

# Early English language learning experiences of Croatian secondary school students

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Early English language learning experiences of

Croatian secondary school students

Master's thesis

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## **Abbreviations**

EFL = English as a foreign language

ELLE = English language learning experience

L2 = second language

LLE = language learning experience

LLH = language learning history

SLA = second language acquisition

YL = young learner

## **Abstract**

This paper explores learners' perceptions and reflections about their own early English language learning experiences (ELLEs) reported in a research study conducted via an online questionnaire on a sample of 197 Croatian secondary school students of three different grammar schools. English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning has a long tradition in Croatia. Children are exposed to English in the English classroom from the first or fourth grade of primary school, and outside of the classroom through a variety of affordances, such as digital and printed media. The findings indicate that the participants overall associated numerous sources of input of the English language with their early formal and informal learning, with the highest number of responses related to TV shows, songs and Internet videos in English. The majority of the students expressed very positive attitudes towards their earliest ELLEs and considered them important for their education and/or for personal reasons. The participants were also asked to share accounts of their particularly memorable early ELLEs. These salient experiences provided valuable data about learners' motivation, emotions and self-esteem on an individual level. The rich diversity of the participants' experiences serves as a reminder that every language learner has their own complex language learning past. Data gathered in this study about the current generations' early ELLEs is hoped to be both interesting and useful to EFL teachers and learners of upcoming generations, as well as to encourage them to reflect upon and find inspiration and comfort in their own past experiences.

**Key words:** English language learning experiences (ELLEs), English as a foreign language (EFL), formal and informal contexts of language learning, affective aspect of language learning, reflection



## **1. Introduction**

The topic of this paper was inspired by Professor Stela Letica Krevelj's lecture, which took place in 2019. Talking about early second language acquisition (SLA), she reminisced about her own early experiences of learning English in school via the audiolingual method. In particular, she described the first lesson from the textbook, which featured very simple dialogue between a boy and a girl playing with a ball and which she vividly remembered. At this point of the lecture, she produced a copy of said textbook and showed it to everyone present. A number of her colleagues from the English Department instantly recognized it and appeared rather delighted about the book and its illustrations. It seemed that seeing the authentic material jogged memories of their first contacts with the English language, experiences which may have been long forgotten. Their positive reaction and another professor's suggestion about possibly researching this further prompted us to conduct a study about learners' consciously reflecting upon what we will call early English language learning experiences (ELLEs).

This paper will investigate learners' early ELLEs: the types of sources of input of the English language with which they associate their earliest memories of learning, learners' reflections on those memories and the effects they had on learners' learning outcomes and attitudes towards learning English. The first part of the paper will introduce the subject matter of language learning experiences along with other closely connected SLA concepts. The second part of the paper will focus on our study and the results and insights gained from it.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Early English language learning experiences carry with them a variety of associated concepts and popular subject matters of the SLA field: early learning of English as a foreign language, formal and informal contexts of learning, affective aspect of language learning and experience itself as a concept in learner-oriented studies. In order to get a better understanding of them, each one will be outlined in this chapter in regards with relevant past research.

### **2.1. Early learning of English as a foreign language in Croatia**

In today's globalized and hyperconnected world knowledge of English, the most popular language in Western civilization, has certainly become a valuable commodity. The threshold for starting English as a foreign language (EFL) learning has shifted so much that some parents enroll their children in private schools as early as only a couple of months old. Teaching English to young learners (YLS) as a special subgroup has been extensively researched in the SLA field, albeit with no clear-cut consensus on the age limit. For example, Kang Shin (2014) differentiates between very young learners or VYLS (younger than 7) and YLS (7-12 years old), while Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) include all children younger than 15 years old. For our research purposes, we will adhere to the latter classification as it also refers to the Croatian context, with the age limit coinciding with the end of primary education in the country<sup>1</sup>.

