

# Primary English Language Teaching: A Comparison of Japan and Croatia

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU**  
**UČITELJSKI FAKULTET**  
**ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

**Marija Juratek**

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A COMPARISON OF JAPAN AND CROATIA**

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**Mentori rada:**

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**Zagreb, rujan, 2022.**

*I am dedicating this thesis to my family who were my greatest support during all of the years of my study.*

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## Summary

Many nations realised the benefits of teaching English from a young age. In addition to ensuring the quality of their basic education, they strive to make English accessible to their citizens, each country in its own way. The main objective of this thesis is to compare foreign language policies and practices in the context of primary education in Croatia and Japan. Both countries invest a lot of effort in teaching English, and they both have a mandatory foreign language course in their primary schools. In Croatia, students choose which foreign language they will learn when they enrol in the first grade of primary school, and English is the most popular choice, English being the most popular choice. In addition, both countries also have foreign language schools that provide language teaching services outside the regular school. However, interesting differences can be noted in between the English teaching practices in the two countries, and some indicators of their English education are remarkably different.

Teaching materials and textbooks are the most obvious differences, along with insisting on having native speakers as English language teachers. However, there are some other issues when it comes to learning English in Japan, such as culture bumps and language unawareness. Moreover, Japan's national language differs from English in numerous ways, while Croatian at least shares the same script. Nevertheless, English words are not infrequent in Japan, which makes even the children become aware of the language and leaves room to familiarise themselves better with it. That familiarisation only recently became the task of the Japanese educational system, which has recently started to implement English language courses in the curriculum of primary education.

**Keywords:** *English language, Croatian primary education, Japanese primary education, English language teaching, cultural differences*

## **Sažetak**

Mnoge države spoznale su prednosti poučavanja engleskog jezika od rane dječje dobi. Glavni je cilj ovoga rada usporediti obrazovne politike i praksu poučavanja engleskoga kao stranoga jezika u Hrvatskoj i Japanu. Osim što veliku pažnju posvećuju kvaliteti osnovnog obrazovanja, obje države na svoj način nastoje svojim građanima osigurati kvalitetnu nastavu engleskoga. Obje zemlje ulažu puno truda u poučavanje engleskog jezika, i obje imaju obveznu nastavu stranog jezika u svojim osnovnim školama. U Hrvatskoj učenici biraju koji će strani jezik učiti upisom u prvi razred osnovne škole, a engleski je najpopularniji izbor. Osim toga, obje države imaju i škole stranih jezika u kojima je moguće učiti engleski. Međutim, mogu se primijetiti zanimljive razlike u njihovim praksama, a neki pokazatelji njihovog obrazovanja na engleskom izrazito su različiti. Primjerice, prošle godine je Hrvatska na međunarodnom testu znanja engleskog jezika postigla mnogo bolji rezultat od Japana..

Nastavni materijali i udžbenici jedna su od najvećih očitih razlika, uz inzistiranje na tome da učitelji engleskog jezika budu izvorni govornici u Japanu. Međutim, postoje neki drugi problemi kada je riječ o učenju engleskog u Japanu, kao što su kulturološke razlike i potpuno nepoznavanje jezika. Štoviše, japanski nacionalni jezik razlikuje se od engleskoga na više razina, dok hrvatski s engleskim barem dijeli isto pismo. Ipak, engleske riječi nisu rijetke u Japanu, što čak i djeci osvještava jezik i ostavlja prostora da se bolje upoznaju s njim. To upoznavanje tek je nedavno postalo zadaća japanskog obrazovnog sustava, koji je tijekom zadnjeg desetljeća počeo implementirati nastavu engleskog jezika u kurikulum osnovnog obrazovanja.

**Ključne riječi:** *engleski jezik, hrvatsko osnovnoškolsko obrazovanje, japansko osnovnoškolsko obrazovanje, poučavanje engleskog jezika*



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Altering the language someone speaks, writes, listens to and reads every day, as well as learning a whole new language without a foundation is no easy task, especially if the language being learned significantly differs from the mother tongue of a learner.

In addition, the contrast between a child and an adult acquiring a language has also not passed unnoticed. A learner's age is one of the key factors that influence his or her progress in learning a language. Children begin to acquire a language from their surroundings from a very early age (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2003). Adults are also able to acquire a new language, but it is likely that they will have to consciously focus and invest much more effort in order to learn a foreign language.

Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts (Penfield & Roberts, 1959; in Johnstone, 2002) were neurologists as well as the first to notice that there may be a biological cause that affects language learning. Conducting research on human brains, they discovered that brain development correlates with language acquisition being better and faster until the age of nine (Johnstone, 2002). This theory was further developed into the Critical Period Hypothesis by Eric Lenneberg (Boeckx & Longa, 2001) who believed that there are biological foundations in language learning. The critical period is described as a very productive period for acquiring a language that lasts until puberty (Byram & Hu, 2003).

Research conducted at McGill University (Chai, et al., 2016) has shown that the success of language learning can be related to an individual's intrinsic learning abilities, along with a learner's age. Acquiring a language from a young age has proven to have certain advantages (Tryfonova, 2021), and many countries strive to teach children foreign languages in their schools as soon as possible in order to enable the best conceivable outcomes.

Taking a closer look at nations that invest many years in teaching English from a young age, such as Japan and Croatia, considerable differences can be noted in their foreign language policies, teaching practices and outcomes. Both countries offer their citizens a lot of opportunities to learn English, such as having English as an obligatory foreign language course in their schools and available to learn in foreign language schools. Furthermore, both countries strive to improve the quality of their English language education by examining the outcomes and improving the existing practices.

## **2. LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

It can be said that the English language functions as an international lingua franca. Nowadays, the world's society mostly uses English as a universal language for interaction and collaboration. For instance, it is the language used for most modern systems and manuals. Therefore, it is no wonder English education is of utmost importance in education systems worldwide.

Learning English can be a difficult task for anyone whose mother tongue is not European, or even Indo-European, and who has not had much of a historical connection with European countries. It is more likely that a nation might have fewer difficulties with learning English as a foreign language if it had more contact as well as integrated English loan words into its own.

Japan, for instance, is one of few countries that have never been colonised by Europe, nor has it, historically, had a lot of contact with English-speaking countries. However, in the last three centuries, it has borrowed a plethora of English words and phrases, and adapted them to the Japanese language, twisting them into sometimes even unrecognisable expressions which lose the meaning of their original version.

Croatia, on the other hand, has constantly throughout history been under the influence of many other cultures and languages, including English, and has learned to adapt the Croatian language to constant changes and loanwords. Moreover, under the ceaseless influence of American and British media, Croatian people acquire a great dosage of English expressions and cultures (Mihaljević Djigunović, Cergol, & Li, 2006).

### **2.1. The English language in Croatia**

Observing historical records, diverse cultures have always influenced each other due to many divergent circumstances. The Croatian language has an abundance of loanwords stemming from the dominant countries that influenced it. The status of the English language in Croatia has had a very different development when compared to other foreign languages from which Croatian has adapted words. In the past, the political and cultural power of other countries left a bigger impact on the Croatian language, depending on the region and the current dominant country's influences. German and Hungarian were dominating for centuries in the areas that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, along with Latin in many

cultural, religious, and educational sections. The Italian language was also taught in the regions of Dalmatia and Istria, making English inferior when compared to German or Italian until the 20th century. Having either German or Italian as the most frequent second language, some authors (Andraka & Milković, 2022) believe that educated Croatian people read literary works by Anglophone authors in their translated form, instead of the original, which resulted in some literary works available only through indirect translations even today.

Because of modern technological amenities, English was also added to the list of languages from which Croatian borrowed. Since American media and culture provided great support for the aforementioned development, the Croatian language took over the already existing English names for arising technological phenomena instead of insisting on creating Croatian words. Even when such efforts were made, many people would still rather use English loanwords instead of newly created Croatian alternatives.

Mirjana Vilke was one of the Croatian researchers who concluded English should be taught from the first grade in Croatian primary schools. Research on the subject itself started in the 1970s, which was the basis for another project on early learning initiated in 1991. Although it faced many difficulties, the project was proclaimed successful, resulting in four published books, and new teaching materials.

