52	0.69
Lexical diversity	0.61	0.78

¹³ The ratio between types and tokens in a text

¹⁴ The ratio between content words and tokens in a text

These results confirm the third hypothesis, which predicted significantly better results when it comes to recognizing words in the experimental group.

4. Conclusion

Vocabulary enrichment is an important part of Croatian language lessons, and introducing vocabulary enrichment as a separate expected outcome in the domain of Croatian language and communication is a step in a direction which requires that the teacher is well prepared and knows different possibilities and strategies that can help in the realization of this outcome. In this research we examined games and drama techniques as useful tools in vocabulary revision and their usage in various contexts and in various ways. Aladrović Slovaček et al. (2019) show that students do not show much creativity in their written work regarding using various lexis, but rather often repeat the same words and therefore the lexical density is very low. Cvikić and Aladrović Slovaček (2016) show that lower grade students use a maximum of eight different adjectives in writing, most often *dobar* 'good' and *lijep* 'beautiful'.

Reading is essential for vocabulary enrichment, which brings about the question of what students read and in what kind of language. Research by Cvikić et al. (2015) done on the literary work for obligatory reading for the third grade of primary school – *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* showed us that the average number of words per sentence in novel *Čudnovate zgode šegrta Hlapića* is 14,5 and authors concluded that it is not well suited for children in the third grade of primary school, who are 9 or 10 years old. Apart from that, in most sentences there is inversion, i.e. the sentence begins with a conjunction (most often it is *jer* 'because'), and this unusual word order affects understanding in a negative way.

Moreover, the named novel contains a great number of archaisms that children do not know and this has negative implications on understanding the text as a whole. It is the same with other works for obligatory reading. There is a small number of low-frequency words that are very rarely used in other contexts and if we do not focus on them and teach them, they will probably not enter students' active vocabulary. These low-frequency words were chosen for this research so that we could establish whether drama techniques, applied on concrete examples, can really help with vocabulary enrichment, i.e. with systematic vocabulary teaching. Pavličević-Franić and Aladrović Slovaček (2018) also confirm that lexical density increases with cognitive age, and statistically significantly in the third educational period (seventh and eighth grade).

The above-mentioned research shows that systematic vocabulary enrichment is not given enough attention in the Croatian education system, as already stated in Section 1. The results of this research, even though the sample was rather small, show that good results are to be achieved if alternative and interesting teaching techniques, such as playing games and drama techniques, are implemented. All examinees in the experimental group achieved better results in the second test, even though the results are not statistically significant except for two words.

The research also showed which words the examinees were familiar with and which were rarely part of their mental lexicon. Moreover, it demonstrated



that teaching target vocabulary helps to build and enrich active vocabulary because lexical density and diversity increased significantly in the experimental group, which proves that systematic teaching and well-chosen methods bring significant results when it comes to vocabulary enrichment and developing communicative language competence. However, one must consider the fact that the research sample was relatively small and the target vocabulary teaching period rather short, which presents a certain limitation for this research.

Since only 40 students in two fourth grades of a primary school participated in this research, it can only serve as an incentive for new and more comprehensive research of school-age children's vocabulary, but also for using drama techniques and other ideas that can motivate the enrichment, understanding and building active vocabulary. Since the examinees were more successful with words that are more familiar and closer to them, it is important to put pupils in different contexts that will help them understand and memorize the word and then use it in different contexts so that retention is supported too. This is an excellent way to foster communicative language competence and improve functional literacy on all levels of the communicational model: strategic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and pragmatic.

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