Croatia is no stranger to the above-mentioned spread of English, as pointed out in past studies (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008). This phenomenon has certainly only been amplified in recent years due to the rise of social media and, for younger generations, it has moved well past what Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld referred to in 2003 as English “losing its ‘foreignness’” (p. 337). Given that Croatia is one of the smaller countries on the continent, a predominantly homogenous one at that, this fact seems surprising. Nonetheless, the language affordances (cf. Aronin 2012; 2014) for learning English are vast and easily available, from English being taught as a compulsory subject from the first or fourth grade of primary school to the sheer quantity of authentic language input coming from undubbed films and series shown on Croatian TV channels and songs played on Croatian radio stations. Aronin (2014) makes a case for perceived and effectuated (realized) affordances,

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<sup>1</sup> Primary school in Croatia is obligatory for all children from age 6 or 7 and includes eight grades divided into two stages of four lower grades and four higher grades.

stating that “for an affordance to be picked up and realized, it has to be made ‘operational’, activated, that is, identified and categorized for each real situation” (p. 162). This concept is crucial for researching early experiences as it essentially focuses on those concrete affordances that the learners were aware of and remembered clearly for years to follow. In a recent qualitative study on multilingual Croatians, the participants unanimously considered all of their early language exposure as beneficial, even if it ultimately did not lead to greater proficiency or motivation (Kajin, 2018).

## **2.2. Formal and informal contexts of learning**

Through effectuated affordances, learners can be exposed to English in what we will refer to either formal or informal contexts of learning. Formal or classroom learning contexts take place in a school setting with learners being taught by an EFL teacher, whereas informal or out-of-classroom contexts refer to all other settings, such as home. As mentioned above, English is well established in Croatia’s public school system, with teachers required a graduate study degree in English with fulfilled pedagogical competences. Furthermore, private language schools are not uncommon and some of them specialize in teaching YLs only. Formal contexts, also known as structure-based instructional settings (see Lightbown & Spada, 2006), invariably have a set of established rules – the learners need to listen to the teacher and cooperate in class, knowledge needs to be evaluated etc. This may affect students’ perception of their classes, and according to findings in Menezes (2008), “classroom experiences are predictable and follow a common pattern and outside classroom ones yield disturbances which can change the acquisition route” (p. 12). Classrooms aimed towards YLs in grades 1 and 2, however, tend to be more relaxed learning environments so as to accommodate to young children’s needs and to retain their attention. Thus, the Subject Curriculum of English for Croatian Primary Schools and Grammar Schools recommends teaching “based on spoken communication and situational learning through mimicry, gestures, movements, artistic expression, play, song and dramatization (...) without explicitly introducing or using metalanguage” (2019, p. 15). For example, nursery rhymes and songs in English textbooks have long been a staple in formal EFL teaching of YLs, with their repetitive lyrics and simple melodies allowing children to memorize basic words and their pronunciations while singing and performing together. Informal contexts are even more commonly associated with this concept of implicit or incidental learning, a term also referred to as contextual learning to denote the fact that children learn as a consequence secondary to their main goal, usually entertainment (Bunting & Lindstrom, 2013; Hendrih & Letica Krevelj, 2019). The amount of input received outside of

the classroom heavily relies on the child's family and parents, also referred to as 'valued others', who are especially influential for children aged 6 to 8 (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). Parents not only provide them with various sources of English, but can possibly play a more active role in their learning by engaging with the content and assisting the child with understanding it. Nowadays, possibly the most popular source of English at home is media, especially cartoons, with its benefits extensively researched (e. g. Bahrani & Tam, 2012; Kuppens, 2010; Kuppens & DeHouwer, 2006, as cited in DeHouwer, 2015; Verspoor et al., 2011). Curtis (2015) attributes the "subconscious learning" from cartoons taking place to "the home setting", which "may feel much safer and more secure for a child in a new country than a classroom full of strangers" (pp. 132-3). This could be said of young children and learners in general. Another prominent type of media is videogames, an umbrella term which we will use to refer to computer, console and mobile phone games. Videogames are released almost exclusively in English, and those available to Croatian audiences are rarely subtitled, let alone dubbed. In terms of content, videogames differ from cartoons in that they offer an interactive experience – the players control the characters, and in order to do so, they have to understand the possible commands and, if the game is story-driven, the plot and the dialogue. Successfully accomplishing a game's objectives can be a source of high intrinsic motivation for language learning, especially for young boys (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). Using videogames in formal English lessons is on the rise; however, students may find specially made educational games less interesting and too different from the commercial games they choose to play at home for fun (Bunting & Lindstrom, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019).