“Four languages – English, French, German and Italian – were introduced on experimental basis into the first grade of primary school (age 7). At the beginning, the project was supported by the Ministry of Education but, unfortunately, some time in the middle of the project the head staff in the Ministry changed and the climate suddenly turned unfavourable for the project. However, thanks to the enthusiasm of the teachers who worked for the project and the project researchers the project went on gaining outstanding results. Four theoretical books (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993; Vilke & Vrhovac, 1995; Vrhovac et al., 1999; Vrhovac, 2001) were published, and textbooks and other teaching materials were produced.” (Vilke, *English in Croatia - A Glimpse into Past, Present and Future*, 2007, pp. 20-21)

Even though it took some time to introduce the English language into the first grade, today it is a subject for first graders that is firmly rooted in the primary school curriculum. A number of researchers, including Vrhovac, Mihaljević Djigunović, Narančić Kovač, Andraka and many others continue to contribute to the development of foreign language instruction in Croatian primary schools by writing books and articles with reviews and suggestions for language classes. *Challenges of Learning a Foreign Language in Primary School* by Vrhovac et al. (2019) is an example of such a book intended for readers in the field of philology and

foreign language education. It contains important information about learning a foreign language in the Croatian context and covers a wide range of intertwining topics. At the beginning of each thematic unit, the authors study the process of mastering languages, give a wider theoretical context, and then present the concrete work of foreign language teachers in Croatian primary schools, combining the theory and practice of foreign language teaching in primary schools (ibid.).

Nowadays, Croatian speakers use words from English on an everyday basis, which affects the lexical grammar of the Croatian language. The importance of the English language today is confirmed by the fact that words of English origin today make up 40% of the total number of new words (Sulić, 2019).

## **2.2. Beginnings of the English language in Japan**

Japan's first contact with Europe was in 1543 when three Portuguese merchants landed on Tanegashima Island (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021). The Japanese were introduced to new languages and developed an interest to learn them and interact with foreigners. The newcomers brought insight into a completely different culture and language, and along with it, alternation to Japan's own language that exists to the modern day.

“Westerners first came to Japan with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1543 in Tanegashima, an island to the south of Kyushu at first, the principal European cultures and languages in Japan were Portuguese and Spanish. They introduced trade and Christian missionary work, and their presence had an abiding effect on Japanese language. This is evident in many Japanese words that exist to this day. Two examples are “castella,” a Japanese cake, which comes from the Portuguese “*pao de Castela*,” meaning “bread from Castile,” and *konpeito*, a Japanese candy which comes from the Portuguese “*confeito*.” However, the inflow to Japan of Portuguese and Spanish culture and language stopped in 1639 when the Tokugawa Shogunate of the Edo period gave the order to close the door to foreigners.” (Shimizu, 2010)

The newcomers had such a great impact on Japan, a country not used to outsiders, that the event became popular enough to be recorded in the art pieces (Image 1).

**Image 1.**

*Arrival of a Portuguese Ship, 1620-1640 by an unknown author*



Due to fear of possible colonial and religious influence from Europe, Japanese leaders closed the borders to foreigners for over 200 years. When the Meiji period started in 1868, Japanese people became aware of the stark difference in industrial and technological progress between the East and the West. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the West was far more advanced and modernised, which prompted Japan to leave the closed-door policy after all, and start learning more about foreign culture, as well as foreign languages.

Unlike Croatia, Japan was not used to frequent drastic adjustments brought about by immigration, alliances, or conquests. Moreover, it had never been under the aegis of any other nation, having only its own imperial families and provincial lords to rule over the whole people of Japan. Therefore, Japanese political leaders were almost always opposed to cultural shifts, which made it harder for English to be learned by the nation since the anti-foreigner policy affected education as well.

Although it has been taught soon after the first introduction to English-speaking cultures, true interest and political investment in the English language began after the end of the Second World War, during the American Occupation of Japan. Japanese people had to interact with the Americans, learning from the best source. Newly introduced items and customs demanded new vocabulary items in the Japanese language to describe imported material and non-material values. Consequently, the Japanese language loaned foreign words to describe new, foreign things and objects.

### **2.2.1. Difficulties of learning English in Japan by Japanese native speakers**

Dissimilar to Croatian, the Japanese language is much more unrelated to English, and therefore many difficulties arise when it comes to learning the language. The phonological system of Japanese, just as well as lexical, orthographic and syntactic systems are very dissimilar to the English language.

Japanese and English diverge in the script, sentence structure, vowel sounds, and intonation of speaking. Combining these fundamental distinctions with entirely new vocabulary and wholly different cultures, it is natural to expect an abundance of obstructions not only in learning but in teaching English as well.

Because of the mentioned obstructions, the Japanese have adapted parts of the English language to make it easier for themselves. The changes have in some cases completely deformed or altered the original meaning.

The Japanese language has assimilated a number of English words so much that some of them have lost their original meaning. Most of them have been modified to the point of being unrecognisable. One of the first mechanical pencils came from the American company “Eversharp Pencil“, and the Japanese linked the name of the company to the name of the object. Mechanical pencils are in Japan called “sharp pencils”, often shortened to be “shaapen”(シャープペン). Another example is the usage of the word “revenge”. When used by a Japanese native speaker, it has a much more positive meaning, implying that they will give something another try after failing the first time (Motomura, 2022).

The case of English being “Japanised” so much has led to the existence of Japanglish, or English-in-Japanese-style. Many have noticed the struggle the Japanese have with the English language, and have even been uploading photographs of unusual English translations or usage of words.

### **2.2.2. The Japanese alphabet**

Although Croatian and English have many differences, they are basically using the same Latin letter system. Japanese, on the other hand, uses three types of alphabets: hiragana, katakana and kanji (Image 2). Children in Japan start learning these three alphabets from a young age, and when they start learning English, they need to start from the basics of literacy and learn a completely different alphabet.

## Image 2.

### *Japanese alphabet*



Hiragana is a syllabic type of writing, used to write Japanese origin words, while katakana is a syllabic script used for writing foreign words and loanwords originating from other languages, not only English. Katakana writing system is also used for writing onomatopoeic sounds. Kanji is a much more complex type of ideogram that has been adopted from the Chinese language and adjusted to better fit the Japanese and can be used to write down multiple syllables or even whole words.

### **2.2.3. Vowel sounds and articulation differences**

There are some sounds in English that do not have counterparts in the Japanese language, for example, a vowel /æ/. When a Japanese person needs to produce such a sound, they will most probably replace it with the closest sound existing in their own language. Depending on the word, the vowel /æ/ may sound like the Japanese /e/, /a/, or /aj/ (Ford, 2001).

When comparing articulatory settings, English and Japanese do not have much in common, which makes it quite difficult to develop a high level of pronunciation proficiency in either language after being used to particular articulation. Therefore, it is required to invest enough time into getting used to different phonetics and phonology before even learning the language in depth.

According to some authors (Vance, 1987, p. 7), “the lips play almost no active role in pronunciation; they are neither rounded nor spread, but neutral” in Japanese. Unlike English, the Japanese language does not demand as much lip rounding. This articulation contrast results in bigger phonetical differences.

Furthermore, tongue placement also varies greatly, which is possibly the most problematic articulatory difference. As explained by some authors (Vance, 1987, p. 7), in the English language “the tongue is tethered laterally to the roof of the mouth by allowing the sides to rest along the inner surfaces of the upper lateral gums and teeth”, allowing the tip of the tongue to move freely. As a result, alveolar consonants are more frequent in English, while in Japanese, velar consonants are more frequent than the other consonants.

#### **2.2.4. Sentence structure differences**

Word order in a sentence can in some languages be of greatest importance, especially if they lack morphological classification used to express the relationships and properties of words in a sentence. Besides greatly differing in phonetics and phonology, Japanese and English are quite dissimilar in grammatical structures and pronunciation.

For instance, verbs in the English language are placed after the subject, while Japanese verbs occur at the end of the sentence. Therefore, when a speaker of one language speaks the other one, they must use a different word placement than usual.

#### **2.2.5. The influence of Japanese loanwords “*Gairaigo*”**

During its vocabulary build-up history, the Japanese language was mostly under the influence of Chinese. Words taken from the Chinese language are categorised under the name *Kango*, whereas *Gairaigo* stands for vocabulary that comes from English or other languages.

