

Benefits and Challenges of Introducing Therapy Dogs into English Language Classrooms: Experts' Opinions

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET
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Lorena Jelkovic

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THERAPY DOGS INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE
CLASSROOMS: EXPERTS' OPINIONS**

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Zagreb, srpanj 2024.

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MENTORICA: izv. prof. dr. sc. Kristina Cergol

SUMENTORICA: dr. sc. Silvija Hanžić Deda

Zagreb, srpanj 2024.

Ovaj rad posvećujem obitelji, prijateljima i dečku koji su me bodrili tijekom studiranja i pisanja diplomskog rada. Također, rad je posvećen i jednom vrlo posebnom psu od kojeg je potekla ideja za temu ovog diplomskog rada. Veliko hvala i mentorici izv. prof. dr. sc. Kristini Cergol te sumentorici dr. sc. Silviji Hanžić Deda za stručnu pomoć, podršku, strpljenje i uloženo vrijeme tijekom izrade ovog diplomskog rada. Posebno se zahvaljujem i svim sudionicima istraživanja, koji su svojim stručnim mišljenjem upotpunili ovaj rad i doprinijeli implementaciji pristupa uvođenja terapijskih pasa u učionice diljem Hrvatske.



Rad je izrađen u okviru projekta *Dogs in Second Language Acquisition - a case of English (DogSLA)* a na temelju Natječaja o raspodjeli sredstava za temeljno financiranje znanstvene i umjetničke djelatnosti – institucijski znanstveni i umjetnički projekti za 2023. godinu, voditeljice projekta izv. prof. dr. sc. Kristina Cergol.

Prednosti i izazovi uvođenja terapijskih pasa u nastavu engleskog jezika: stavovi stručnjaka

SAŽETAK

U suvremenom obrazovnom sustavu, gdje eksperimentalni programi poput Škole za život (eng. *School for Life*) i Cjelodnevnje nastava (eng. *Whole-Day School*) stavljaju naglasak na cjeloživotno učenje i razvoj učeničkih kompetencija, učiteljima je vrlo izazovno odabrati strategije, metode i pristupe kojima bi svojim učenicima omogućili što učinkovitije učenje. U današnje digitalno doba učenicima može biti teško pratiti nastavu i zadržati fokus, posebno učenicima s teškoćama u razvoju koji su sve više integrirani u obrazovni proces. Stoga učitelji moraju napustiti tradicionalnu nastavu i prilagoditi nastavu potrebama svojih razreda. Jedan pristup koji je privukao značajnu pažnju posljednjih godina je uključivanje terapijskih pasa u obrazovni proces. Ovaj rad istražuje proces uvođenja terapijskog psa u nastavni proces i predlaže rješenja za moguće izazove koji se mogu pojaviti. Nadalje, opisuje se dobrobit uvođenja takvog psa u obrazovni proces, s posebnim osvrtom na učionice stranih jezika (u ovom slučaju engleskog). Također uključuje mišljenja stručnjaka diljem Hrvatske koji imaju iskustva u radu s terapijskim psima i djecom, kao i njihova iskustva u odgojno-obrazovnim ustanovama te njihova viđenja implementacije takvih pasa u nastavni proces.

Ključne riječi: engleski kako strani jezik, izazovi uvođenja terapijskog psa u učionice, jezična anksioznost, motivacija za učenje stranoga jezika, prednosti terapijskog psa za djecu, rano učenje jezika, terapijski pas

Benefits and Challenges of Introducing Therapy Dogs into English Language Classrooms: Experts' Opinions

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary educational system, where experimental programs such as *Škola za život* (eng. School for Life) and *Cjelodnevna nastava* (eng. Whole-Day School) emphasize lifelong learning and the development of student competencies, it is very challenging for the teachers choose strategies, methods and approaches to enable their students to learn as effectively as possible. In today's digital age, it can be difficult for students to follow lessons and maintain focus, especially students with disabilities who are increasingly integrated into the educational process. Therefore, teachers must abandon traditional teaching and adapt lessons to the needs of their classes. One approach that has gained significant attention in recent years is the inclusion of therapy dogs in the educational process. This paper explores the process of implementing a therapy dog into the teaching process and suggests solutions for potential challenges that may arise. Furthermore, it describes the benefits of introducing such a dog into the educational process, with a special focus on foreign language classrooms (in this case, English). It also examines the opinions of experts across Croatia who have experience working with therapy dogs and children, as well as their experience in educational institutions and their views on the implementation of such dogs in the teaching process.

Key words: benefits of therapy dogs for children, challenges of introducing therapy dogs into classroom, early language learning, English as a foreign language, language learning anxiety, motivation for learning a foreign language, therapy dogs

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LEARNING A LANGUAGE	2
2.1 LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT AN EARLY AGE.....	2
2.2 EARLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CROATIA.....	4
2.3 TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING	7
2.4 FLL DIFFICULTIES.....	9
3. DOG-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING	10
3.1 CLASSIFICATION OF THERAPY AND WORKING DOGS.....	11
3.2 BENEFITS OF THERAPY DOGS.....	12
3.3 THERAPY DOGS IN CLASSROOMS.....	14
3.3.1 DOG BREEDS SUITABLE FOR CLASSROOMS.....	16
3.3.2 THERAPY DOGS IN EFL CLASSROOMS	17
4. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	19
5. METHODOLOGY	20
5.1 PARTICIPANTS.....	20
5.2 INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURE.....	22
6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	24
6.1 INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM.....	24
6.1.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOG INTRODUCED INTO THE CLASSROOM	25
6.1.2 DOG BREEDS SUITABLE FOR CLASSROOMS.....	25
6.1.3 PREPARING THE STUDENTS AND THE THERAPY DOG FOR COOPERATION AND ENTERING THE CLASSROOM.....	27
6.2 BENEFITS OF INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM	29
6.2.1 THE INFLUENCE OF THERAPY DOGS ON STUDENTS' MOTIVATION	31

6.2.2 THE INFLUENCE OF THERAPY DOGS ON REDUCING STRESS DURING ORAL PRESENTATION	32
6.3 CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM	34
6.4 PARTICIPANTS' GENERAL CONCLUSIONS	36
7. CONCLUSION.....	38
REFERENCES	40
APPENDIX 1.....	43
APPENIX 2.....	44
IZJAVA O IZVORNOSTI DIPLOMSKOG RADA	46

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, there is growing recognition of the need for innovative approaches to support students' emotional, social, and academic development. Experimental programs such as *Škola za život* (eng. School for Life) and *Cjelodnevna nastava* (eng. Whole-Day School) emphasize lifelong learning and the development of student competencies. However, in today's digital age, it is more and more challenging for students to follow lessons and maintain focus, and a special emphasis is placed on students with disabilities who are increasingly integrated into the educational process. Therefore, teachers must abandon traditional teaching approaches and incorporate new strategies and methods to enable their students to learn as effectively as possible, with a special focus on inquiry-based learning and discovery. One approach that has gained significant attention in recent years is the inclusion of therapy dogs in the educational process. Therapy dogs are specially trained to work with people with disabilities. Along with the many benefits they provide, they are valuable allies in creating a positive and supportive school environment for both teachers and their students. The inclusion of therapy dogs in schools encompasses a wide range of activities, including assisting students with special needs, reducing stress and anxiety, encouraging social interaction, and improving concentration and motivation for learning. Scientific research confirms numerous advantages of such programs, highlighting their contribution to the overall well-being and development of students, as well as their emotional health and social skills. Moreover, therapy dogs can greatly assist teachers in achieving educational outcomes in an innovative and engaging way for students. However, although this approach is used in many countries worldwide, it is still very rare or almost non-existent in Croatia.

This paper explores various aspects of the use of therapy dogs in schools, including their effects not only on students with disabilities but also on all students and teachers in the classroom community. It also addresses foreign language classrooms (with a special focus on English foreign language classrooms), where lower motivation and language anxiety are often present, and explains the benefits of therapy dogs in such an environment. Through the analysis of existing research and interviews with experts in Croatia who have extensive experience working with therapy dogs, children with special needs, and the educational process, the goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the benefits and potential challenges that may arise and offer guidelines for the successful implementation of therapy dog programs in educational institutions.

2. LEARNING A LANGUAGE

According to Cambridge Dictionary, language is the main and unique system of human communication which consists of sounds that form words that are composed into sentences according to grammatical rules. In reality, it is actually so much more than that. Language is the basic means of communication that accompanies a person from birth to the end of life. As soon as they are born, babies begin to communicate with people in their environment. At first, this communication is based only on facial expressions, but later it gradually develops into movements, sounds and, in the end, words.

According to Vignjević and Markanjević (2019), children begin to learn as soon as they are born and this process of learning lasts a lifetime. It is important for children to acquire and develop different abilities, starting with effective communication in their native language (mother tongue), which they will use for the rest of their lives. As the authors state, children initially develop language skills within their immediate surroundings, such as their home, but also through participation in educational and social structures, like kindergartens and schools. Language and communication competencies that children will acquire and develop at a young age will largely determine their entire lives. An important aspect of developing communication skills is what Vignjević and Markanjević call *lexical competence* (2019, p. 11). It means not only knowing and being able to use the vocabulary of a language but also mastering the inclusion of grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, and orthoepic competencies. Once a child acquires the form, meaning, and correct pronunciation of words and is able to use them in a meaningful communicative context, their communicative competencies will be developed (Vignjević & Markanjević, 2019).

2.1 LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT AN EARLY AGE

Studies prove that children master a foreign language faster than adults. The research conducted by Mihaljević Djigunović (2015) shows that the majority of parents believe that children can master a foreign language better than adults. This does not happen by chance, but there are a number of scientifically proven reasons for it. Kralj (2022) claims that this could be attributed to the fact that the child is in a sensitive phase of life, in which, due to the peculiarities of brain development, absorbs and receives certain information more quickly and efficiently. During that period, the power of language learning is so great that it can be used to learn a foreign language. At that stage of life, a child can easily (and often subconsciously) acquire structures

of a foreign language, its rhythm, and accent, which leads to a pronunciation closely resembling the one a native speaker has and the acquisition of similar linguistic abilities (ibid.). Because of that, primary school foreign language teachers have a great responsibility to encourage and nurture a child's talent for languages. The research about the most appropriate age to start learning a second language, conducted by Erk and Ručević (2021) shows that early learning of English as a foreign language in the Croatian education system would provide benefits that would be reflected in the achievements of young learners. The authors emphasise a synergy between age and other critical factors which can influence multilingual development. Traditionally, it is believed that a child will achieve higher levels of proficiency in the second language (foreign language) the earlier it is included in the learning process, suggesting that an early start is essential for successful second language development. In other words, the earlier a child starts learning a foreign language, the more successful it will be and the better results it will achieve in the future. However, in Erk and Ručević's (2021) study, very young learners who have learned English as a foreign language for four or five years and young learners with three years of English as a foreign language learning experience did the tests equally well in their study, so they could not provide the evidence to support the idea that an earlier start is better. This can be explained in such a way that, at the kindergarten age, children have a capacity for quick learning but also tend to forget more quickly and easily if they are not consistently exposed to the language and repetitively engaged with a target language at a high intensity. This indicates that young learners benefit from a developmental advantage over very young learners (ibid.). It is also important to mention that foreign language is learned in the monolingual environment, so their research could not lead to any significant results in terms of English foreign language learning acquisition for very early learners in comparison to young learners. However, the authors have concluded that the connections formed among individual traits (such as cognitive, affective, social, and physical aspects) during the maturation process, in conjunction with learners age, are gaining significance in the comprehension of the second language acquisition (Erk & Ručević, 2021).