### **2.3. Affective aspect of language learning**

Like all cognitive processes, language learning is unique to each individual – even if taught in the same environment receiving the same amount of input, no two learners will have the same learning curve. One of the most popular theories about this is Krashen's affective filter hypothesis from the 1970s, i.e., the notion that learners' affect – their motives, needs, attitudes and emotional states – may block the processing of comprehensible input and, in turn, prevent acquisition of certain lexical items or of language in general. Krashen went on to develop his theory in a later work placing the filter as the first internal processor, followed by the organizer and the monitor, the only conscious one out of the three (Dulay et al., 1982). The amount of filtering depends on a variety of factors, including age; YLs are generally seen as having an advantage in language learning because "the adult tunes out various aspects of the language environment and ceases language acquisition efforts prematurely" (p. 92). Furthermore,

motivation is of high importance as it is possibly the most stable filtering factor. One of the most popular theories on motivation is Dörnyei's L2MSS (Second Language Motivational Self System). The model consists of three components crucial for an individual's motivation: the Ideal L2 Self, connected to the learner's own language learning goals (intrinsic motivation); the Ought-to L2 Self, connected to what the learner feels are their obligations and expectations from others (extrinsic motivation); and the L2 Learning Experience, connected to the learner's immediate environment and experience. According to Dörnyei, "the *Ideal* and the *Ought-to L2 Selves* are by definition teleological, concerning future motivational perspectives (as they concern imagined future end-states) and the *L2 Learning Experience* component is the causal dimension" (2005, p. 106). Motivation has been difficult to research when it comes to YLs as it is still unclear at what age they consciously become motivated to learn, i.e., at what age their L2 selves form (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). However, one thing is clear: emotions are extremely important in early learning; YLs "learn best what they like best" and that, in turn, positively affects their emotional state and boosts their self-esteem (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008, p. 263). Research on these emergent effects of language learning has been gaining traction in recent years. Rather than focusing solely on affective aspects that improve or inhibit acquisition, exploring affective aspects *resulting* from language learning experiences – or, as Ros i Solé puts it, emotions viewed as "the result of language learning rather than the point of departure" – can be a valuable avenue of SLA research (2016, p. 104).

## **2.4. English language learning experience as a key concept**

### **2.4.1. Experience**

The word experience by definition encompasses multiple facets of human existence; not only is it "the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation", but also "something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through; the conscious events that make up an individual life" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Simply put, our experiences make us and greatly affect everything we engage with in our lives, language learning notwithstanding. In psychology, David Kolb (2014) defines experience as a "string of discontinuous experiential moments" (p. 139) and views it as the key of all learning in his experiential learning theory:

The fact that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience has important educational implications. Put simply, it implies that all learning is relearning. How easy and tempting it is in designing a course to think of the learner's mind as being as blank

as the paper on which we scratch our outline. Yet this is not the case. (Kolb, 2014, p. 39)

#### **2.4.2. Past research on language learning experiences**

Language learning experiences (LLEs) have been a popular topic of study among researchers wanting to explore the personal side of learning which is not purely cognitive or easy to observe externally. Insight gained from learners' personal perspectives has been universally recognized as valuable, not only to the researchers but to the learners themselves (Lee & Patkin, 2017; Oxford, 1989; see also Ellis, 2004; Roberge & Phillion, 1997). Isolated LLEs are closely connected to the concept established in SLA terminology as language learning histories or LLHs, i.e., detailed chronological accounts of an individual's learning as a whole (Deacon et al., 2006; Oxford, 1995). Usually, this type of research is carried out via narrative inquiry method on a qualitative scale, allowing for a deeper dive into individual learner case studies. As is the case with all emic data, the biggest disadvantage is the risk of participants providing unreliable or inauthentic answers, whether consciously (e. g. due to societal expectations) or unconsciously. Another modern concept worth mentioning is 'experiencing' coined by Ros i Solé (2016) as being "away from the conscious/unconscious distinction made by Krashen and Terrel in order to focus on the personal worlds made by the language learner in his/her intimate journeys between the mind, the body and the social, and from the subjective to the intersubjective" (p. 21). Highly radical and abstract in its nature, this approach calls for exploring new data, like silences, images, objects, and reflections which make up a learner's personal world of language learning.