“*Kango* is a Japanese vocabulary derived from Chinese and is generally written using Japanese *Kanji*. *Wago* is an authentic Japanese vocabulary created without the influence of a foreign language. *Gairaigo* is a vocabulary formed from foreign languages, except Chinese. *Gairaigo* can be formed from the uptake of English or other foreign languages. *Konshugo* is a vocabulary formed from the combination of the other three *Goshu*, such as the merger of *Wago* and *Kango*, *Kango* and *Gairaigo*, or *Wago* and *Gairaigo*.” (Kaluge, 2020, p. 172)



All other words derived from other foreign languages are usually written in *katakana* syllables, so they are visually also easily distinguishable from other Japanese-like words. Many foreigners have trouble learning and understanding such loanwords, mostly because they are harder to pronounce after being alternated to such lengths that they do not sound anything like the original words.

Since Japanese people are aware these loanwords often originate from English, they could have a biased image of English when they begin to learn it, and it could also be harder for them to learn the language with misinterpreted prior knowledge.

### **3. THE CROATIAN CURRICULUM**

Croatia's education policy was to create a National Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education (Nacionalni kurikulum Republike Hrvatske za predškolski, osnovnoškolski i srednjoškolski odgoj i obrazovanje (hr), 2011), which enables all components of the system to be meaningfully and harmoniously connected into one interconnected whole.

The Croatian National Curriculum Framework emphasizes the necessity of developing social competences and presents numerous opportunities for student-oriented work through methodical adaptations and learning outcomes. The document delivered a significant change in the educational paradigm, bringing the transition to a competence system, student achievements and learning outcomes.

#### **3.1. Primary education in Croatia**

Primary education in Croatia is compulsory from the age of six to fifteen and spans eight grades (Zakon o odgoju i obrazovanju u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi (hr), Article 11 paragraph 1, Article 12 paragraph 1, Article 26 paragraph 1, Article 30). The Croatian Constitution (Croatia, 2014) in Article 63 paragraph 1, states that parents have a duty to school their children. Article 65 paragraph 1, states that primary schooling is mandatory and free of charge.

Croatian children start their compulsory education approximately at the age of seven, when they enrol in primary school. After four years of lower primary, they carry on to upper primary where they have expanded courses. After finishing the whole eight years of primary school, children choose their career paths depending on their high school of choice. Afterward, they may choose to enrol in a faculty, being given a chance to complete their tertiary education free of charge or scholarship in case of diligent studying.

#### **3.2. Historical overview of the current curriculum organisation**

The development of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) from 2011 was preceded by a series of activities that demonstrate the permanent efforts of the Croatian education policy to improve the quality of education.

In 2005, various scientific, professional and public reflections led to the creation of the Croatian National Education Standard (HNOS) as a comprehensive norm for improving the quality of education. The development of the Croatian National Educational Standard is aimed at gradually and adaptively raising the quality of teaching, knowledge and learning ability.

HNOS refers to a comprehensive approach to the educational process and includes educational goals, educational content, proposed teaching methods, expected learning and teaching outcomes, and the teaching environment, and represents the basis for the implementation of education in Croatia (Hrvatski nacionalni obrazovni standard (HNOS), 2005).

The Curriculum and program for primary school (Zakon o odgoju i obrazovanju u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi (hr), Article 24, »Narodne novine«, No. 59/90, 26/93, 27/93, 29/94, 7/96, 59 /01., 14/01. and 76/05.) from 2006 brings foreign language learning programs with outlined goals, tasks, educational contents and goals to be achieved by teaching/learning in each topic (educational achievements).

The novelty compared to the previous teaching programs was a modernized approach to teaching foreign languages, the simplified content of previous programs, and the introduction of new content. One of the most important novelties introduced by HNOS is the cross-curricular approach, allowing teachers to plan lessons that incorporate more than one disciplinary area. Lesson topics from different subjects were connected and for the first time teachers of different subjects planned, and sometimes conducted, lessons together. The goal of modern foreign language teaching became oral and written communicative competence in a foreign language, expanded by elements of sociocultural, intercultural and reading/literary competence.

The National Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education from 2011 is considered to be a development document, and as such, it is the basis and starting point for the development and production of all other documents, developed in terms of openness to changes and constant innovation in accordance with changes and development directions in society and education.

The fundamental feature of the National Curriculum is the transition to a competence-based system focusing on students' learning outcomes, as opposed to the previously content-

oriented one. From the first proposal in November 2008 to today, it is the only document in education that has passed the approval of a huge number of participants.

In 2018, during the curricular reform as part of the experimental program “School for Life” the term Subject Curriculum was introduced. With its application, a new curriculum for the subject English language came into force with three main goals being stated:

“1) educational outcomes, directed towards solving problems and critical thinking, in subject curricula as well as seven intercurricular subjects; 2) satisfied and creative students that are the result of an inclusive and motivating environment for learning, and 3) motivated teachers who accept and use their competencies (knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility) in order to respond to challenges of the school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in innovative ways, and especially the challenge of lifelong learning.” (Divjak & Pažur Aničić, 2019)

Many noticed some drawbacks in the practice, but are aware that making sense of the new curriculum takes time. In summary, the main ideas of the curriculum reform are changing the focus from teaching to learning; they tend to develop competences and values, as well as actively engage students by using inspiring methods relevant to outcomes, and by teaching them how to learn (Taevere, 2019).

#### **4. ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN CROATIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

English as a foreign language was taught in Croatia both in foreign language schools and primary schools long before Croatia achieved its independence. However, owing to researchers like Mirjana Vilke and Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, who emphasised the importance of learning a foreign language from a young age, the Croatian government realised the necessity to implement foreign language learning from the beginning of primary school education. Croatian primary schools integrated English as an obligatory subject in the first grade at the age of seven in 2003, along with other foreign languages like German, French, Italian, etc.

Mirjana Vilke focused on the research in order to discover what is the optimal age for a person to start learning a foreign language. During the 1991-1994 project, she and other scholars focused on research into the acquisition and learning of foreign languages at early school age. The research continued from 1995 until 2008, resulting in altogether 8-year long longitudinal work.

The conclusion of the research was that the optimal age to start learning a foreign language was from the first grade of primary school, when children are around seven years old. She believed that teachers in primary schools should be educated to be able to teach English as well.

Between 2006 and 2010, J. Mihaljević Djigunović focused on early language learning research to find out what could be realistically achieved in early language learning in state schools under ordinary conditions. She found that Croatian children have a very positive attitude toward learning English as a foreign language, just as well as most teachers have a positive attitude toward teaching young learners.

The conclusions of the project (Dinković & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2016) were that, in order to attain successful teaching of the English language, three conditions need to be fulfilled:

1. Foreign language teaching should be more intensive in the first four years
2. It should take place in groups of 12-15 learners
3. It should be carried out by teachers specially trained to teach young learners.

Even though it is hard to achieve smaller groups of learners in Croatian public primary schools, especially in bigger cities, today's primary school teachers are being educated to

achieve native-level proficiency in order to teach their students the language in the best pedagogical way, which is something M. Vilke also accentuated almost thirty years ago as important:

“One of the requirements is that the teacher should attain near-native pronunciation of the foreign language, which is not easy. The language training of the primary teachers should be carried out professionally and with due care and precision, and the trainees should be made aware of the responsibility of the job.” (Vilke, 1993, p. 28)

Jasminka Buljan Culej was a researcher who participated in the European Survey on language competences (Buljan Culej, 2012), and she found that an early start indeed has a positive influence on the attainment of higher levels of foreign language in Croatia. However, there are some other factors that encourage children to learn English, such as the positive correlation between their parents’ knowledge of the language, and exposure to the media in a foreign language.

There is more to learning languages than just learning their linguistic components. Marija Andraka studied the potential of English textbooks in Croatia for intercultural competence development. She emphasised how the teacher, the textbook, and the curriculum are the main contributors to the development of students’ ability to alter perspectives, realise stereotypes, and learn more about the culture behind the language that is being learned (Andraka, 2019).

#### **4.1. Teaching materials and strategies**

The aim of the new National Curriculum was to shift the focus away from explicit grammar teaching and testing to learners’ autonomy and the development of the ability to communicate between teachers and students. New textbooks and learning materials were produced to achieve such aims. As an example of such a textbook used in the first grade of primary school, *New Building Blocks 1* has been taken for this paper (Images 3 and 4).