Children best learn a foreign language through games, acting activities, stories, puppets, songs, chants, rhymes, etc. However, Kralj (2022) states that it does not matter how many poems, rhymes, or chants children learn by heart in a foreign language. According to him, what matters is that a teacher awakens the motivation and love for learning a foreign language and that children develop the satisfaction and joy of the learning process. It is also important for the children to find meaning in the learning process and to understand why it is so important to

learn a foreign language. According to Kralj (2022), this can be achieved if the content they learn is appropriate and interesting, and if it originates from the children themselves. Furthermore, in early foreign language learning, short-term outcomes are not that important because children will quickly forget new vocabulary mentioned in some song or tale. It is important to focus on the following long-term outcomes (ibid., p. 3):

1. Making a sense of language learning – means that children will acquire a positive attitude towards the language and learning a foreign language will increase their confidence and language skills.
2. Raising awareness and tolerance for another culture – means that children will be taught to accept and respect diversity among different people and cultures.
3. General development – means that learning a foreign language contributes to the development of children’s intellectual, social, and emotional growth.

The process of learning a foreign language is different from learning any other school subject because of, as Kralj states, “its social nature” (Kralj, 2022, p. 4). It means that the children will not only acquire linguistic knowledge and skills of a foreign language, but they will also change the ways they see themselves and will learn to accept different cultural norms and people, which will significantly affect their social development. In her research, Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) concluded that learners’ motivation, self-concept, and attitudes toward learning a foreign language oscillate regarding the age and the interest of the student and that they depend on the individual characteristics of each individual student. She also found that parents’ role in early foreign language learning is very important because students whose parents show interest and provide support in learning a foreign language have more faith in language achievement than students whose parents do not show interest. In the end, she states that language development, especially the accuracy and fluency of oral production, varies from year to year in different ways, because of the contextual and individual factors of the student, but no one can clearly interpret them because of their complexity (ibid.).

2.2 EARLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CROATIA

In Croatia, primary school education is compulsory for every person. It starts at the age of 6 or 7 and lasts until the age of 14 or 15. Primary education includes 8 grades of primary school which are divided into lower primary (from the 1st to the 4th grade) and upper primary (from the 5th to the 8th grade). Education in primary schools is based on the *National Curriculum*. It

states that learning a first foreign language is mandatory in all primary schools in the Republic of Croatia since the school year 2003/2004. In the fourth grade of primary school, parents can include their children in learning a second foreign language (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, 2024). There are two important documents regarding foreign language learning in Croatia: the *Croatian National Educational Standards* (2006) and the *National Framework Curriculum* (2011) in which, according to Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) the emphasis is placed on spoken language skills and their development.

In Croatian elementary schools, the first foreign language (mainly English) is usually taught twice a week for 45 minutes by non-native English teachers. The teaching is based on state-mandated textbooks that follow a nationally prescribed EFL (English as a foreign language) syllabus (Erk & Ručević, 2021). It is also possible to attend EFL courses at the pre-primary level, in certified foreign language schools if parents can financially afford it for their children. Furthermore, Erk and Ručević (2021) list the possibilities of attending Helen Doron school in which they can be included in a bilingual programme in English and Croatian, but they cannot confirm the efficiency of short-term or long-term outcomes of these programmes on a global or local (Croatian) scale. Another problem in the Croatian educational system listed by the same authors is that both, learners who studied English at the pre-primary level and the learners who are just starting to learn the language are placed all together in the same foreign language classroom in the first grade. This contributes to a lack of equal education for all foreign language learners since the learning process can be monotone, less motivating and not challenging enough for learners who already have previous target language knowledge. On the other hand, the same classes can be too difficult for learners without previous target language knowledge. Moreover, the authors have also explained that a global lowering of the starting age for second language acquisition happens due to parental pressure on educational institutions.

Exposure to the English language in Croatia is very high and cannot be avoided because children encounter English while watching cartoons on the TV, playing computer games, listening to music, using the internet or digital tools, chatting on social media networks, etc. Furthermore, there are lots of Erasmus projects in which students can participate and have the opportunity to use English in communication with other people who are not speaking their native language. Moreover, as Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) states, students can practise their oral language skills while communicating with foreigners who visit Croatia, or while they, as tourists visit any other country (because English can be described as *lingua franca*, a language

that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different (Cambridge Dictionary)). This is also confirmed by Erk and Ručević (2021) who claim that the opportunities for foreign language development exist both within and outside the family circle. They explain three essential contexts for second language acquisition:

1. At-home context – which involves studying a new language as a foreign language within the family environment.
2. Immersion context – which refers to being immersed in the language of the surrounding environment, facilitating natural language acquisition.
3. Study abroad context – which is temporary compared to immersion context, but usually occurs in the second language environment and provides intensive language exposure and practice.

In Croatia, English is the most popular foreign language, as well as in most countries where tourism is a well-developed economic activity. Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) describes that 85% of learners start learning English as the compulsory foreign language subject in the first grade of elementary school. According to her research, German is the second most popular language, followed by Italian and French. She explains that learning English as a foreign language in Croatia is regulated because English is the only language that students are required to learn in the fourth grade of primary school if they choose another foreign language in the first grade. This rule ensures that every student who completes primary school education has acquired English proficiency (to some extent).

Kapović (2022) conducted research related to the topic of the representation of learning a particular foreign language in primary education. The results of his research include data collected in primary schools between the school years 2013/2014 and 2019/2020, first and last included. The results show that the vast majority of students learn English (95.82%), and almost a third of students learn German (32.55%). Italian is studied by slightly less than 8% of students, while French and Spanish are very poorly represented (ibid., p. 289). The results obtained by Kapović are shown in the following image (Image 1):

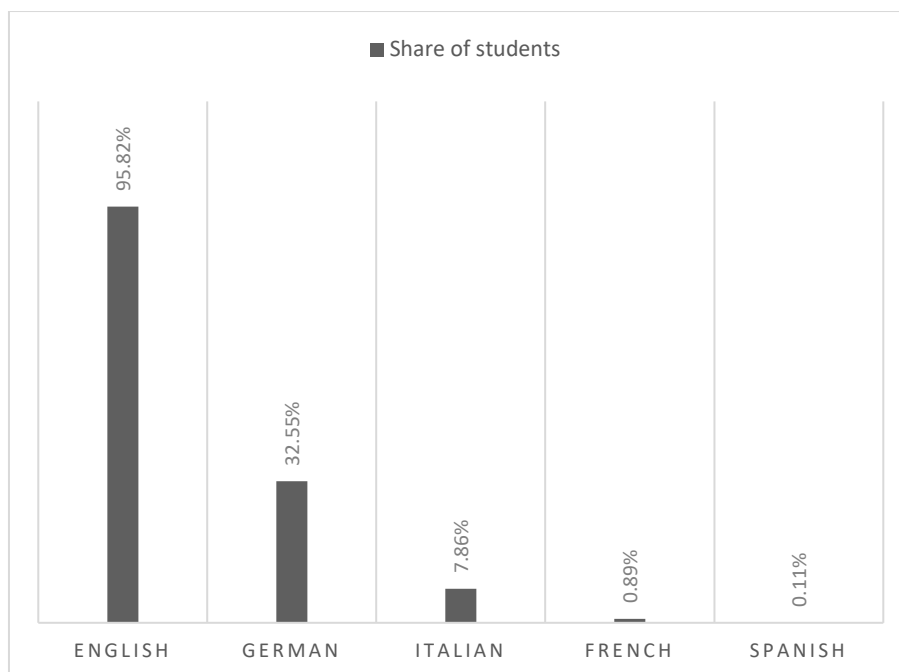


Image 1. *The representation of foreign language learning in Croatia, results obtained by Kapović (2022, p. 289); visualisation prepared by the author of this thesis.*

2.3 TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Foreign language learning (FLL) is a very complex and long-term process. Silić (2007) claims that, because of the demandingness and complexity of this process, the educational system needs to be open to accept and embrace external initiatives of other systems, institutions, and individuals which will contribute to the child's development. This collaboration will directly influence the quality of not only education but also the child's upbringing and growth.

Today there are many different strategies, methods, and techniques for teaching a foreign language. As Kostić-Bobanović and Ambrosi-Randić (2008) explained, language learning strategies refer to particular actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques employed by students to improve their learning, such as actively seeking conversation partners or providing self-motivation when faced with challenging language tasks. Teachers choose these strategies themselves, in order to better teach students to understand words (comprehension) and use them in everyday communication situations (production). They set the aims and the outcomes to help their students achieve basic language skills. These skills are divided into two main categories: receptive and productive skills. Receptive skills include listening and reading comprehension while productive skills include speaking and writing production. Gavrilović

Smolić (2019) states that children, especially primary school students, cannot focus on one activity for too long because their attention and concentration skills are not yet sufficiently developed. Because of this, in language teaching, attention should be paid to the children's personal characteristics and natural needs and the teaching methods should be adapted and used accordingly.

Early foreign language curriculum emphasizes that the primary objectives of learning a foreign language at an early stage involve not just improving and developing language skills, but also developing positive attitudes towards language learning and self-perception as a language learner (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017). This self-perception, or self-concept is quite the new term in the early foreign language learning field. The author describes self-concept as the perception or mental representation each individual learner creates of themselves during the process of foreign language learning. This self-awareness helps young learners to be more motivated for the whole process of foreign language learning because learners need both, to be competent and to feel competent to be able to describe and evaluate their learning experience. She explains that each learner has individual learning characteristics which can be described in terms of attitudes and motivation for foreign language learning. Most of the studies on learner attitudes and motivation show that they are closely related to the learners' language achievements. In general, numerous studies prove that if a child is motivated and has positive experiences and attitudes about learning a foreign language, the outcomes of language learning set by the curriculum will be easier to achieve (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017). A positive attitude towards learning a foreign language is realized through a series of strategies, methods and learning approaches chosen by the teacher. However, foreign language learning can sometimes be an extremely complex and long-lasting process because of many different factors among which (ibid.) especially emphasizes the contextual and individual factors of learners. According to Mihaljević Djigunović (2017), it is very important that young learners acquire the foreign language in the context, and explains that contextual factors can belong to the macro- or micro-level. Macro-level includes some socio-educational factors, foreign language policies, and curricula, along with exposure to the foreign language outside of school, while the immediate learning environment (school environment, classroom dynamics, teachers, and teaching materials), the learner's socioeconomic status, and support at home fall within the micro-level.