In Dörnyei's L2MSS model, L2 Experience is viewed as one of the primary sources of motivation, defined as "the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process", most notably syllabus and teaching materials, classmates and teacher (2019, p. 25). Dörnyei's original underpinning of the concept as immediate classroom experiences has been extended by other researchers. Thompson and Vásquez (2015) include informal or 'naturalistic' experiences, while Csizér and Kálmán (2019) go even further:

The L2 learning experience is a broader concept. On the one hand, it is a concurrent perception of cognitive and emotional processes, as well as external stimuli and circumstances that the learner experiences during the course of learning a foreign language in and outside the classroom. On the other hand, it can also be viewed as a

synthesis of retrospective contemplation that may continuously evolve after the actual language learning has taken place. (Csizér & Kálmán, 2019, p. 226)

For our research purposes, we will adhere to the same understanding to define the key concept of our study; we will use the term English language learning experience or ELLE since our focus is on learning English, and not languages in general.

#### **2.4.3. Reflection and remembering**

Remembering and thinking about past autobiographical experiences may lead learners to certain conclusions on why those were positive or negative, successful or unsuccessful. Known as attribution theory in psychology, the idea was adapted to education and SLA by Weiner (1972), who proposed four key elements – effort and ability (internal) and task difficulty and luck (external) – to which students attributed their successes and failures. The theory has since been applied to L2 motivation research; drawing from Ushioda's late 1990s interview studies, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argue for adhering to the following positive attributional patterns: attributing L2 achievements to effort, and *not* attributing failures to permanent factors like personal ability, but rather to insufficient effort. It goes without saying that, in most cases, learners' perceptions are blinded by emotions and other subjective reasoning, which is why teachers should try to direct their students to shift perceptions of their past failures as something that can be remedied so as to avoid demotivation (Dörnyei, 2005; 2014).

According to Kahneman and Riis (2005), one must be aware that retrospective evaluation (remembering self) is more fallible and less authoritative than evaluation of current feelings (experiencing self). That is not to say that retrospection is unimportant, quite the opposite in fact:

The experiencing self that lives each of these moments barely has time to exist (...) Unlike the experiencing self, the remembering self is relatively stable and permanent. It is a basic fact of the human condition that memories are what we get to keep from our experience, and the only perspective we can adopt as we think about our lives is that of the remembering self (Kahneman & Riis, 2005, pp. 285-6).

Some experiences are inherently more memorable than others due to their saliency and importance to the self (Howe, 1998). When it comes to memory, Kolb (2014) differentiates between two distinct types: semantic memory, denoting decontextualized data and knowledge; and episodic memory, in which the individual can pinpoint the context and time of a particular

event from their past. Research on LLEs, it can be concluded, is concerned with accounts of episodic memories, whether they be one-off unique occurrences (e. g. studying abroad for a semester) or similar and routinely repeated ones (e. g. primary school English classes). Whatever the case, introspection and retrospection enable learners to explore their own emotional and metacognitive processes inseparable from language learning (Oxford, 1995). By becoming conscious of their most memorable and most important early experiences, learners could potentially deepen their relationship with language learning as a life-long process and find new ways of motivating themselves.



### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. Aims**

The study aims to gain insight into early English learning experiences via three research questions:

1. What are the sources of early ELLEs of Croatian secondary school students?
2. What are the students' perceptions of their own early ELLEs?
3. Which of their early ELLEs do the students find particularly memorable?