Effective communication with members of different cultures is important when establishing intercultural interaction. Intercultural communicative competence thus represents an important component of language learning. Communication is an everyday experience, and during intercultural communication, the speaker is expected to have the ability to communicate in a culturally competent way.

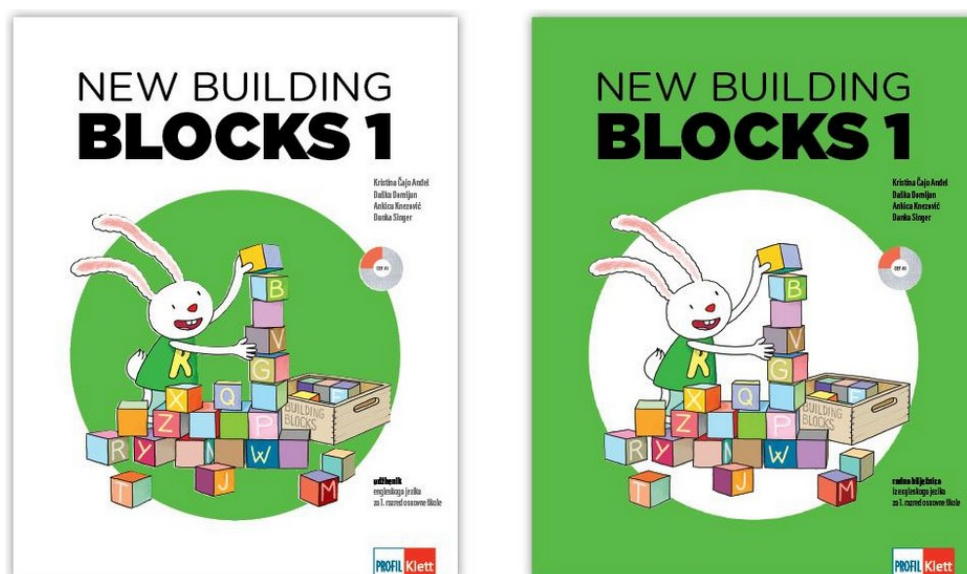
English language lessons in Croatia also focus on awareness of cultural differences. Andraža (2019) emphasised how important it is to have intercultural communicative competence as the main objective in foreign language classes. Intercultural communicative competence is necessary for overcoming cultural communication barriers, as well as for successfully accepting and understanding other people, regardless of their culture or identity.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to ensure the comprehension of different cultures. It is extremely important that it is fully supported and encouraged by teachers and other stakeholders of the educational process as they themselves should possess the knowledge, abilities and attitudes that they want to develop in their students.

A good quality textbook should offer precise, up-to-date, and accurate information in order to portray a realistic image of a culture, and it is up to the teacher to contribute to developing their pupils' intercultural awareness by providing some more thought-provoking topics, not just discuss the neutral and positive ones that textbooks often provide. In addition, the curriculum should precisely define the aims, content and outcomes of the lesson for each grade of primary school education for students to develop intercultural competence (ibid.).

### Image 3.

*New Building Blocks 1 textbook and workbook covers*



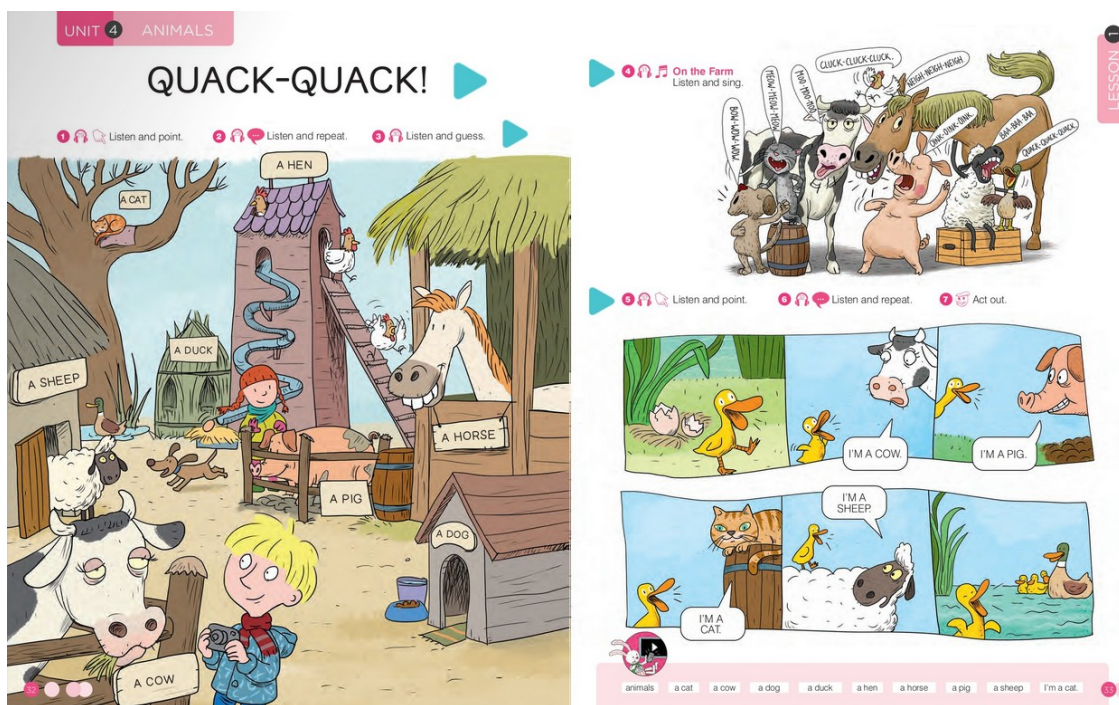
By using these textbooks, children are taught not only to master the vocabulary, but also other skills such as listening and understanding, speaking, writing and reading. This kind

of teaching material ensures independence in mastering the language through interactive educational approaches and develops linguistic and intercultural communicative competence in a fun and interesting way while taking into account the inclusiveness of the content.

In an English language lesson, a communicative approach is frequently included, and often teaching takes place through interaction with others. Collaborative learning through pair and group work is also very often promoted. It is very important for children to develop motivation for language learning, intercultural competences, and creative ways of thinking and expressing themselves through song and acting.

**Image 4.**

*Sample pages from an English textbook New Building Blocks 1 used in first grades of Croatian Primary schools*



Some publishers have all their materials available online, not only for teachers, but for the public to easily access them as well. In such a way, everyone has a possibility to learn, in this case, the English language from adequate sources. The digital material works independently or as a supplement to the printed textbook and contains digital flashcards, digital picturebooks, animated songs and karaoke, interactive tasks with feedback on the solution, video instructions for making practical props for use in class or for practice, and films recorded with native speakers.



In Croatia, the tendency is to use English as much as possible both in textbooks and during the lessons. Therefore, children are immersed in the language and are encouraged to speak exclusively in English. To avoid using their mother tongue, there are many visual images and flashcards with which teachers do not need to lean on their native language when explaining new vocabulary and grammar.

## 5. JAPANESE SCHOOLS AND CURRICULUM

In Japan, schools and teachers, along with the family, media and peer groups, have a great impact on children and young people. Schools reflect and embody the values of society, owing their existence to the fact that Japanese society values education and wants to influence its future development through education.

The values of the schools are visible in their organization, curriculum and disciplinary procedures; in relations between teachers and students; in what teachers choose to approve or encourage in the classroom. Even the seating arrangement in the classroom reflects certain values. Japanese schooling system significantly differs from the Croatian one, although it does have some similarities with western countries.

### 5.1. Historical overview of Japanese education and curriculum

Being under Chinese gripe, even Japan's beginnings of schooling were under its influence. First schools opened their doors in the 6th century where they taught Buddhism and Confucian teachings, along with science, calligraphy, divination and literature (Hays, 2014). After the rise of the samurai in the Kamakura period, scholars and officials were of less influence, and it was the Buddhist monasteries that became centres of learning.