2.4 FLL DIFFICULTIES

There are two main difficulties that can affect successful foreign language learning. One of them is *motivation*. Vilke (1979) states that children who start learning a foreign language at an early age can quickly lose enthusiasm if they spend too much time in the learning process because their motivation decreases the longer they learn the language. Furthermore, she explains that this happens because a child cannot understand why it is important to learn a new foreign language because “children of that age, if not influenced by parental attitudes, have no clear ideas or reasons for studying language” (Vilke, 1979, p. 315). While she conducted the research, “initial motivation had little to do with the child’s real interest in English” (ibid., p. 311), because children cannot understand the fact that English is a lingua franca, the language “which will take you anywhere in the world” (ibid., p. 316).

Another difficulty that occurs more and more is certainly *language anxiety*. According to Kostić-Bobanović and Ambrosi-Randić (2008), while anxiety is defined as “a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening” (p. 295), foreign language anxiety is defined as “a complex phenomenon that occurs at each stage of the language learning process (i.e., input, processing and output)” (p. 284). They further explain all three stages. Input anxiety is anxiety that occurs during the initial stage of learning, in which students feel discomfort when encountering unfamiliar words or phrases in the language they are learning. Processing anxiety is anxiety that appears during the cognitive stage, in which students feel discomfort when engaging in mental tasks with newly acquired information. The last one is output anxiety, also known as anxiety during the demonstration stage, in which students feel discomfort while presenting their proficiency in previously learned material. Specifically, this anxiety emerges after processing the information but before effectively reproducing it as output, often leading to interference. Kostić-Bobanović and Ambrosi-Randić (2008) explained that language anxiety is closely related to compensation and affective strategies because the higher the level of anxiety among learners is, the more they try to overcome gaps in their language knowledge and manage the emotions and attitudes associated with language learning. In other words, learners who have had positive previous learning experiences tend to frequently employ cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. However, they state that primary school students may not use compensation strategies as frequently, possibly due to their limited vocabulary or underdeveloped reasoning abilities.

Silić explains that “children learn a language in the context of everyday situations in general” (2007, p. 23) and that “children enjoy speaking in their mother tongue, and later in a foreign language, when it happens in an appropriate and natural way” (2007, p. 42). Furthermore, she underlines the importance of “everyday and practical real-life situations that are natural and important for language learning (native and foreign)” (2007, p. 43). According to that, Pavičić Takač (2019) states that in the classroom, there will always be active and motivated students who are ready to participate in every activity that the teacher presents to them. Along with them, there will also be those ‘unsuccessful’ students who are not motivated to learn, because the learning experience itself does not give them enough self-confidence to overcome the potential problems they might encounter. Considering all that, teaching should include a motivational component that would create a positive attitude while learning a foreign language for both types of students. Only in this way, students can develop the skills necessary to master a foreign language.

This paper will help answer the question of how to effectively teach the four language skills to assist and motivate the learners to master the foreign language they chose to learn. To achieve that, animal-assisted language learning will be presented and discussed, or, to be more specific – dog-assisted language learning.

3. DOG-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Therapy dogs are specially trained canines that provide comfort, companionship, and emotional support to people in various situations. With their presence, they offer therapeutic effects to people in need in institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and disaster relief areas, among other places. Their handlers also play a crucial role, ensuring that the dogs are comfortable and able to engage appropriately with individuals they meet during therapy sessions. Because of their nature and accomplished special training during which they develop the skills needed for their role, therapy dogs create a unique bond with humans. Many positive effects arise from that relationship. Interacting with a therapy dog has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness. Their gentle demeanour and non-judgmental nature create a safe space for people to express their emotions and connect with a source of unconditional love. Considering all those positive aspects, it can be concluded that therapy dogs are perfect companions for children in schools, and not just in therapeutic settings, because they are well-mannered, calm, and responsive to human interactions. With their

presence inside the classroom, they help the teacher to create a positive and motivational working atmosphere, thus, their presence provides a safe environment and helps learners to overcome language anxiety and reduce stress. They are also encouraging positive social interactions and improving the morale and dynamic of both, students and their teacher, but most important of all, they bring smiles and joy and make their learning experience better.

3.1 CLASSIFICATION OF THERAPY AND WORKING DOGS

People often confuse therapy dogs with service dogs, but they are not the same. According to the *American Kennel Club*, a non-profit organization and the largest and oldest purebred dog registry in the United States, “Therapy dogs are dogs who go with their owners to volunteer in settings such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes” (American Kennel Club, n. d.). A therapy dog lives with its owner (most often a therapist or a volunteer) and helps him while doing his job to improve the lives of other people (e.g. working with a child with disabilities who is learning to read, communicate, or walk or visiting old and lonely people in hospitals or nursing homes).

At the same time, there are service dogs. “Service dogs are dogs who are specially trained to perform specific tasks to help a person who has a disability” (American Kennel Club, n. d.). While the therapy dog meets different people with whom its owner works every day and helps them overcome certain difficulties or situations in their life, a service dog is with its person all the time. After specific, prescribed training and passing numerous tests, service dogs can be assigned to a person with some disability. An example of a service dog is a dog who guides an owner who is blind, or a dog who assists a person who has a physical disability. These dogs have special access privileges to public areas such as on planes, restaurants, hospitals, etc. to assist their owner with everyday tasks.

In addition to therapy and service dogs, there are many other divisions of assistance dogs. In his book *A zašto pas?* (eng. Why a dog?) Bolha describes how dogs go through different trainings and how different forms of work are applied to them, which then determine the purpose of the dog. That way, he distinguishes different types of dogs: mobility dogs (dogs who guide blind and partially sighted people), rehabilitation dogs, therapy dogs, assistance dogs, alarm dogs, work dogs, etc. There are so many terms, because the role of dogs in human life is “expanding every day, and each program implies a different type of help” (Bolha, 2020, p. 148). Regardless of the term, what all these dogs have in common is helping people

(especially vulnerable groups of people) and providing help and support in different situations in everyday life.

The Croatian encyclopaedic journal *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013) also listed a division of dogs similar to Bolha's. The authors of the journal distinguish between *working dogs* and *therapy dogs*. Working dogs are divided into **livestock dogs** (dogs used to control many types of domestic animals, e.g. herds of cows or flocks of sheep), **rescue dogs** (dogs that are trained to find people killed in accidents on inaccessible terrains, which are divided into different types of search dogs), **police dogs**, (often called 'K-9' dogs, who are used for the performance of police tasks, and are often divided into search dogs (dogs trained to help maintain public order and peace, protect police officers, chase offenders and fight violent people) and assistance dogs (dogs trained to identify various types of dangerous substances, e.g. explosives, narcotics or poisons), **military dogs** (dogs whose training is similar to that of police dogs, and are used as guards, searchers, rescuers, fighting dogs and, on special occasions, dogs for communication or delivery of medical supplies or weapons), **sled dogs** (indispensable dogs in the northern parts of the world who serve as transport for people in heavy snow) and **movie dogs** (originated in the second half of the 20th century, together with the development of television, film and the advertising industry, and their main task is the ability to learn and repeat different types of tasks and tricks). Therapy dogs, according to *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013, p. 14), are "dogs specially trained to help people with different types of diseases, handicaps or treatment processes". They are divided into **guide dogs** (dogs that help handicapped, most often blind, people in their everyday lives) and **rehabilitation dogs** (dogs that help people with disabilities to improve their quality of life) (ibid., pp. 12-16). It is important to say that all these dogs go through intensive training in different institutions for the upbringing and education of therapy dogs.

3.2 BENEFITS OF THERAPY DOGS

There is an old saying, "A dog is a man's best friend". It is not said without a reason. There are lots of benefits to having a dog in your life. Dog can affect a person's life, not only in physical, but also in an emotional way. According to the authors of *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013), the basic role of therapy dogs is to develop a sense of comfort in people in hospitals, rehabilitation institutions, nursing homes, people with seriously impaired health and children with developmental disabilities, because the relationship that develops between a person and a dog is an extremely strong motive for overcoming health, psychological difficulties, and difficulties

in development and learning experience. This is also confirmed by Bolha (2020), who in his book *A zašto pas?* (eng. Why a dog?) talks about the positive therapeutic effects of people who interact with animals. He claims that those positive effects are especially important for vulnerable groups of people (people with disabilities, people with disabilities, chronic diseases, abused and neglected people, etc.). He lists many positive aspects that therapy dogs have on humans. For example, therapy dogs provide people with the help and support they need to cope with stressful life conditions and to build up self-confidence. Moreover, interaction with a therapy dog helps people suppress negative behaviour that can lead to negative physical, psychosocial, or social consequences. It also helps one to improve self-confidence, create a better self-image, inviting attitude towards people in the community and develop competencies for dealing with various life situations (Bolha, 2020). This is also confirmed by the authors of *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013) journal who explain that working with therapy dogs affects several types of neurotransmitters in the brain: increasing oxytocin and dopamine (the hormones of happiness), which affect motivation, and making a person satisfied by creating a feeling of reward and reducing the level of cortisol (a hormone that the human body secretes in moments of intense stress). Furthermore, Beetz (2013) states that studies conducted on dogs and humans have shown that elevated levels of oxytocin are associated with decreased physiological stress responses, heightened calmness, diminished feelings of fear, depression, and aggression, as well as increased social engagement, attention, and trust, which all happen because of their interaction.

When it comes to children, many scientists came to the conclusion that dogs can help children develop in several ways. According to Chen et al. (2007), a child will develop his or her personality and social competence while a dog will provide psychological support and increase the child's physiological health by reducing stress and blood pressure. Moreover, according to the *Alliance of Therapy Dogs*, the presence of a therapy dog in the classroom has the following benefits for students:

- **Physical benefits** (reducing stress, lowering blood pressure, lowering the level of pain, providing physical stimulation)
- **Social benefits** (increasing self-confidence and developing interaction skills)
- **Cognitive benefits** (enhancing memory and developing problem-solving skills)
- **Emotional and mental health benefits** (overcoming anxiety problems, motivational support, creating a pleasant working atmosphere)

Brekalo (2020) confirms that the presence of a therapy dog in the classroom enhances different aspects of student development: socio-cognitive development, sensorimotor development, psychosocial development, emotional development and communication development. Cergol (2023) also states that interaction with a therapy dog in the classroom will be beneficial for student's emotional and cognitive development.

As Reynolds and Rabschutz (2011) claim, dogs can have a positive impact not only on young learners but also on college students who cope with the challenges of living a young adult life away from home which represents happiness and safety. They explained that studies have shown that interacting with a dog can alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression in college students by lowering blood pressure. To conclude, the presence of a therapy dog in the classroom can be an important factor for successful learning and students' personal development and motivation.