#### **3.2. Sample**

The participants were first-, second-, and third- graders from three different state grammar schools in Zagreb<sup>2</sup>. The grammar schools in question differ in that each one offers different programs and are thus accordingly known as a language-oriented, a science-and-math-oriented and a general grammar school. A total of 220 responses was submitted by the participants; however, after careful examination, it was found that 19 of them were exact duplicates of previously submitted ones. This was most likely due to a possible error in how the responses had been processed automatically through the questionnaire tool used for the study. In other words, there were 201 unique respondents, four of whom were excluded from the final results after their responses identified them as careless responders; meaning that the final total amounted to 197 (N=197). Out of the respondents, 134 were girls (68.02%) and 63 were boys (31.98%). There were 100 (50.76%) first-grade students, 84 (42.64%) second-grade students and only 13 (6.6%) third-grade students. The majority of the respondents attended the language-oriented grammar school (92 or 46.7%), followed by the general grammar school (66 or 33.5%) and the science-and-math-oriented grammar school (39 or 19.8%). When it comes to their success in school, an overwhelming number of students expected an excellent (59.39%) or a very good (35.03%) final grade in English. Only 6 (3%) of the students stated that they had been learning English from birth, i.e., that they were simultaneous bilinguals. A similar percentage (7 or 3.55%) stated that they had not been taught any other language besides English in their formal education. The other students claimed to have learned, or to still learn, at least

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<sup>2</sup> Grammar schools in Croatia are generally seen as a precursor to university and offer a more comprehensible education, as opposed to specialized secondary schools or vocational schools.

one other foreign language. The most popular of these was German (78.17%), followed by Italian (30.96%), French (26.9%) and Spanish (14.72%).

### **3.3. Instrument**

The instrument employed in the study was an online questionnaire which consisted of two parts. The first part contained multiple-choice questions about the learners' language learning backgrounds and some demographic data. The main part of the questionnaire explored the learners' early experiences of English learning. The participants had to choose the categories of the sources of input of the English language that were most relevant for their earliest English language learning experiences (ELLEs), which we defined as all experiences in which one came into contact with English. Then, they were asked to specify their answers in the form of a short answer by providing concrete examples of those sources according to the categories they had marked. The penultimate question contained thirteen 5-point Likert scale items, statements that allowed the participants to express their opinions and attitudes towards their early ELLEs. Finally, the participants were asked to describe in detail a specific early ELLE that left a particular impression on them. This question was especially important as it allowed the participants to freely share and write about experiences they wished to single out. These insightful individual answers added a qualitative element to an otherwise quantitative study conducted on a larger scale.

### **3.4. Procedure**

The first version of the questionnaire was piloted on a small sample of young Croatian learners of English, most of whom were part of the intended secondary school student demographic. Input gained from the pilot helped improve the phrasing of some of the questions. The headmaster of each grammar school consented to the school participating in the study; parents were also informed about the study via e-mail, and the students themselves consented to participating by reading the introductory part of the questionnaire and subsequently clicking on the link to start answering the questions. The final questionnaire form was thus distributed to the students by their teachers online via link in their online classrooms or sent to them by e-mail. The questionnaire could have easily been filled in on a smartphone as well, making it more accessible. A total of 12 questions needed to be answered, none of which could be skipped in order to minimize any irregularities with gathering the data. The questionnaire was in Croatian, so all student answers quoted in the text which follows have been translated to English. All of the responses were voluntary and the students could opt out of participating at

any moment before submitting their response. The responses were collected over the course of three days in June 2021 and stored online through the questionnaire tool Google Forms.