During the Edo period, children aged 7 to 15 attended nearby temple schools run by Buddhists. Most were taught by monks and priests to read, write and use an abacus, but samurai, doctors, and people of other professions also aided as teachers. At the time, two main schooling systems were attended. The first type was the *hanko*, which enrolled the children of the samurai class (Hays, 2014). During the period, feudal lords with the title of *daimyo* lead powerful warriors and controlled Japanese provinces. In order to empower themselves in peaceful times, their samurais had to educate themselves in agriculture and accounting, along with the military and strategy. That way, lords also became patrons of arts and science.

Another type of school was called "*Terakoya*", usually run either by a single teacher or a married couple (Ishikida, 2005). That school provided education mainly for children of both commoners and samurai warriors. The focus was on moral education, literacy and arithmetic, and was also an inspiration for artists (Image 5).

Image 5.

*Bungaku Bandai no Takara Terakoya School by Issunshi Hanasato*



Although the borders were closed, and contact with foreign countries was limited, Japan imported books from China and Europe, which still impressed and inspired Japan's people regardless of the lack of foreigners in Japan.

“In June, 1848, an American named Ranald MacDonald, came ashore on Rishiri Island off Hokkaido in defiance of the Japanese policy of isolation. He was caught and sent to Nagasaki for questioning. Fourteen translators who were proficient in Dutch were chosen to learn English from him. Each day for six months in front of MacDonald's cell floor, they lined up on tatami mats to learn English from him, after which MacDonald was sent back. Dutch translator, Einosuke Moriyama (who would later act as translator for Perry and Harris) was in charge of this task. They also asked MacDonald to pronounce words in the *Angeriagorintaisei*, which was published thirty-five years previously in order to correct the pronunciations of many of the words. MacDonald was, therefore, the first native speaker and teacher of English in Japan.” (Shimizu, 2010, p. 7)

During the final days of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the first true English grammar book was published (Shimizu, 2010). Despite scarcity, there were followers of westerners'

education, and their schools were being founded. Today's well-known leading institution of higher education, Keio University, was actually founded in 1858 as a private Western school. Japanese schooling at the time was so developed that in 1868, when the Tokugawa Shogunate fell, Japan had a higher literacy rate than many Western countries.

Learning methods of the West remained appealing to the Japanese even in the Meiji period, after 1868. Japan believed that adopting such a system would be a good way of becoming a strong and modern nation. Eventually, there were students sent to study abroad. Foreigners were also invited to teach at their universities and academies. That might be considered the beginning of the period when foreigners were valued as teachers of foreign, especially as their native language teachers. However, Japan's seclusion from the rest of the world remained strong.

According to some sources (e. g. Numano, 2011), elementary school education in Japan was carried out after the establishment of the educational system and became completely functional after the revision of the Elementary School Order in 1900. Western countries once again restored their strong influence on Japan's schooling after World War I, when the country's education movement gained momentum. As World War II approached, English-speaking countries became unappealing to the Japanese government.

After the Second World War, the government made educational reform one of its main goals, drastically changing their attitude towards English education as well. Since then, schools have started to have their own say in creating curricula and selecting textbooks, even though the Ministry of Education still had to approve all content and materials. English became a compulsory part of the curriculum, starting as an elective course in lower grades, and compulsory in upper.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture began to carry out educational reforms considered the most important since the end of World War II. One third of the content of the previous national curriculum was eliminated in order to put the focus on the development of students' autonomy and self-reliant learning.

“In terms of language policy, Japan is a monolingual country where ethnicity, culture, language and identity are closely connected, and national language policies have focused on the development of a nationalistic adherence to a particular concept of Japanese identity.” (Liddicoat, 2007 Hashimoto, 2011, p. 168)

According to the National Center on Education and the Economy website (2022), the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture revises the national curriculum about once every decade, the curriculum that preceded the previously implemented one from 2013 lessened instructional time in the compulsory subjects, and allowed more freedom to combine subjects. Revision of curriculum focuses on three main points: motivation to learn and apply learning to life; acquisition of knowledge and technical skills; and skills to think, make judgments, and express oneself (Economy, 2022).

The most recent revision was executed between 2020 and 2022. It made English a graded subject in fifth and sixth grade, with selective and ungraded English language activities starting as early as third grade.

## 5.2. Primary education in Japan

Today's Japanese law obliges everyone with compulsory education, as can be seen from the following excerpts:

„Chapter II: Fundaments of Education Implementation (Compulsory Education)

Article 5

The people shall be obligated to have children under their protection receive a general education, in accordance with separate legislation.

(2) The objectives of general education, given in the form of compulsory education, shall be to cultivate the foundations for an independent life within society while developing the abilities of each individual, and to foster the basic qualities necessary for the builders of our state and society.

(3) In order to guarantee the opportunity for compulsory education and ensure adequate standards, the national and local governments shall assume responsibility for the implementation of education on the basis of mutual cooperation. The people shall be obligated to have boys and girls under their protection receive a nine-year general education“ (Ministry of Justice, 1957))

The schooling system in Japan is often categorised as a 6-3-3 pattern, inspired by the American structure. For the first six years, children are in Elementary school (小学校 *shōgakkō*), which provides primary education, and the next six years are divided into lower secondary school (中学校 *chūgakkō*) and upper secondary school (高等学校 *kōtōgakkō*).

Although the Japanese curriculum does share many similarities with the curriculum of the USA, which was used as a model, there are some important differences. For instance, Japanese teachers are better trained in mathematics than Americans, and the focus on that subject is stronger in Japan. Likewise, their native language teaching is more taken into consideration than English education in the United States because of the difficulty of learning the ideograms. Furthermore, students in Japan take the English language as their foreign language course from the third grade through the final year of high school.

“Even though the Japanese adopted the American 6-3-3 model during the U.S. Occupation after World War II, elementary and secondary education is more centralized than in the United States. Control over curriculum rests largely with the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) and education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Municipalities and private sources fund kindergartens, but national, prefectural, and local governments pay almost equal shares of educational costs for students in grades one through nine.” (Honkasnoson, 2015, p. 11; Ministry of Education C. S., *The course of studies for elementary schools*, 2009)

In other words, Japanese students share more or less similar timetables to the Croatian students, but the contents of their courses are much more overwhelming and copious. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture provided (Ministry of Education C. S., *The course of studies for elementary schools*, 2009), a brochure in English in which they described their schooling system and basic education in Japan, and portrayed what would a typical class schedule look like in a Japanese school (Image 6).

**Image 6.**

*An example of a typical class schedule of second graders in Japanese schools provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture*

Example of 2nd graders

## Class Schedule

		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:10-8:20		Morning Study	Morning Reading	Morning Study	Morning Reading	Morning Study
		Morning Meeting				
8:45-9:30	1	Japanese Language	Physical Education	Japanese Language	Living Environment Studies	Japanese Language
9:40-10:25	2	Living Environment Studies	Japanese Language	Arithmetic	Japanese Language	Arithmetic
		Recess				
10:45-11:30	3	Arithmetic	Music	Art and Handicraft	Physical Education	Music
11:40-12:25	4	Japanese Language	Arithmetic	Art and Handicraft	Japanese Language	Japanese Language
12:25-13:55		Lunch / Lunch break / Cleaning				
14:00-14:45	5	Moral Education	Living Environment Studies	Japanese Language	Arithmetic	Physical Education
14:55-15:40	6		Classroom Activities			
		Closing Meeting				

## 6. ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

English language teaching has been keenly promoted ever since the end of World War II, and after the 1980s when globalization and internationalization were on the rise. Eventually, English being introduced as early as elementary school became a serious topic for the Japanese Ministry of Education to consider.

In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education announced their awareness of how important it was to introduce activities in the English language to elementary school during the Period for Integrated Study, guided by those who are proficient in English. Their plan was to enrich training for English teachers, just as well as promote the utilization of native speakers:

“With a view to ascertaining the importance of English education, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) listened to the opinions of experts in various fields with a view to ascertaining the importance of English education. Specifically, MEXT accepted the suggestion about the improvement of English education from the "Round-table Committee for the Improvement of English Teaching Methods" in January 2001, and heard the opinions of experts at the "Round-table Committee on English Education Reform" in 2002. Based on the deliberations of both these committees, MEXT developed the strategic plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" - Plan to improve English and Japanese abilities on July 12, 2002 with the aim of drastically improving English education.” (Ministry of Education C. S., Action plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’, 2003)

In 2008, the Ministry issued another restructuring of the curriculum which regarded English Language activities. They were no longer part of the course Period for Integrated Study but became compulsory, and ungraded, segregated ‘foreign language activities’ course planned to be conducted one class per week for Grades 5 and 6:

### “II. CONTENT

[Grade 5 and Grade 6]

1. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to help pupils actively engage in communication in a foreign language:

- (1) To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language.
- (2) To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language.
- (3) To learn the importance of verbal communication.



2. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to deepen the experiential understanding of the languages and cultures of Japan and foreign countries:

(1) To become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language, to learn its differences from the Japanese language, and to be aware of the interesting aspects of language and its richness.

(2) To learn the differences in ways of living, customs and events between Japan and foreign countries and to be aware of various points of view and ways of thinking.

(3) To experience communication with people of different cultures and to deepen the understanding of culture.” (Ministry of Education C. S., The course of studies for elementary schools, 2009)

The proposed plan for the Reform had focused on providing adequate teaching materials and aids to primary schools, and researching its effectiveness as well as the overall improvement and results of the Reform. They also planned to invest in better teacher education and the provision of native English speakers as English language teachers. However, some believed (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009) that the approach in which English class was in the form of activities class had great diversity in the content and frequency of the English lessons, and that such an approach could cause problems in the future.

The projects began with pilot experiments in some schools in 2009 until English education became compulsory starting in 2011 in all elementary schools in Japan, starting in the 5th grade. In 2013, the Ministry of education announced new plans for enhancing English language teaching, planning to make English activity classes mandatory starting from the third and fourth grade in 2020, which they are in today’s time.

According to some English language teachers in Japan (Carrigan, 2018), grade three and four students have 35 hours of English lessons of per year. Grade five and six students have 70 hours of teaching per year, approximately two times per week. Most often it is a homeroom teacher that teaches English classes with the occasional support from the native speaker as an assistant language teacher:

“Homeroom teachers or teachers in charge of foreign language activities should make teaching programs and conduct lessons. Effort should be made to get more people involved in lessons by inviting native speakers of the foreign language or by seeking cooperation from local people who are proficient in the foreign language, depending on the circumstances of the

local community.” (Ministry of Education C. S., The course of studies for elementary schools, 2009)

### 6.1. Teaching materials and strategies

Textbooks used in Japanese schools must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and the same applies to the textbooks used for English class lessons. All elementary and junior high school students are provided with textbooks written and edited by private publishers based on the National Curriculum Standards free of charge.

Textbooks in current use for the English class are titled *Let's Try!* (2018), with the covers shown in Image 7. These books are used by third and fourth graders, while fifth and sixth graders use the books *We Can!* (2018), shown in Image 8. Some teachers using the book in their class evaluated the activities as simpler and easier to explain without the need to use Japanese. The aforementioned books gradually increase the difficulty of their activities and eventually demand full-sentenced answers before being able to converse. Unlike some previous teaching materials, these textbooks offer more interaction between a teacher and students. Japanese students were previously mostly concentrated on reading and repeating read material, but nowadays they are instructed to converse and interact more with the rest of the class.

#### Image 7.

*Let's Try!* textbook covers



Each unit in these books has a series of chants and listening activities to practice, but they include instructions and explanations in Japanese (images 9 and 10). Even the lesson plans for teachers are combined with explanations in Japanese. Moreover, there were some complaints about the dialogues in the audio materials included in the textbooks. To some (Carriagan, 2019), they often seemed unnatural with actors who speak too fast and use more complex vocabulary than the students were being taught in the previous sections.

**Image 8.**

*We Can!* English textbook covers



Image 9.  
Sample page from the English textbook *We Can!!*

Unit 5

**Let's Watch and Think** 2 映像を見て、登場人物ができることに○を、できないことに△をつけよう。

John                      Christina  
Satoshi

●二人ができること・できないことについて、□に書こう。

Satoshi

**Activity** 3 インタビューの準備をしよう。先生のできることを予想して、□に巻末絵カードをおこう。

●先生の似顔絵を書こう。 ●HeかSheを4線に書こう。

\_\_\_\_\_ can \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ can \_\_\_\_\_

●先生の名前をローマ字で書こう。

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_

Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ can \_\_\_\_\_

**Activity** 4 先生にインタビューをしてわかったことを□に書こう。

**Jingle**      Animals Jingle      p.77

38 39

ダウンロードしたファイルをホームページ上に転載するなどして不特定多数が閲覧できるようにすることや許可なく出版物等に転載すること、営利目的で利用することを禁止いたします。

Image 10  
Sample page from the English textbook *Let's Try!!*

Unit 5

**Let's Listen** 登場人物の筆箱の中身について聞いて、( )に名前を書こう。

1

( )

2

( )

3

( )

4

( )

**Let's Watch and Think** 2 えいぞうを見て、世界の子どものかばんの中身について、気づいたことを□に書こう。

**Let's Play** 2 文房具絵カードをならべて、文房具セットを作り、友だちとつたえ合おう。

**Activity** 文房具セットを作って、友だちにおくろう。

だれに

20 21

ダウンロードしたファイルをホームページ上に転載するなどして不特定多数が閲覧できるようにすることや許可なく出版物等に転載すること、営利目的で利用することを禁止いたします。

## 7. DISCUSSION

Comparing the two countries, many dissimilarities can be noticed in their approach to English instruction. There are some differences even in their basic structure of education. For instance, while in Croatia primary school lasts for eight years, and is divided into lower and upper years, in Japan it lasts for six years without any specific separation.

Furthermore, the English Language is a compulsory subject from the start of primary school in Croatia, whereas in Japan it is mandatory only from the third grade. Thus, children in Croatia start learning the language earlier and do not struggle with the basics in the third grade as much as Japanese students do when they start their third grade.

Another reason why Japanese students may find English difficult is because of how extremely different their native language is from English. Not only do they need to learn the different vocabulary, but also different script, pronunciation, and grammatical structures. In addition, teachers often pay more attention to grammar, rather than to developing communicative skills through conversation.

On the other hand, Croatian children need to focus on all four skills and develop their reading, writing, speaking and listening. Unlike in English class in Japan, in Croatia, it is recommended to use mostly English during the lesson, even when giving instructions. In Croatian textbooks, only English is used, but in Japan, instructions are written in Japanese.

Croatia has also identified the necessity to train specialist teachers to teach English. In Japan, English native speakers are thought to be appropriate teachers since it is their mother tongue, which often leads to teachers who do not know how to transfer the knowledge to their pupils. Even though learning English from a native speaker could help students improve their pronunciation, they still need to know how to approach the students who are not used to foreigners and are very afraid of making mistakes. It is important to establish a good teacher-student relationship. Allowing students to interact and communicate in English might help them open up a little bit, which is a more suitable approach than reading by themselves all the time and learning grammar.

Some authors (Kubota, 2018) believe that the Japanese should invest more effort outside of their scholarly circle. Not being conversant with the traits of the English language as a lingua franca, the Japanese more often than not expect only white native speakers as their English language teachers. There should be more awareness of diversity associated with

English variants and its diverse native speakers, which needs to be clarified to children from a young age.

### **7.1. Comparison of Croatian and Japanese English learning in primary schools**

In the Japanese educational system, students are very dedicated to passing the entrance exams in order to get to a higher level of education. Such a habit has been present ever since the beginning of English language education in the Meiji period (Løfsgaard, 2015). The Japanese Ministry is currently striving to change the system and the routine, but such a change does need more time to be successfully implemented. English is also regularly being learned because many companies require a certain level of English language knowledge, which became the main focus of the modern educational system. That is why Japanese children often view English classes as something they must do in order to succeed someday. Instead of partaking in English activities while having fun, pupils often end up considering them as something they must execute.