3.3 THERAPY DOGS IN CLASSROOMS

Children learn and acquire new information best through play and everyday real-life experiences. What reduces the child's desire and motivation to learn are routines, which the child often finds boring and unnecessary. By introducing a therapy dog into the teaching process, the child can be helped and motivated for further work and learning. This is confirmed by the authors of *Drvo znanja* journal (2013), who state that therapy dogs contribute to creating a positive, stimulating, and relaxing learning environment by interacting directly with children, thereby helping them develop throughout the learning processes.

There is a lot of research that supports dog-assisted learning, and many studies enumerate the positive aspects that the therapy dog has on both the students and their teachers. Beetz (2013) explains that the presence of a dog in the classroom can significantly improve the relationship between the student and their teacher and build trust among them. Authors of *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013) journal state that research results provide many positive effects on students who had a therapy dog in the classroom during the learning process and that their interaction affects various aspects of the child's development. Students were motivated to learn more than ever before and wanted to interact with a dog throughout different activities because the dog made them feel comfortable and relaxed. Furthermore, Beetz (2013) explains that the main goal of implementing dogs into classrooms is to enhance students' motivation and discipline by creating a positive learning environment since interaction with a dog can be used

as a motivation or reward. When it comes to activities conducted in the classroom while therapy dogs are there, it is important to differentiate them from animal therapy. As Renck Jalongo and colleagues (2004) state, animal-assisted activities are short-term activities conducted in the classroom, in which all children of the class actively participate, while animal therapy is a programme planned as part of the curriculum only for individual children.

Anderson and Olson concluded that incorporating a therapy dog into the learning process has the following benefits for students: “the dog’s placement in this classroom: a) contributed to students’ overall emotional stability, evidenced by prevention and de-escalation of episodes of emotional crisis; b) improved students’ attitudes toward school; and c) facilitated students learning lessons in responsibility, respect, and empathy” (Anderson & Olson 2006, p. 40). Considering all the listed benefits, the author’s opinion is that there are many schools that would love to host a four-legged friend in their classrooms, but it needs to be done through careful planning. Anderson (2007, pp. 5-8) states that careful planning is essential when integrating a dog into a classroom setting just like with any new teaching procedure and recommends the 5 following steps before including a therapy dog in the teaching process:

Step 1: conducting preliminary meetings – inform the school administration, discuss with them detailed strategies and determine policies for introducing a therapy dog into the classroom.

Step 2: selecting a dog – the dog entering the classroom must be a dog that has passed detailed training and tests by experts and therapists who train such dogs to be therapy dogs.

Step 3: establishing classroom policies and procedures – prepare students for the introduction of a therapy dog into the classroom, explain to them the role of the therapy dog in the classroom, clearly set the rules that both the students and their teacher must adhere to during the therapy dog’s stay in the classroom.

Step 4: obtaining consent – inform students’ parents and the school administration and get their consent

Step 5: providing information to colleagues – present the purpose, goals and procedures of the dog’s inclusion and explain the benefits that the students have from the therapy dog to other teachers, but also to the rest of the school staff.

3.3.1 DOG BREEDS SUITABLE FOR CLASSROOMS

Having a dog in the classroom will help create a pleasant working atmosphere for both students and their teachers. In order for the whole learning process to be as successful as possible, the dog must be very well trained. This can lead to problems because if the dog is not well trained and prepared, it can interfere with students' learning. Students are likely to be very excited to see the dog, and this can greatly affect its behaviour. For example, a dog may start barking or jumping on students, may be impatient, restless, or irritable, and may start walking around the classroom which will disturb not only the students but also their teachers. The worst possible situation is for the dog to become so irritable or aggressive that it bites someone. To avoid this, it takes years of working with the dog before it is ready to enter the classroom. A professional trainer must work with the dog to avoid any unexpected or unpleasant situations.

A therapy dog cannot be a dog of any breed. The most important characteristic that affects the choice of a dog that will become a therapy dog is its character. According to *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013), "The therapy dog must be calm, good-natured, extremely patient and must enjoy contact with people." (p.16). This means that the dog must be patient enough and accept the child's touch, which is often rough (pulling the dog) and sudden. In addition, children can often be loud, which can upset the dog, so the dog must also be able to lie still and not react to the child (in the sense of not attacking, barking, scratching, or biting the child). This means that not every type of dog is suitable for classroom work. However, there are many breeds of dogs that would be suitable for implementation in classrooms. Anderson (2007) lists Toy Poodles, Labradors, West Highland Terriers, and Golden Retrievers. Border Collies would also be suitable dogs because they are sociable, calm and easy to train. While authors of *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013) journal state that the most suitable dogs are Golden Retrievers, Labradors, and German Shepherds, Beetz states the following: "Breeds of dogs involved vary widely. Most popular are Retrievers (ca. 30%), followed by mongrels (ca. 20%)" (Beetz, 2013, p. 2).

Regardless of the completed training and character of the dog, the fact that dogs are animals and animals are wild creatures must not be forgotten. Some can never be 100% sure of their temper, so they should always be approached with caution. Children should, therefore, be taught how to properly approach a therapy dog in order to avoid unwanted consequences. In cases where the child is very small, it should never be left alone with the dog without the supervision of an adult who can and knows how to react properly for both the child's and the dog's sake in case an unforeseen situation occurs.

3.3.2 THERAPY DOGS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

As explained in section 2.1 which discusses foreign language learning at an early age, children can acquire a foreign language fast and easily, but sometimes it is hard to define what ‘easily’ actually means. Children also might face difficulties while learning a foreign language. One of them is a child’s intrinsic **motivation**, because, as Kostić-Bobanović and Ambrosi-Randić (2008) explain, students do not understand the importance of the English language in their future professions and everyday life. By introducing therapy dogs into English language classrooms, children might develop their own personal attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language due to their relationship with the therapy dog and their teacher. In other words, if they create a positive emotional relationship not only with the therapy dog but also with their teacher, their motivation will increase and they will learn a language more easily and have better results in it. Sadly, as Cergol (2023) claims, the integration of the therapy dog into English foreign language classrooms is rare (especially in Croatia), and this approach has not been fully researched so far.

More and more children need to overcome **language anxiety**, which was discussed in section 2.4. Speaking in public is often an aspect of language learning that induces anxiety the most. Many teachers can confirm that their students often experience significant anxiety when they need to communicate in a foreign language, especially during speaking activities such as oral presentations, role-plays, or speaking assessments. Students who feel anxious when speaking are often introverted students who are uncomfortable with spontaneous interaction or performing in front of an audience (Kostić-Bobanović & Ambrosi-Randić, 2008). By introducing therapy dogs into English language classrooms, students will be motivated to learn, and, due to the calming influence of the therapy dog, their anxiety will decrease, which will greatly affect their speaking abilities and increase their self-confidence while speaking. Anderson and Olson (2006) claim that the presence of a therapy dog can alleviate student’s stress and help anxious students be more open and communicative. Brekalo (2020) states that a therapy dog is the student’s main motivator while participating in the school’s activities because it provides unconditional acceptance, comfort, and safety in the educational process, by creating an atmosphere without judgement, threat, or fear. This happens because a therapy dog has a relaxing effect on students, encourages them to communicate, motivates them, and challenges them to focus on teaching content which is realized in a spontaneous way due to their interaction. Lane and Zavada (2013) explained that recent studies investigating animal-assisted literacy programs indicate that companion animals, especially dogs, are believed to

offer a non-intimidating yet socially encouraging and interactive audience for children as they practice their oral reading skills. This theory was also proved by Cergol (2021) who conducted a research project in which six children from the third grade of elementary school (three boys and three girls, whose native language is Croatian, but who have been learning an English language since the first grade of elementary school) were reading to therapy dogs once a week during six weeks. The results she obtained show significant improvement in fluency (words read per minute), correctness (the percentage of correctly read words), stress and intonation (Cergol, 2021). Moreover, Kropp and Shupp (2017) also confirmed that reading to dogs is beneficial for students because it: a) reduces the levels of stress and anxiety, b) improves attitudes towards reading and increases motivation, and c) improves reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension. To sum up, many studies confirm that reading to a dog significantly increases a child's self-confidence, literacy, and oral and reading skills. Moreover, interacting with a dog in the classroom has emotional and social benefits for children.

Today, the integration of children with disabilities into the teaching process is highly encouraged in the world. Because of that, in some classes, there are children with mental problems such as autism, who find it difficult to express themselves in their native language, let alone in a foreign language. Following that, expressing in a foreign language can be an even greater source of discomfort, stress, and frustration for them, and, as Geist (2011) describes a therapy dog can reduce the physiological reaction to stress. The dog's presence will provide a non-threatening environment for the child because a dog cannot judge a child. Their interaction can not only lower a child's stress levels but can also alleviate a child's negative behaviour patterns and encourage the development of self-awareness (Geist, 2011). This was also confirmed by Beetz (2013) who states that the benefits of interaction between a dog and a child can reduce aggressive behaviour and depression, improve a child's attention and motivation, enhance emotional self-regulation and intra-emotional balance, help the child with integration and social communication skills and develop positive affect towards learning. Brekalo (2020) states that the presence of therapy dogs in the classroom has a major role in working with students with any form of difficulties, because they make school, as an educational institution, a place in which they feel happy, motivated, and accepted.

Based on that, the association *Alliance of Therapy Dogs* comes to the following conclusion. The classroom environment can be quite stressful due to its social nature and peer pressure. The presence of a therapy dog can lower the stress and anxiety in most students, but, due to the broad spectrum of intensity, the behaviours of children with disabilities can be

unpredictable. Nevertheless, according to the *Alliance of Therapy Dogs*, throughout interaction with a therapy dog, a child with autism will start expressing more verbally and will abandon some forms of obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Even if the child does not want to participate in certain activities, the therapy dog will help the child feel more comfortable simply by being there. Beetz (2013) explains that physical contact can be the key to success in school-related activities for these students because petting a therapy dog can reduce the physiological stress reactions that may occur in a stressful school environment. Solomon (2010) states that therapy dogs can be beneficial for children with autism because they help them increase their communication and social interaction skills and develop a sense of affective connection. She also explains that bonding with a therapy dog contributes to a child's social and communicative development because, throughout their interaction, a child develops a sense of self, imagination, empathy, and morality in ways that could never be achieved in human interaction. Accordingly, Beetz (2013) claims that in stressful classroom situations, the presence of a dog will calm the students down and reduce anxiety and stress more than the presence of their teacher or peers. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2007, p. 3) explained that not just therapy dogs, but animals, in general, can be used to "treat emotionally troubled children who are extremely shy or hyperactive" because, during their interaction, children learn about love, loss, loyalty, nurturing and responsibility which increases social skills and educational opportunities for these children.

4. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research was designed to gain insight into the approach of using a therapy dog in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to primary school students, with a special focus on enhancing their learning experiences. The introduction of a dog was intended to enhance language learning in a fun and interesting way. In other words, the dog helped create a pleasant working atmosphere for both, students and their teachers. Learning a language with the help of a dog is one of the newer approaches to teaching and learning a foreign language where students would learn foreign vocabulary in a newly created, pleasant and relaxing atmosphere.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the positive aspects, but also possible challenges that may arise during the process of introducing a therapy dog into classrooms. The focal point of this research is to understand why therapy dogs are not used in classrooms in Croatia to help

and support children during the learning process, while in other countries around the world, this approach is welcomed and often used.

This thesis investigates the process of introducing a therapy dog into classrooms, with special emphasis on foreign language classrooms – English classrooms, to be more specific. It discusses what qualities a dog that will be introduced in the classroom must possess, and what kind of training it must undergo. Dog breeds that are suitable for being in the classroom are also reviewed. Furthermore, the thesis investigates the procedures through which the teacher can prepare their students for the arrival of a dog and their cooperation. The advantages of introducing a therapy dog into the teaching process are explored, with special emphasis on the impact of a therapy dog on reducing stress among students and their motivation for learning. The influence of a therapy dog on students with some kind of difficulty has also been investigated. This research further examines potential challenges and unexpected situations that may arise during the process of introducing a therapy dog into classrooms, and several solutions are offered to overcome these challenges. Moreover, a special emphasis is placed on the two challenging factors, fear and allergy.

In essence, this research aims to show the positive aspects that can arise from the bond created between the students, their teacher, and the therapy dog in the classroom environment. It also promotes a positive attitude towards therapy dogs and contributes to the implementation of the practice of introducing them into Croatian classrooms.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study are six experts who use therapy dogs in everyday work with children and teachers with extended experience in working with therapy dogs, and who have seen the benefits dogs provide to children. Because of their knowledge and experience, they are considered experts regarding the topic of this paper.

Participants' background:

Participant 1 (P1) – is an occupational therapist and holds a master's degree in physiotherapy. P1 is also an educational rehabilitator who currently works in a children's rehabilitation centre with children who have disabilities, primarily providing sensory

integration therapy with the help of a therapy dog. P1 has participated in many international conferences in the field of sensory-motor integration and animal-assisted therapy.

Participant 2 (P2) – is a specialist in early intervention, an educational rehabilitator, and a physiotherapist. P2 works at a children’s rehabilitation centre in a sensory integration therapy program with a therapy dog. P2 has extensive experience working with children with autism spectrum disorders and also has experience working in a school through an autism centre. With the therapy dog, P2 visited lower grades of elementary schools in Croatia and conducted activities with children in the presence of the therapy dog. They also conducted workshops in schools where the therapy dog provided reading support for children with dyslexia. P2 visited kindergartens and nursing homes with the therapy dog as well.

Participant 3 (P3) – is an associate professor at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, where they teach English literature and other courses related to literature in English language instruction. P3 has experience working with children as a lower primary teacher and an English teacher, as well as experience working with young adults at the faculty. P3 has also worked in private schools and has personal experience working with neurodiverse children. P3 experienced the positive effects that the therapy dog provided to their child during the therapy program.

Participant 4 (P4) – holds a master’s degree in primary education. P4 currently works as a lower primary teacher but also works as an advisor. P4 has been working in the educational system for 26 years and since 2018 has been introducing therapy dogs into the educational system. P4 takes their therapy dog to school and teaches all subjects in the lower primary with the presence of the therapy dog in the classroom. The therapy dog actively participates in many different activities in all school subjects. P4 has received numerous awards as a mentor to the students and has been awarded three times by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia for contributions to the development of the quality of the Croatian educational system, demonstrating exceptional dedication and professionalism to ensure quality education for students. P4 continuously participates in numerous professional development activities both in Croatia and abroad, focusing on education as well as working with and promoting therapy dogs. P4 is a member of the *Tačke pomagačke Association* of the Republic of Slovenia, which works with therapy dogs, as well as the *Udruge za školovanje pasa vodiča i mobilitet Zagreb* (eng. Parent

Association for Guide Dog Training and Mobility in Zagreb). P4 participates in international conferences as a presenter on the topic of using therapy dogs in education. In their work, P4 employs innovative methods which apply in working with the students.

Participant 5 (P5) – earned a doctorate at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, and is an adjunct lecturer at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Petrinja, teaching the course Contemporary Methodological Theories. P5 currently works as a teacher and has been teaching Croatian language for 22 years in upper primary. P5 has advanced to the title of outstanding advisor, received numerous awards and recognitions, and was several times selected among the top 500 educational workers in Croatia. The pinnacle of their professional career was the so-called ‘Teacher’s Oscar’, the *Ivan Filipović* Award, which represents the highest award in the Croatian school and education system. Additionally, P5 initiated a number of innovative projects for the students, one of them being *Učenje s četiri šape* (eng. Learning with Four Paws) project in which P5 and P6 introduced a therapy dog into their classroom for Croatian (native) language classes. P5 also initiated the radio show *Zvonjalica* where their teaching experience is shared.

Participant 6 (P6) – is a primary school teacher with 32 years of experience and is also an advisor teacher. P6 has personal experience working with children on the autism spectrum. Early on, they realized their child had an autism spectrum disorder and started therapy with the child at the Center for Education, which initiated *Ples s 4 šape* (eng. Dancing with Four Paws) project that included their son. In sensory rooms, a therapy dog was present with the child. Seeing the benefits that interaction with the therapy dog provided their child, P6 initiated the inclusion of the *Ples s 4 šape* project in the school when their child started regular classes. This project was used during homeroom periods when a trainer conducted educational workshops. Students sat in a circle with the therapy dog beside them, who carried tasks to them, etc. Together with P5 and the therapy dog trainer, P6 initiated *Učimo s 4 šape* (eng. Learning with Four Paws) project, in which the dog enters the classroom during Croatian language lessons in both lower and upper grades of primary school.

5.2 INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURE

The research instrument used for this qualitative study was a semi-structured interview with ten mainly open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted live or via the Zoom platform (depending on the disposition of each participant) and were documented through audio

recordings. The *Questions*² used in the interviews were pre-defined and sent in advance to the interviewees so that they could prepare for the interview. Each interview was conducted separately, with only the researcher and the participant present. Before the interview, each participant was asked to sign the *Consent*³ to participate in the interview. The consent stated that this research was completely anonymous and that the participant had the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Furthermore, participants were informed about the nature of the interview which was conducted in a question-answer form (the questions were asked by the researcher and answered by the participant). The interview was conducted in the native language (in this case, Croatian), and the responses were translated into English for the purpose of writing this master's thesis. The questions were divided into five categories containing between one and three questions, as listed below. Some of the questions contain additional questions that were needed for further elaboration or clarification of the given responses.

A. Background of the participant

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and describe your professional experience in working with children (and in education)?

B. Introducing a therapy dog into the classroom

1. What characteristics should a dog possess in order to be introduced into the classroom? Can it be any dog, or are some breeds more suitable for the classroom than others?
2. How should students and the therapy dog be prepared for entering the classroom and working together?

C. Benefits of introducing a therapy dog into the classroom

1. What benefits does a child gain from the introduction of a therapy dog into the educational process?
2. How does a therapy dog in the classroom affect students' motivation to study and work?
3. Do you believe that the presence of a therapy dog can help reduce stress during oral presentations?

⁴ <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/standards/summary-of-standards/>

D. Challenges of introducing a therapy dog into the classroom

1. What potential challenges might arise during the process of introducing a therapy dog into the educational process? In your opinion, how could these challenges be overcome?
2. What unexpected situations might occur while the therapy dog is in the classroom? What should be done in such cases? Which steps should be taken to prevent such situations from happening again?
3. What should be done in cases where a child is extremely afraid of the dog or is allergic to it?

E. Participants' general conclusions

1. Could you briefly state your overall opinion on the introduction of a therapy dog into the educational process? Should this approach be applied more in practice in Croatia?

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM

The most important thing that all participants state is that the dog entering the classroom should be trained by a specific association or professional individuals involved in dog training and upbringing, which is also confirmed by the authors of *Drvo znanja* (Galešev, 2013) and Bolha (2020). P1 and P2 add that the dog's temperament must suit the type of work it performs, but P2 explains that, according to the Assistance Dogs International (ADI) standards⁴, the dog must come from a carefully selected litter, must be monitored from the beginning by professionals working with animals and tested, raised, and socialized according to certain criteria to be included in work with children. P6 also mentions that not all dogs from the litter will be able to become therapy dogs. P4 explains that it is possible that a pet dog enters an educational institution, but in that case, the dog must undergo minimum training or testing for specific activities intended to be carried out with the dog. P1, P2 and P4 mention R.E.A.D. (*Reading With the Dog*) program that allows pets/dogs to participate in such activities in classrooms.

⁴ <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/standards/summary-of-standards/>

6.1.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOG INTRODUCED INTO THE CLASSROOM

Participants also list character traits the dog that will be introduced into the classroom must possess, which are: stability, tolerance, obedience, calmness, patience, and kindness. P1, P2, P5, and P6 state that the dog must be able to endure the noise in the classroom and that it must be willing to participate in classroom activities. P2 and P5 explain that it is important that the dog can adapt to various situations and be tolerant of larger groups of people their touch and sudden movements. Participants also share the opinion that the dog should know how to wait and have self-regulation to remain calm while other activities are ongoing in the classroom and be able to accept situations where it is not constantly involved in something. P3 states that the dog must not have sudden reactions, must not be aggressive, and must not get into a situation where the provoked reaction is in any way dangerous for children. In case there really is a painful or inappropriate reaction of the child, the dog must know how to react appropriately, i.e., not to react in a way that endangers the child. Moreover, P3 and P4 claim that the dog must listen to its trainer or its owner, but also want to respond to the instructions of other people as well if the instructions are given that way. P5 agrees with P3 and emphasises that a therapy dog should be attached to its handler, but also open and friendly even towards strangers and have trust in them. P5 also points out that this dog should not be territorial or possessive nor should have a pronounced protective instinct and that it must be able to handle the, sometimes stressful, classroom environment. P5 also states the following, “jumping on people, growling or barking loudly, pulling on the leash, and not listening to the owner’s signals – a therapy dog should not do any of the above”. Instead, P5 explains, “a dog should allow itself to be petted at all times and should not become nervous or aggressive even if handled a bit roughly or if someone pulls its tail for example”, which children often unknowingly do. The same characteristics were established by the authors of *Drvo znanja* journal (Galešev, 2013).