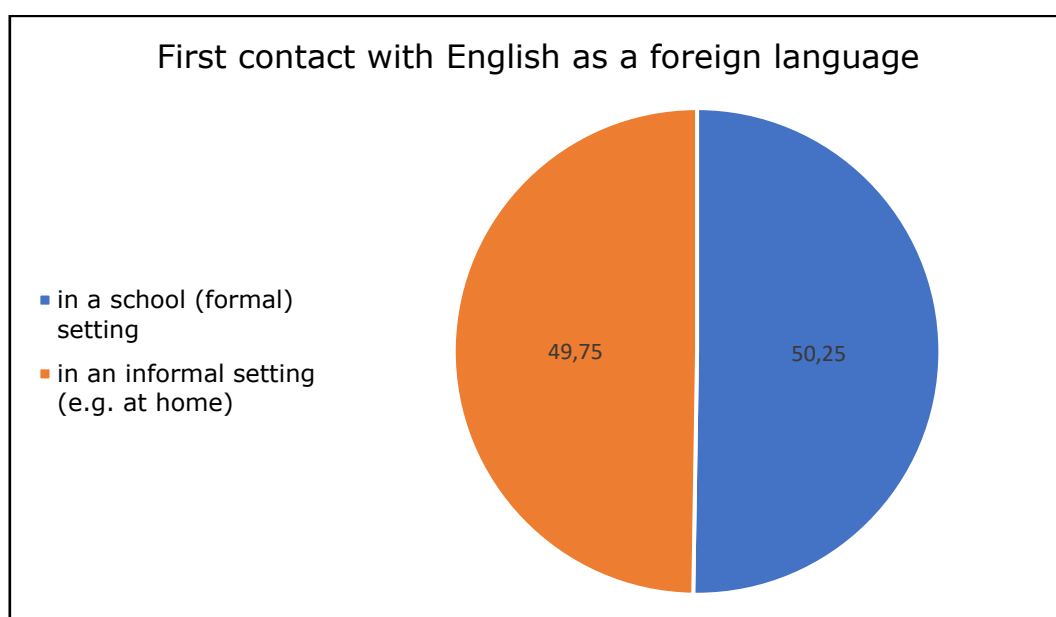
### 3.5. Results and discussion

#### 3.5.1. First contact with English as a foreign language

The first question explored the students' first contact with English, i.e., their first exposure to English. The difference we imply here between 'exposure/contact' and 'experiences' is that the learner does not necessarily have to consciously remember their first contact. That being said, the question was:

My first ever contact with English as a foreign language was: a) in a formal school setting with an English teacher (in school, kindergarten or preschool); or b) in an informal setting (at home etc.)

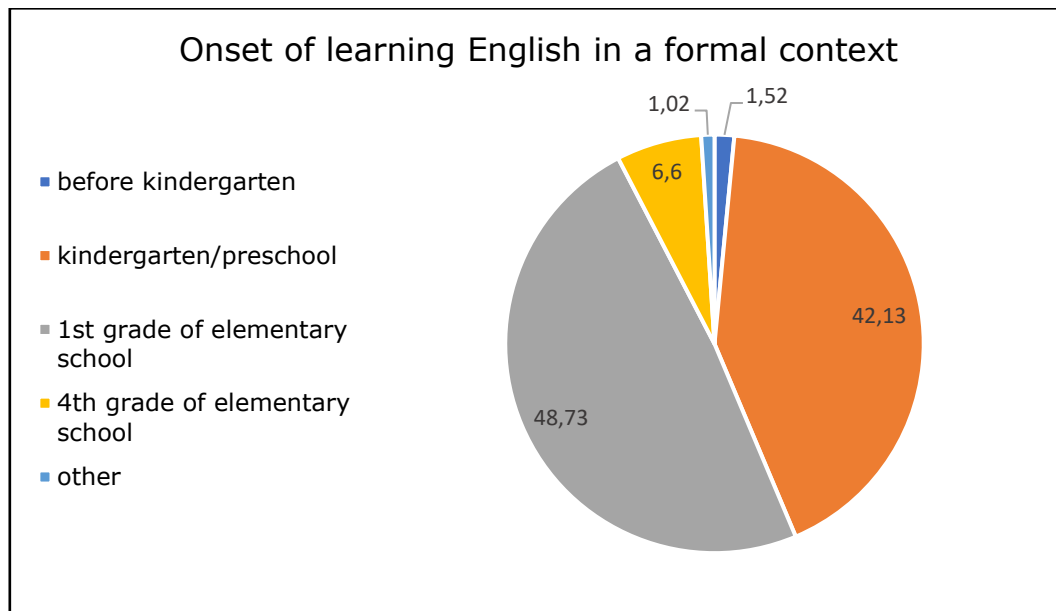
As seen in the figure below, the answers were completely evenly divided.



*Figure 1: First contact with English as a foreign language*

The second question inquired about the learner's background in learning English "officially" from an English teacher. The majority of the participants started learning English very early on – 42.13% in kindergarten or preschool and 48.73% at the start of primary school at the age of 6 or 7, with three participants learning even before kindergarten. Given that more than 90% of the participants had been learning English in a formal setting from such a young age, yet

still half of them were exposed to it even beforehand outside of the classroom as seen in the previous question, reinforces the notion of the omnipresence of the English language in Croatia, which has been frequently mentioned in past studies (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008; see also Kajin, 2018 and Hendrih & Letica Krevelj, 2019).