Some authors (Hashimoto, 2011) believe that the lack of motivation of students to learn English is one of the primary issues when it comes to learning English. Learning a language in such a repetitive and non-creative manner that is often used in Japan is an issue for even later years following primary school:

“Many students start studying English in junior high school with eager anticipation. Unfortunately, due to the emphasis on memorization and learning about English, rather than using English for the purpose of communication, many lose interest.” (2002:88 Iino in Løfsgaard, 2015, p.28)

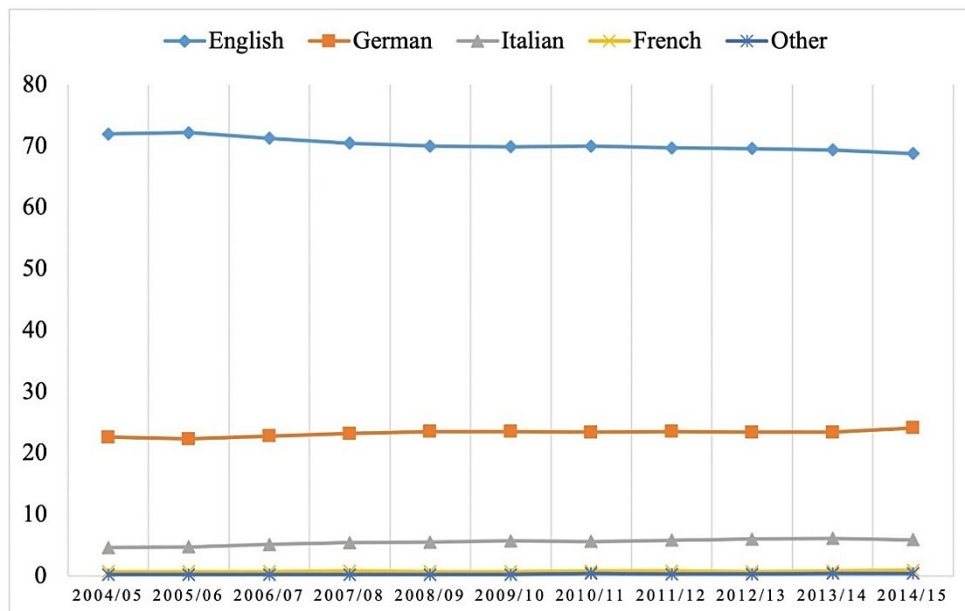
In Croatia, on the other hand, English is very popular among younger learners, and they are very motivated to learn it. Even though the English language is mandatory in schools, enrolling children in private foreign language schools is quite popular in Croatia, with English being offered frequently.

In addition, many young children start learning English even before enrolling in school. Not only do they have a chance to learn it in kindergartens but are surrounded by it from a very young age and acquire it through songs, computer games and media. Exposure to English through the media enables children to immerse themselves in English in their

surroundings, and learn it through what they hear and read (Buljan Culej, 2012; Mihaljević Djigunović, Cergol, & Li, 2006; Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2003).

To confirm high motivation and preference for English, it remains the child's first foreign language until the end of primary school. Even though students can choose an elective foreign language in grade 4, English remains the most popular to learn, as can be concluded from Figure 1 (Košuta, Patekar, & Vičević Ivanović, 2017).

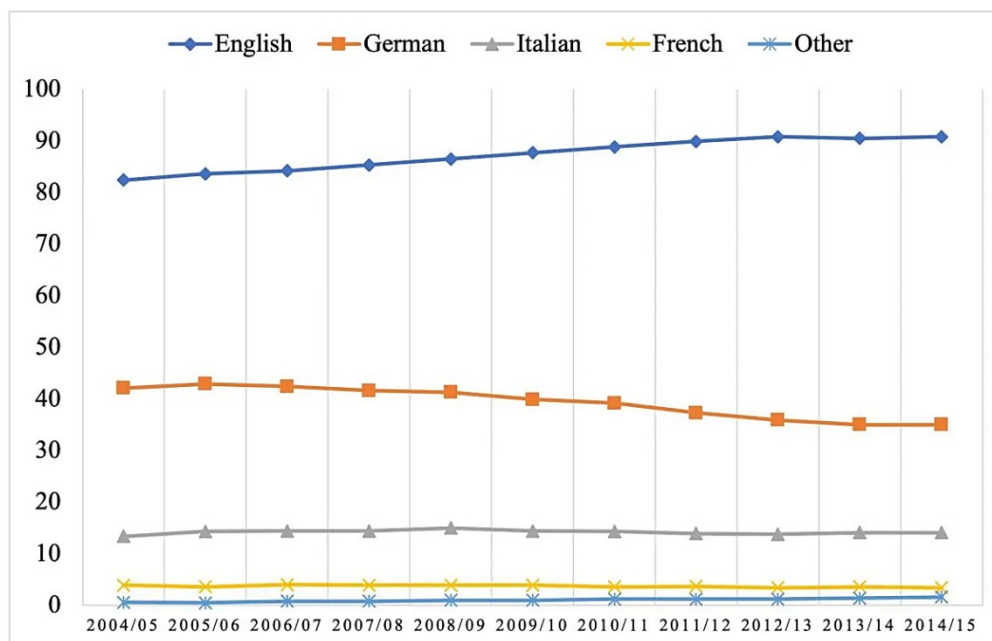
**Figure 1.**  
*Proportion of students according to foreign languages they were learning in Croatian elementary schools from 2004/2005 to 2014/2015 (source: Košuta, Patekar, & Vičević Ivanović, 2017)*



The same attitude and motivation for learning English continue in high school. When given the opportunity to choose a foreign language, English is still the most popular choice (Figure 2, Košuta, Patekar, & Vičević Ivanović, 2017).

**Figure 2.**

*Proportion of students according to foreign languages they were learning in Croatian high schools from 2004/2005 to 2014/2015 (source: Košuta, Patekar, & Vičević Ivanović, 2017)*



Unlike Croatian pupils, Japanese children are less exposed to English, since American and British culture is not as popular in Japan and some other Asian countries as it is in a European country such as Croatia. A classroom environment is not as natural because it is structured and planned, and if it is the only time when Japanese pupils are learning English, no written tests could really prepare them for a real-life situation.

However, it is not an entirely alien language to them, which makes it unusual to some why they are so unused to it:

“Even the children are surrounded by numerous English letters in their daily lives where many brands, products names, sports teams and so on are given in English letters. So they could understand some of the alphabet. They probably know the pronunciation of these English words with the pronunciations in Katakana.” (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009)

Many could notice even from the media how English education in Japan often concentrates too much on word-for-word translation and vocabulary memorisation, neglecting the need to develop communicative aspects as well:



“Through conversations with Japanese university students and teachers I have learnt that many are dissatisfied with the current educational system in Japan, especially with regards to foreign language education. Both students and teachers wish for the teaching to be communication focussed, but the reality of entrance exams and often limited abilities of the teachers makes it difficult to replace the grammar-translation method and memorisation that dominates in English lessons today.” (Løfsgaard, 2015)

Theoretical knowledge is often more prioritised over practical in the Japanese education system. In English classes, that means that children are often more focused on passing the exam, rather than learning how to speak English. This approach could also be the responsibility of teachers and schools, in case they choose to lean more on grammar which can be used to create worksheets and test material.

## **7.2. Indicators of English proficiency**

There are organizations that regularly conduct research on large samples and monitor trends in education. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is the world's largest study in education, launched in the late 1990s by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with the aim of collecting internationally comparable data on fifteen-year-old students' knowledge and competences.

The PISA survey aims to examine how young people are ready for full and active participation in society. Since 2000, PISA has included more than 90 countries and economies and about 3,000,000 students worldwide. From 2025, fifteen-year-olds will be tested in English as a foreign language in reading, listening and speaking. The assessment will then be repeated every six years to monitor trends and gradually include other languages. (Learning another language: The PISA 2025 Foreign Language Assessment Framework, 2020)

Education First (EF) is an international education company offering study abroad, language learning, cultural exchange and academic programs worldwide. The EF English Language Proficiency Index (EF EPI) is the world's largest country/region ranking of English language skills for adults based on test results of 2 million adults in 112 countries and regions (2022).

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a largely accepted standardized test intended for measuring the English-language proficiency in non-native speakers (TOEFL, 2020). The TOEFL program has been in use since the 1960s, and the test, together with the accompanying testing methodologies, is constantly revised and developed. For instance, TOEFL iBT was developed in 2005, and it “emphasizes integrated skills and provides better information about test takers’ ability to communicate in an academic setting and their readiness for academic coursework” (ibid., p. 3).