6.1.2 DOG BREEDS SUITABLE FOR CLASSROOMS

When it comes to dog breeds suitable for classrooms, the opinions of the participants are divided. P1, P2, and P4 believe that Labradors are the most adaptable and best for training and would definitely recommend Labradors, but also note that the size of the dog is not the only factor. They mention Poodles as a good choice, especially because of their hypoallergenic fur. P2 states that temperamental dogs that bond to only one owner are not a good choice for the classroom, so people combine Poodles (which are not so perfect in terms of learning and

upbringing) with Labradors. Labradoodle dogs, claims P2, have hypoallergenic fur and are easier to train, but says the following, “Personally, I would not know how to choose a dog myself; I would need support from people who work with them and train them”. P1 and P4 would not recommend Border Collies, Terriers, Maltese dogs, and other small breeds, because they are too active and energetic for the classroom environment. Opposed to them, P6, who worked in the classroom with both a Border Collie and a Labrador, claims to have had better experiences with the Border Collie, which was more active and capable of doing a variety of activities. Border Collie was also better fitting the classroom dynamics. P6 argues that the Labrador was too calm, just “lying on the carpet”, and that students could only give it a treat or it would lick their hand. But, P6 mentions mongrels, just as Beetz (2013) does, but states that they could not be taught to do tricks as efficiently as a Border Collie can and that such dogs may have a higher risk of developing some undesirable behaviour. P3 mentions that they may be biased, but believes that small breeds are not quite suitable due to their nervousness or anxiety, as people often perceive them as cute little beings, so they may be at risk of misinterpreting their character. From personal experience, P3 considers larger breeds, such as Labrador and Retriever, the most suitable, but their experience with German Shepherds has also been extremely positive, because of their very gentle nature. P3 explains that, even when not trained, German Shepherds are very benevolent and more protective than inclined to express any inappropriate reaction towards children. But Labradors and Retrievers are really the first choice because they are of suitable size and have a gentle nature and are easy to train and to cooperate with. P3’s opinion about German Shepherds, Labradors, and Retrievers is in line with what the authors of *Drvo znanja* journal (Galešev, 2013) wrote. Anderson (2007) lists Toy Poodles, Labradors, West Highland Terriers, and Golden Retrievers as dog breeds suitable for classrooms, but P5 claims that if a dog meets all the characteristics mentioned in the previous paragraph, breed affiliation no longer plays any role. However, P5 states that there are certain breeds of dogs that are more likely to be successful therapy dogs and mentions that particularly suitable dogs are sociable and people-oriented, which have been bred for decades as hunting, herding, or assistance dogs for working with people. P5 says the following: “These include breeds such as Maltese, Pug, Poodle, Hungarian Vizsla, Border Collie, German Shepherd, Bernese Mountain Dog, Australian Shepherd, Saint Bernard, Leonberger, Newfoundland, Beagle, Labrador Retriever, or Golden Retriever”, but mentions that, “belonging to one of these breeds does not immediately make a dog an excellent therapy dog because good socialization, training, and many positive experiences are more important than the breed”.

6.1.3 PREPARING THE STUDENTS AND THE THERAPY DOG FOR COOPERATION AND ENTERING THE CLASSROOM

In response to the question of how to prepare students and a therapy dog for entering the classroom and working together, all participants agree that the dog must be trained by professional trainers and should attain the status of a therapy dog, but P4 emphasizes that the therapy dog must have its handler, and they need to undergo training together and jointly pass tests to become a Team. Only then do they gain access to a specific institution. “If the dog meets all the criteria, it receives a vest, and the handler receives a certificate.”, points out P4. P1 claims that a dog should be introduced gradually and prepared over a longer period of time, first without students, then with a smaller group of students, and only then with the entire class. P3 illustrates that having a therapy dog inside the classroom “is like having another student, but with a completely different set of needs. Another neurodiverse student.”. Above all, participants point out that a specific place should be designated in the classroom where the dog will stay until it is involved in a particular activity, and this place should be consistently used. Also, all the dog’s basic needs (food, water, rest, exercise, going for a walk) should be met. Additionally, participants claim, that before working with the therapy dog, an agreement should be made with the school administration on a specific room where the dog can be taken if the handler notices that the dog is stressed or tired. Furthermore, all the participants assert that the school administration and parents of the students in whose classroom the dog will be present should sign informed consent. According to the participants, it is mandatory to check with parents if any child has allergic reactions to dog fur and if any child is afraid of dogs. In that sense, once everything is agreed upon, P4 outlines the detailed steps for how the first meeting between the students and the dog should look:

Step 1: a therapy dog’s handler should arrive early in the classroom without students or the teacher so that the dog can get used to the space.

Step 2: the first lesson in any classroom or institution is an introductory lesson during which the students and/or school staff are introduced to the basic rules of working with the therapy dog.

Step 3: at the end of the introductory lesson, students can pet the dog or give it a treat in the presence of the handler, who keeps the dog on a leash the entire time.

Step 4: after the introductory lesson, specific activities begin where students are informed about what will be done that day and how the therapy dog will be involved in each activity.

These steps are in accordance with Anderson's (2007) recommendations: conducting preliminary meetings, selecting a dog, establishing classroom policies and procedures, obtaining consent, providing information to colleagues as explained in section 3.3.

When it comes to preparation of the students, P1, P2, and P6 would introduce the therapy dog with an introductory or social story that they would tell the students so that the students would know what sensory experiences they might get from the dog (e.g., the dog's fur is soft, if the dog touches a child with its nose, the nose will be wet, if it licks, it's a kiss, if the dog brings a ball, the ball will be wet, etc.). This is very important for children who have an autism spectrum disorder. Bolha (2020), American Kennel Club, as well as the authors of *Drvo znanja* journal (Galešev, 2013) also confirm that bonding with a therapy dog can help with the social interaction and communicative development of children with autism spectrum disorders. Solomon (2010) adds that throughout their interaction, a child develops a sense of self, imagination, empathy, and morality in ways that could never be achieved in human interaction. P2 and P6 would also use short films or video demonstrations featuring the very dog that will be entering their classroom. Furthermore, P2, P3, and P6 would talk to the students before introducing the therapy dog into classrooms, but would tell them different things. P2 would explain to the students how they can communicate with the dog (e.g., what commands the dog understands in which situations and what behaviours the children can expect from the dog) and would adjust the introduction of the dog to the students' level of understanding. Before introducing the therapy dog to their classroom, P6 talked with the students about pets, where the students described their dogs. P6 also educated the students about the purposes of therapy dogs, discussed topics such as the white cane, celebrated Autism Awareness Days, Down Syndrome Awareness Days, and similar events with their students. P3 on the other hand, would explain to the students that the dog is a living being with its own personality and should be treated with respect, "because the dog is not a toy", but would not explain too many details because "It is sometimes difficult to explain what actually happens when a therapy dog enters the classroom and it is difficult to interpret all the connections that children establish with the therapy dog. It has to be an individual connection, so I would leave that open-ended actually.". P3 would also set some basic rules of behaviour and responsibilities with the students (e.g., who takes care of the dog's water or food, who looks after the dog when we go outside, etc.), but "would not go into details to avoid disrupting the special bond that children create with the dog. That bond must be individual, must be personal, and once you set a rigid framework, it's no longer the same. You have essentially imposed on the child how to behave with the dog.

This is often wrong even when a dog comes into a family. This opportunity to connect with a therapy dog, I believe, must be left to the child to establish their own connection with the dog.”. Moreover, P5 and P6, assert that a teacher should also be prepared and that all activities must be designed with the aim of encouraging cognitive aspects within the educational processes for children, and the dog acts as a catalyst for learning and teaching. In addition to being planned in advance, these activities are designed in agreement with the dog’s handler to jointly create a safe and stimulating environment and appropriate organizational conditions for delivering the educational content in a new and creative way. P5 adds that “Every implementation of these activities should be documented to assess the impact of the therapy dog on children’s cognitive development.”.

6.2 BENEFITS OF INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM

When asked about the benefits children gain from introducing a therapy dog in the educational process, all participants mentioned that students pay more attention during the lectures and are more focused, happier, in a better mood, and have increased self-confidence. P3 points out how the focus is no longer solely on the child, which is crucial because their success or grades are not under scrutiny. P3 explains that when the dog enters the classroom, students are focused on the dog, which is very beneficial because they learn through activities with the dog without even realizing it. Additionally, children learn to recognize the needs of another living being, which is essential for developing empathy and understanding. P2 agrees and adds that if a child learns something new through positive emotion, then it is permanently stored as a well-acquired skill or information. In general, all participants believe that a dog can provide the students with a positive emotional experience that will positively impact their learning. Additionally, P4 and P6 mentioned that their students achieved better results in exams they took or during the revision lessons in the presence of a therapy dog in the classroom. Continuing on that, none of the participants believe that the dog will disrupt the students during the learning process or interfere with their learning, and the majority of them claim that it is absolutely natural and normal that students pay more attention to the dog when it first enters the classroom. Along with Beetz (2013), the authors of *Drvo znanja* journal (Galešev, 2013) explain that working with therapy dogs increases oxytocin and dopamine (the hormones of happiness) and reduces the level of cortisol (a hormone that the human body secretes in moments of intense stress). P1, P2 and P5 also mentioned that children are more relaxed

because oxytocin is released and the level of cortisol decreases, while P2 mentions that biomedical parameters change (e.g., reduction of blood pressure, pulse, hormones), which is important for emotional regulation, closeness, attention and concentration, especially with children with disabilities. The same is concluded by Chen et al. (2007), who state that the dog can provide psychological support and increase the child's physiological health by reducing stress and blood pressure. P3, P2, and P6 particularly emphasize the positive effects of a therapy dog on undesirable behaviours in neurodiverse children with disabilities (e.g., autism), which Solomon (2010) and Brekalo (2020) confirm and explain that therapy dogs can help children with autism to increase their communication and social interaction skills, because a child develops a sense of self, empathy, and morality in ways that could never be achieved in human interaction. Geist (2011) suggests that interacting with a dog can alleviate negative behaviour patterns in children and induce self-awareness and Beetz (2013) suggests that such interactions can decrease aggressive behaviour and depression, improve emotional self-regulation and internal emotional balance, and assist children in developing integration and social communication skills. P2 states that a therapy dog helps children with developing tolerance and self-regulation because it 'forces' them to move away from their stereotypical behaviours (with which they are normally preoccupied) and shifts their focus to functional activity. Also, children more easily build upon their play and further develop symbolic play. Similarly, according to Alliance of Therapy Dogs, through interactions with a therapy dog, a child with autism will begin to express themselves more verbally and may reduce certain obsessive-compulsive behaviours. When it comes to discipline in the classroom environment, P1 believes that all students will learn better and be more disciplined with a dog in the classroom and P6 points out that children learn discipline and develop tolerance by waiting for their turn if another child is doing activities with the dog. By respecting their friends, a child who has an overly high opinion of themselves will not stand out as much, and a shy child will come forward, which is also an important educational aspect. Additionally, Chen et al. (2007) state that therapy dogs can be beneficial to children who are extremely shy or hyperactive because during their interaction, children learn about love, loyalty and responsibility which increases social skills and educational opportunities for these children, while Cergol (2023) also claims that this interaction can be beneficial for students' emotional and cognitive development. P1 emphasizes that it is important for children's development to have an animal by their side from an early age, as it contributes to numerous benefits in the future. Following that, P5 states that the benefits of introducing a therapy dog into the educational process are manifested through a range of positive effects, and claims that it promotes: *motor development* (development of fine

and gross motor skills, improvement of balance and coordination of movements and reduction of muscle tension), *development of sensory integration* (development of tactile, visual, auditory and olfactory perception), *speech-language development and communication* (encouraging speech, development of analysis and synthesis, storytelling and retelling, describing, listening, answering questions, and promoting conversation), *socio-emotional development* (fostering a sense of security, encouraging and developing positive moods and a positive self-image, strengthening self-confidence, enhancing the desire for interaction and communication with others, and promoting a sense of community) and *catalysing learning* (increasing motivation to learn, improving concentration and attention span, aiding in the development of short-term and long-term memory, enhancing and developing knowledge of concepts, facilitating the learning of abstract concepts, and developing mathematical skills). A similar grouping of benefits presented by the *Alliance of Therapy Dogs* and Brekalo (2020) is listed in section 3.2 that discusses the benefits of therapy dogs.