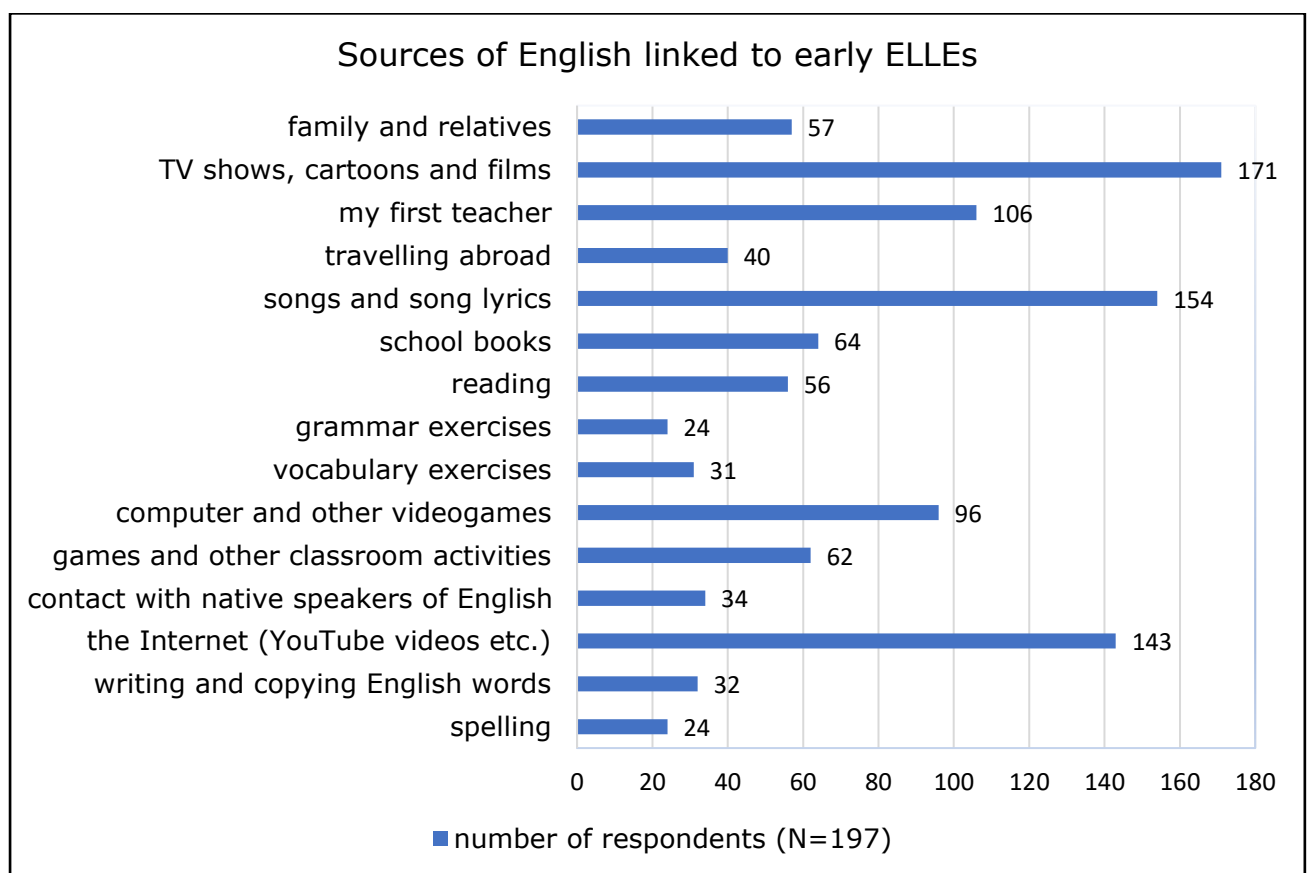


*Figure 2: Onset of learning English in a formal context*

### 3.5.2. The sources of English language linked to early learning experiences

The participants were asked to identify the sources they can connect to those early English experiences they could remember clearly, which tends to differ from their first contact, especially if it happened during their very early childhood days. Precisely because of this was the phrase “remember clearly” highlighted in the questionnaire, to emphasize the fact that the experiences in question left an impression of some kind (like any experience, by definition, does). When asked to specify her answers, one respondent unknowingly illustrated this difference: “I started learning English in kindergarten, but my first memories are of TV shows and YouTube videos.” In other words, it is possible for the learner to know for a fact that he learned English in a particular setting without himself having any recollection of it now because of the nature of human memory (and forgetfulness). If we reiterate the notions of episodic memory and semantic memory as explained in Kolb (2014), we are interested in episodic memories, episodes from students’ early English learning that they can visualize and recall in context.

The participants could choose any number of the 15 different categories of sources of input of the English language – family and relatives; TV shows, cartoons and films; my first English teacher (their accent and pronunciation); travelling abroad; songs and song lyrics; student's books and workbooks for English; reading (books and picture books in English); grammar tasks and exercises; vocabulary tasks and exercises; computer and other videogames; games and other activities in English class; contact with native English speakers or other foreigners who spoke English; the Internet (YouTube videos etc.); writing and copying English words; spelling English words. The option to add another answer was included; only one respondent used it to add 'board games in English'. The results are shown in the figure below.



*Figure 3: Sources of English linked to early ELLEs (N=197)*

Evidently, the answers that stand out most are 'TV shows, cartoons and films' with 86.8% of respondents, 'songs and song lyrics' with 78.17% and 'the Internet' with 72.59%. Around one half of the respondents also answered 'my first teacher' (53.81%) and 'computer and other videogames' (48.73%). The least popular answers were 'grammar exercises' and 'spelling', with 12.18% each.