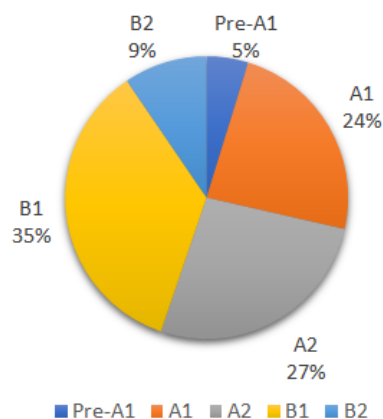
These organizations are concrete indicators of independent research on English language proficiency, and demonstrate a big difference in the global ranking between Japan and Croatia. The Education First and the TOEFL iBT results will be used in the following paragraphs because their main focus is on proficiency in the English language.

### 7.2.1. Outcomes of English education in Croatia

The aim of the National Curriculum is for students finishing elementary school to reach the A2 level. A study about grade 8 learners’ proficiency in 2011 (Figure 3, based on Buljan Culej, 2012) revealed that almost half of the students were even above that target. Students’ reading, listening, and writing skills were tested in the study.

**Figure 3.**

*CEFR levels of learners in grade 8 of elementary school - Comparative results of writing skills (Buljan Culej, 2012)*



The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test for measuring the English language ability of speakers whose native language is not English. The TOEFL test

was introduced in America in 2005, and was gradually introduced worldwide during 2005 and 2006. The examinees have approximately three hours to complete the testing in one day, with their writing, reading, listening and speaking skills being assessed. Image 11 shows an excerpt from the 2019 Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT Test (TOEFL, 2020, p. 22). The original table<sup>1</sup> includes the results of all examinees, and it is organised according to the geographic region, but here Croatia has been singled out to show the mean scores for each of the four skills, and the total score mean of 93 out of the possible 120 points.

**Image 11.**

*Test of English as a Foreign Language results 2019 (TOEFL, 2020)*

Geographic Region and Native Country	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
Croatia	23	25	24	22	93

Furthermore, according to the Education First international survey of English language proficiency in 2020, Croatia ranked 13th, thus placing itself at the top of the high proficiency group. In the following year, Croatia ranked 10th, earning itself a position in a very high proficiency category (Image 12).

**Image 12.**

*Part of English Proficiency Index 2021 - The world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills (Index, 2022)*

Very high proficiency	High proficiency	Moderate proficiency	Low proficiency	Very low proficiency
1 Netherlands	14 Serbia	32 Hong Kong, China	59 Armenia	87 Afghanistan
2 Austria	15 Romania	33 Spain	60 Brazil	88 Uzbekistan
3 Denmark	16 Poland	34 Lebanon	61 Guatemala	89 Syria
4 Singapore	17 Hungary	35 Italy	62 Nepal	90 Ecuador
5 Norway	18 Philippines	36 Moldova	63 Ethiopia	90 Jordan
6 Belgium	19 Greece	37 South Korea	63 Pakistan	92 Mexico
7 Portugal	20 Slovakia	38 Belarus	65 Bangladesh	93 Myanmar
8 Sweden	21 Kenya	39 Albania	66 Vietnam	94 Angola
9 Finland	22 Estonia	40 Ukraine	67 Tanzania	94 Cameroon
10 Croatia	23 Bulgaria	41 Bolivia	68 Mozambique	96 Kazakhstan

<sup>1</sup> Table 16, [https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227\\_unlweb.pdf](https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf)

### 7.2.2. Outcomes of English education in Japan

Even though Japan is considered a highly developed country and at the top of the globalized economy, English speaking skills among Japanese people are far behind most other less developed countries in Asia. Image 13 shows an excerpt from the 2019 Test and Score Data Summary<sup>2</sup> for TOEFL iBT Test (TOEFL, 2020, p. 22). In the same way as the Croatian results shown earlier, Japan has been singled out from the original table to show the mean score of Japanese examinees for each of the four skills and the final mean score of 72 (out of 120). Apart from the countries with unclear results, Japanese speakers mark the lowest score in Asian results on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (2020).

#### Image 13.

*Test of English as a Foreign Language results 2019 (TOEFL, 2020)*

Geographic Region and Native Country	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
Japan	18	18	17	18	72

Even though the Japanese Ministry of Education invested time and money in the last few years in order to improve English proficiency in its nation, Japan has still a lot of room to improve its scores. According to the earlier reports, it can be seen that despite the efforts, no progress can be seen yet. On the contrary, the opposite happens. According to a survey of English language proficiency in 2020 (2021), Japan ranked 55th, which placed it at the top of the low proficiency group. Last year it ranked even lower than the year before (Global ranking of countries and regions, 2022). Based on test results of two million adults in 112 countries and regions in 2021, Japan is still in a low proficiency category ranked 78th (Image 14).

<sup>2</sup> Table 16, [https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227\\_unlweb.pdf](https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf)

## Image 14.

*Part of English Proficiency Index 2021 - The world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills*

Very high proficiency	High proficiency	Moderate proficiency	Low proficiency	Very low proficiency
1 Netherlands	14 Serbia	32 Hong Kong, China	59 Armenia	87 Afghanistan
2 Austria	15 Romania	33 Spain	60 Brazil	88 Uzbekistan
3 Denmark	16 Poland	34 Lebanon	61 Guatemala	89 Syria
4 Singapore	17 Hungary	35 Italy	62 Nepal	90 Ecuador
5 Norway	18 Philippines	36 Moldova	63 Ethiopia	90 Jordan
6 Belgium	19 Greece	37 South Korea	63 Pakistan	92 Mexico
7 Portugal	20 Slovakia	38 Belarus	65 Bangladesh	93 Myanmar
8 Sweden	21 Kenya	39 Albania	66 Vietnam	94 Angola
9 Finland	22 Estonia	40 Ukraine	67 Tanzania	94 Cameroon
10 Croatia	23 Bulgaria	41 Bolivia	68 Mozambique	96 Kazakhstan
11 Germany	24 Lithuania	42 Ghana	69 U.A.E.	97 Cambodia
12 South Africa	25 Switzerland	43 Cuba	70 Turkey	98 Sudan
13 Luxembourg	26 Latvia	44 Costa Rica	71 Morocco	99 Ivory Coast
	27 Czech Republic	44 Dominican Republic	72 Bahrain	100 Thailand
	28 Malaysia	44 Paraguay	73 Panama	101 Kyrgyzstan
	29 Nigeria	47 Chile	73 Venezuela	102 Oman
	30 Argentina	48 India	75 Algeria	103 Tajikistan
	31 France	49 China	76 Nicaragua	104 Saudi Arabia
		50 Georgia	77 Madagascar	105 Haiti
		51 Russia	78 Japan	106 Somalia
		52 Tunisia	79 Qatar	107 Iraq
		53 Uruguay	80 Indonesia	108 Libya
		54 El Salvador	81 Colombia	109 Rwanda
		55 Honduras	82 Sri Lanka	110 Democratic Republic of Congo
		56 Peru	83 Mongolia	111 South Sudan
		57 Macau, China	84 Kuwait	112 Yemen
		58 Iran	85 Egypt	
			86 Azerbaijan	

## 8. CONCLUSION

Both Croatia and Japan are aware of the global importance of the English language and they have invested heavily in the education of foreign languages on a national scale. Each has chosen their own path and methods to promote and proliferate the English language, with mixed results. Both countries have English as a compulsory subject in their primary and secondary education, but the results are very different.

Although there have been many sources in English that served well for writing this thesis, it would be better if there is much more research on the improvement of English language teaching methodology written in English. This analysis has shown that there is a multitude of variables influencing English proficiency in both countries. Croatia has had an earlier start, compared to Japan, because of its geopolitical position and national disposition. In the past, Japan more than once closed its borders and is still to this day an isolationist country.

Seeing that Croatia has achieved a much higher proficiency rate than Japan, it can be concluded that Japanese primary schools could invest in better trained English teachers, even if their native language is not English. Thus far, lessons in English courses in Japanese schools have been perceived as monotonous, repetitious, and dreary by students, but becoming aware of that situation is a good starting point for Japan to rethink and improve their teaching approaches.

In the future, similar comparative studies should also include the factor of foreign language anxiety to investigate the differences between Croatian and Japanese students learning English. That would certainly contribute to more realistic findings and help shed light on ways to improve proficiency in English and perhaps find a remedy for fear of making mistakes.

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## **Izjava o izvornosti diplomskog rada**

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

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(vlastoručni potpis studenta)