6.2.1 THE INFLUENCE OF THERAPY DOGS ON STUDENTS' MOTIVATION

As described in section 2.3, dedicated to the teaching strategies needed for successful foreign language learning, the two main difficulties that can affect successful foreign language learning are motivation and language anxiety. All participants claim that the presence of a therapy dog (if it is properly introduced into the learning process) will increase students' motivation and positively impact the working atmosphere and overall classroom dynamics. Brekalo (2020) states that a therapy dog is the student's main motivator while participating in the school's activities because it provides unconditional acceptance, comfort, and safety in the educational process, by creating an atmosphere without judgement, threat, or fear and similar is stated by Bolha (2020). All participants agree on that, and explain that many children might not do something for themselves but will do it for the dog, as the therapy dog evokes in students a desire to work, participate in activities, and successfully complete tasks. "It is," claims P6, "like that dog gives them some kind of self-control where they want to show their best selves." P1, P2, and P6 remarked, that the students who have a therapy dog in their classroom feel very special. Additionally, P4 notes that there is a greater concentration and focus during certain activities, as students need to be mindful of their interaction with the dog (not to injure it, not to squeeze its paw too hard, etc.). P4 also mentions that the dog's calmness and stability influence the calmness and stability of the student who is interacting with the dog. Furthermore,

P4 explains that when a student receives a specific task, they will quickly complete it so they can engage in the assigned activity with the dog and describes that the dog can participate in the lesson in two ways – active and passive: “In a passive way, the student comes to pet the dog or give it a command for the activity they have completed. In an active way, the dog and the student work together to do the task, which is a big motivator because the student is not alone. Even if they make a mistake, the dog is there to help.”. After completing the task, describes P4, the student needs to take the dog to its place and give it a command. In the end, the student is satisfied because they completed their task and worked with the dog, and the dog is satisfied because someone petted it and gave it a treat, which creates a connection, and positive effects are seen in both directions. “It is also important”, continues P4 “that the other students carefully observe the activity between the student and the dog, focusing on the problem and solution, thereby learning together. This increases motivation for work among the other students in the class.”. To sum up, a therapy dog creates a sense of comfort and relaxation in the classroom, helps children to develop respect for themselves and others, build self-confidence, and believe in their own abilities.

6.2.2 THE INFLUENCE OF THERAPY DOGS ON REDUCING STRESS DURING ORAL PRESENTATION

Classrooms and educational processes can often be sources of stress for children, especially during oral presentations. When it comes to language anxiety, a therapy dog can help to reduce stress if the child pets the dog or if the dog sits next to them during oral presentations, which would be great, believes P1. Beetz (2013) explains that physical contact with the therapy dog can significantly enhance success in school-related activities for these students, as petting a therapy dog can lower their level of stress. P2 agrees that the dog reduces stress and notes that the dog influences the classroom dynamics, offering behaviour that creates new learning opportunities and can help a child refocus their attention back on the content. Beetz (2013) also states that in stressful classroom situations, the presence of a dog will calm the students down and reduce anxiety and stress more than the presence of their teacher or peers. The same is confirmed by P6 who claims that students did not feel ashamed if they did not know the answer in the presence of a therapy dog and that they were feeling safe. Furthermore, when it comes to reading skills, P3 mentioned that, while reading to a dog, a child does not have to demonstrate exceptional reading ability and can enjoy being with the dog and reading

something to it, because the dog will not judge them, but will patiently listen and P2 confirmed this from their own experience when they organized reading workshops with a therapy dog. P2 explained that the dog was a motivator who made reading more engaging and less monotonous. Moreover, especially children with dyslexia perceive the dog as someone who will not judge or criticize them and who does not think of their reading as negative. In accordance with that, a therapy dog makes the experience more positive for children. Lane and Zavada (2013) explained that dogs offer a non-intimidating yet socially encouraging and interactive audience for children as they practice their oral reading skills, and the same theory is proven by Cergol (2021), Geist (2011) and Kropp and Shupp (2017) because the dog does not grade, criticize, judge, correct nor evaluate. “That grade is often like a judgment.” believes P3 and adds: “We really are a society focused on grades, and everything revolves around that kind of summative assessment. But the dog is very benevolent and non-judgmental. It will just listen.”. P3 explains that during oral presentations, children often try to guess the right answer, what is expected of them, and that “they are afraid to speak, afraid to think about what they are saying, and the dog, with its patience and silence, provides an opportunity, a space for the child to hear themselves, maybe correct themselves, think about what they are saying, hear themselves back, and realize that there is something they can improve or want to correct, but without the judgmental and evaluative pressure from outside”. Because students will be rewarded for their work and effort in the form of petting and playing with the dog, describes P4, they are more relaxed during oral presentations. In addition, it is extremely important that the correction method is not used when working with a therapy dog, which means that the dog should be used more during review lessons, practice, reading exercises, although even in lessons for acquiring new outcomes, the dog can be a great benefit for oral expression, adds P4. P6 agrees with this, as noticing that the students were more relaxed and that they were not afraid to express their opinions during the therapy dog’s stay in the classroom and adds that students had excellent discussions and presentations. Anderson and Olson (2006) confirm that the presence of a therapy dog can alleviate student’s stress and help anxious students be more open and communicative. Teachers often forget that students must feel safe and relaxed and good when learning because they are sometimes too focused on educational goals, lesson plans, how much they have covered, or how many pages are left in the book, but the dog, explains P3, introduces a necessary dose of relaxation because the teaching process must also adapt to that dog. To conclude, as Beetz (2013) and P5 state, a therapy dog will create a positive working atmosphere for both the students and their teacher and will improve their relationship and trust between them.

6.3 CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING A THERAPY DOG INTO THE CLASSROOM

A review of the literature did not identify any significant obstacles that would prevent the introduction of a therapy dog into the educational process. However, when it comes to potential challenges or unexpected situations which might occur while introducing therapy dogs in the classroom, most of the participants mentioned allergies and/or fear of dogs, while some of them highlighted a lack of understanding or prejudice from the environment, institutions, and/or parents. P1 explains that some parents fear the dog might react and scare the children, but with good training, careful selection of the dog, and proper guidance from a professional handler or teacher, these risks are significantly reduced. When it comes to children's fear, P2 believes that initially, contact between the child and the dog should not be encouraged or forced. Instead, they suggest that the child should choose where to sit in the classroom and decide if and when they want to interact with the dog. This way, the child is given control over the situation, and it is important for the child to feel that the person (teacher or therapist) with the dog has complete control over it. P4 states that the handler of a therapy dog must always be close to the dog and be able to assess the situation well and respond in a timely manner if any form of problematic behaviour is noticed. If the dog is restless, or if a student starts crying, the dog is removed from the classroom, and the teacher should calm the student down and explain why the particular situation occurred. However, P4 emphasizes that in the 6 years they have been working with a therapy dog in the classroom, they have never encountered an unexpected or unpleasant situation. P3 experienced fear of the dog with their own child but claims that due to the natural temperament and patience of the therapy dog, this fear quickly turned into a wonderful bond. P6, on the other hand, encountered fear from the parents of a student in their class, so the student was placed in the library while the therapy dog was in the classroom. However, as soon as the other students shared their experiences with that student, the student became very eager to participate, and the parents then agreed to it.

When it comes to allergies, participants have divided opinions. According to P2's experience, the presence of the dog in the classroom should not trigger allergic reactions if there is no close contact but rather stimulate some immunization. Such a child should not engage in physical contact with the dog, and the situation should be discussed with the parents and a doctor to determine the actual risk, P2 concludes, adding that there are dog breeds with hypoallergenic fur (e.g., Poodles or Labradoodles) that would be a good alternative for that class. P3 agrees, adding that allergic people sometimes have a dog anyway, as they control their allergies with medication. P4, who encountered this situation in their own class, claims that a

student who is allergic to fur does not have to be excluded from the lesson when working with a therapy dog and suggests that the student sits at the back of the classroom near an open window, observing the activities without participating. In contrast, P5 and P6 believe that no teacher would be willing to take the risk of including a child with allergies in such a lesson, and it is better for the child not to participate at all. The student, although they probably already know it, needs to be explained why they cannot be present in that class, concludes P6.

Regarding other unexpected situations that might occur, participants mentioned the possibility of the dog barking and scaring the students, but they assert that these are excellent learning opportunities. P1, P2, and P3 state that it is necessary to rationalize the situation. It is important to talk to the students and explain that it is normal for a dog to bark and to try to understand with the students the reason for its barking. If the situation does not calm down, both P1 and P3 would take the dog out of the classroom and place it in another room, ensuring some time apart. P3 has also mentioned the possibility that the dog might not want to enter the classroom or school at all, and P6 experienced this situation first-hand. P3 suggests that an outdoor school setting is also a very good alternative solution. P2 concludes that the teacher or therapy dog's handler should have the skill to use every situation with the dog as a learning opportunity. The dog can be integrated with the lesson content, or the students can be given an active, structured break that includes the therapy dog. This approach helps students practice flexibility in their attention, allowing them to return to the lesson content later, P3 explains and adds the following: "I believe the dog might cause a distraction, but I think it would be a positive distraction", and all other participants agree with it. Due to the large number of students, it is important to ensure that the dog in the classroom is not under stress, as such a situation is unnatural for a dog. Following that, the dog's behaviour should be monitored and the dog should be provided with a place for rest. Moreover, regular breaks and taking the dog outside can address this issue, notes P1. P2 adds that the teacher should arrange in advance with the students who will be responsible for the dog that day to avoid overburdening the dog. P6 describes how they introduced the dog into the classroom outside of recess time because otherwise, all the children might overwhelm the dog. Typically, this was done after the bell when everyone had gone to their classrooms. It is especially challenging, P6 notes, to prepare first graders not to bother the dog and to remain calm during its time in the classroom. Children can suddenly start kicking their feet, so the teacher needs to be very careful to ensure a child does not hit the dog which can cause a reaction, adds P6. Even if an unexpected situation occurs, P2 claims that most therapy dogs will simply move away from the child. There is a

very low chance that a therapy dog would react negatively towards the students (e.g., biting, barking, scratching) due to the training, assessment, and conditioning it has undergone, conclude all participants. P3 remarks the following: “They are simply, I won’t say angels, but special living beings. Like some ‘upgraded dogs’, where there is no danger whatsoever.”

6.4 PARTICIPANTS’ GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

All participants in this study are highly skilled experts possessing extensive experience with therapy dogs and in working with children. They all agree that the approach of working with therapy dogs should be implemented in schools in the Republic of Croatia, due to the immense benefits that children receive from their relationship which are listed in section 6.2. A therapy dog influences students’ motivation and encourages a desire for learning and participation in activities. The mere presence of a therapy dog reduces stress during oral expression. Moreover, as Reynolds and Rabschutz (2011) assert, dogs can have a positive impact not only on young learners but also on college students. This is also noted by P4 and P2, who emphasize that a dog brings smiles to everyone – preschoolers, students, young adults, adults, and the elderly. Other respondents also confirm the happiness and smiles in children who interact with a therapy dog. In today’s era of digitalization and a busy lifestyle, it is important not to strictly adhere to traditional teaching methods but to introduce innovations and adapt to the needs of the students in the classroom, as emphasized P4, P5, and P6. P5 describes how modern teaching should be more focused on the student and their needs, preparing them for lifelong education. The choice of methods and forms of work in teaching is a crucial issue for contemporary teachers, and by introducing a therapy dog, they encourage students to become independent in their learning, stimulate their creativity, and promote learning through discovery and problem-solving. Modern teaching methods enable active student participation in lessons, highlighting their creativity, which is the actual goal of contemporary teaching. This all can be achieved through active interaction between students and the dog, explain P5 and P6.

When asked why this approach is not more implemented in Croatia, participants provided the following responses. P1 cites bureaucracy as the main problem, while P2 points to spatial capacity and the need for staff who would work with and train such dogs. P3 highlights that there are not many dog-friendly schools in Croatia and, in their many years of experience, they have never seen a child with an assistance dog because all such dogs were explicitly banned in institutions. Silić (2007) confirms that, because of the complexity of the

learning process, the educational system needs to be open to accept and embrace external initiatives of other systems, institutions, and individuals that will contribute to the child's development. "These must be people who truly want to work in that way, who genuinely want a dog in the classroom because if you force something, there is a lot of resistance, to begin with.", adds P3. P4 also encountered administrative problems when introducing a therapy dog into any institution and believes that "the Republic of Croatia should, following the example of other European countries (e.g., the Republic of Slovenia), enact a law that allows all Teams (a therapist and their therapy dog) the freedom to work in any institution requesting such work". P6 states that early intervention for children with difficulties is extremely important, but the system in Croatia is not functioning properly, and the waiting lists for therapy are simply too long, causing therapy to start too late. In their project, *Učimo s 4 šape* (eng. Learning with 4 Paws), P5 and P6 encountered financial problems. P6 argues that while it is difficult at the city level, it is possible at the state level (or even using the EU funds) to withdraw some money to finance such a dog if there is greater interest. Building on this, P5 suggests organizing workshops and lectures for teachers, students and parents, to raise awareness about the benefits of dogs for children's development and progress, and to encourage broader adoption of the new teaching method. In the end, P2 thinks that it is very unlikely that a therapy dog would not be a good choice for a classroom and P1 asserts that with the wider use of dogs in classrooms, students would learn a great deal about responsibility, tolerance, how to treat another living being, respecting animals, recognizing different states in them, and developing care, empathy, and acceptance and concludes by saying, "Dogs ask for little but give a lot."

7. CONCLUSION

This research confirms that therapy dogs can be excellent allies for teachers in achieving educational goals during the teaching process. A therapy dog serves as a motivator and non-judgmental support for students in all subjects. The physical, social, cognitive, emotional and mental health benefits that such a dog provides to all students in the classroom, especially those with special needs, are immense. A therapy dog positively impacts classroom dynamics by creating a pleasant and relaxed, yet stimulating work atmosphere. Special emphasis is placed on the benefits of such dogs in foreign language classrooms, where language anxiety is often present. According to experts in this research, the therapy dog, due to its personality and special training, is a key factor in addressing this issue. Its presence offers unconditional love and support, creating a comfortable environment where children are not afraid to make mistakes because the dog will not judge, correct, or grade them. Learning in this manner can significantly boost a child's confidence, which would positively affect their performance and oral skills. However, despite the significant benefits, there are some potential challenges in introducing a therapy dog into the teaching process. These challenges typically include parental and/or children's fear of dogs and children's allergies. Experts suggest solutions for these situations, such as placing the child at the back of the classroom near an open window (in case of allergies) or using a hypoallergenic therapy dog. In case of fear, interaction with the therapy dog should not be forced but will come naturally, according to participants' experiences. In any case, the relationship built through active interaction between the student and the dog will bring great benefits in learning and memory retention, as well as the child's overall health.

Unfortunately, participants indicate that in Croatia, there are significant problems with administration, bureaucracy, and funding for such a dog. Moreover, many educational institutions are not pet-friendly. Additionally, there are issues with space and staff sufficiently trained for the upbringing, socialization, and education of such dogs. Currently, dog-assisted therapies in Croatia can only be found at the *Silver Rehabilitation Centre* and the *Croatian Association for Guide Dog Training and Mobility*. If funds were collected from state or European sources and if workshops and projects of introducing such dogs not only into schools but into all institutions in Croatia were organized more frequently, the response to this approach would certainly be much greater, state the experts.

In conclusion, the advantages are significant, and the potential problems can be solved with the effort and willingness of all those who want to work with therapy dogs. The author of

this research hopes that this thesis will provide new insights into all the benefits and offer solutions for the potential challenges of implementing this approach in the educational process, as well as inspire and provide a broader perspective on why this approach should be introduced in schools across Croatia.

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APPENDIX 1

PITANJA ZA POLUSTRUKTURIRANI INTERVJU

POZADINA

1. Možete li se ukratko predstaviti i reći nešto o Vašem profesionalnom iskustvu u radu s djecom (i u obrazovanju)?

UVOĐENJE TERAPIJSKOG PSA U RAZRED

1. Kakav mora biti pas koji će biti uveden u razred? Koje karakteristike mora posjedovati? Može li to biti bilo koji pas ili postoje pasmine koje su primjerenije za učionicu od drugih?
2. Kako pripremiti učenike i terapijskog psa za ulazak u učionicu i međusobnu suradnju?

PREDNOSTI UVOĐENJA TERAPIJSKOG PSA U UČIONICU

1. Koje prednosti dobiva dijete uvođenjem terapijskog psa u nastavni proces?
2. Kako terapijski pas u učionici utječe na motivaciju učenika za učenje i rad?
3. Smatrate li da terapijski pas može pomoći u smanjivanju stresa prilikom usmenog izražavanja?

IZAZOVI UVOĐENJA TERAPIJSKOG PSA U UČIONICU

1. Koji su potencijalni izazovi koji se mogu pojaviti pri procesu uvođenja terapijskog psa u nastavni proces? Kako bi se, prema Vašem mišljenju, ti izazovi mogli prevladati?
2. Koje neočekivane situacije bi se mogle dogoditi za vrijeme boravka terapijskog psa u učionici? Što učiniti u tom slučaju? Što je potrebno poduzeti da se takve situacije više ne događaju?
3. Što učiniti u slučaju ako se dijete izrazito boji psa ili je alergično na njega?

ZAKLJUČAK

1. Možete li ukratko reći Vaše generalno mišljenje o uvođenju terapijskog psa u nastavni proces? Treba li se taj pristup početi primjenjivati u praksi u Republici Hrvatskoj?

APPENIX 2

PRIVOLA ZA SUDJELOVANJE U ISTRAŽIVANJU

Poštovani,

Studentica sam 5. godine Učiteljskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Za potrebe izrade diplomskoga rada provodim istraživanje kojim želim utvrditi pozitivne strane, ali i izazove uvođenja terapijskog psa u nastavni proces. Istraživanje se provodi u obliku polustrukturiranog intervjua uživo ili preko platforme *Zoom*, ovisno o želji sudionika. Sudjelovanje u ovom istraživanju u potpunosti je anonimno i dobrovoljno te u bilo kojem trenutku možete odustati. Prikupljeni rezultati bit će korišteni samo u svrhu izrade diplomskoga rada, a imena sudionika bit će poznata samo meni (autorici rada), mentorici i sumentorici.

Zahvaljujem na sudjelovanju.

Studentica: Lorena Jelkovic

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Kristina Cergol

Sumentorica: dr. sc. Silvija Hanžić Deda

Ja, _____ (ime i prezime sudionika) ovim potpisom pristajem biti sudionik za potrebe istraživanja u svrhu izrade diplomskoga rada studentice Lorene Jelkovic na temu *Pozitivne strane i izazovi uvođenja terapijskih pasa u nastavu engleskog jezika: stavovi stručnjaka*.

Potpis

Datum

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a 5th-year student at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb. For the purpose of my master's thesis, I am conducting research to identify the positive aspects and challenges of introducing a therapy dog into the learning process. The research is conducted in the form of a semi-structured interview, either in person or via the Zoom platform, depending on the participant's preference. Participation in this research is completely anonymous and voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. The collected results will be used solely for the purpose of writing the thesis, and the names of the participants will be known only to me (the author of the thesis), my mentor, and my co-mentor.

Thank you for your participation.

Student: Lorena Jelkovic

Mentor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kristina Cergol

Co-mentor: Dr. Silvija Hanžić Deda

I, _____ (name and surname of the participant),
hereby consent to participate in the research for the purpose of writing the master's thesis by student Lorena Jelkovic on the topic "BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING THERAPY DOGS INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: EXPERTS' OPINIONS".

Signature

Date

IZJAVA O IZVORNOSTI DIPLOMSKOG RADA

Izjavljujem da sam ja, Lorena Jelkovic, rođena 30. studenog 2000. u Karlovcu, studentica Sveučilišnog integriranog prijediplomskog i diplomskog studija (Učiteljski studij, smjer engleski jezik), diplomski rad na temu: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING THERAPY DOGS INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: EXPERTS' OPINIONS, napisala samostalno, korištenjem navedene literature i provedenog istraživanja uz mentorstvo izv. prof. dr. sc. Kristine Cergol i sumentorstvo dr. sc. Silvije Hanžić Deda. Izjavljujem da je ovaj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojega rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

Zagreb, lipanj, 2024.

Lorena Jelkovic

(vlastoručni potpis studenta)