The students were then asked to specify their answers by providing concrete examples of the sources of input they had marked. The students varied in the extent of their answers; some were eager to enumerate as many as a dozen specific sources, while some listed only one or answered more generally by copying the names of the categories they had marked in the previous question. Furthermore, 28 (14.21%) respondents did not want to specify or stated that they could not remember any concrete examples. Still, dozens of different examples of sources came up<sup>3</sup>. Most of these pertained to the categories ‘TV shows, cartoons and films’ and ‘computer and other videogames’. The most popular answers, with 8 or more mentions, were children’s TV channels “Nickelodeon”, “Disney Channel” and “Cartoon Network” and videogames “Minecraft”, “GTA (Grand Theft Auto)” and “Call of Duty”. Overall, the ‘computer and videogames’ category proved to be the most diverse, with the respondents listing a total of 43 different games of all genres, ranging from sports and simulation to shooter and horror games. The variety of the answers provided indicates that every individual had had their own unique experiences, but it is also another testament to the rich affordances for learning English available in Croatia. “A whole bunch of things”, “Everything”, “I was surrounded by the English language” and “My family uses English regularly, on a daily basis” were responses that indicate that some students had been accustomed to English from an early age and therefore could not single out only a few examples. A couple of students also included their own opinions about learning English in their response to this question, even though this particular question did not require them to: “I learned the most by watching shows, movies and cartoons in English. I think that that is the best way to learn English, by listening to others”; “Basically, school didn’t teach me much, but living in a community where English is spoken did”. The wording of the second response is particularly interesting given that the respondent in question is not a simultaneous bilingual, yet he perceives his Croatian environment as English-speaking. Furthermore, two students described the strategies their parents or they themselves had employed: “All cartoons I watched were in English with Croatian subtitles, later when I would rewatch a cartoon, my parents would cover the subtitles so I could only hear spoken English”; “A lot of the games I played (like Winx on PS2) were in English so I would copy the words and look up their translations in the dictionary”. The latter one is an interesting example of how modern content made primarily for entertainment can motivate a learner to improve their language skills by using traditional methods like physical dictionaries.

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<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive list of all specific sources can be found in the Appendices (pp. 47-8).

There are certain similarities between our data and the data from Lee and Patkin’s (2017) project of creating a database of English learning. Although carried out in a culturally completely different context (Hong Kong) and on the university student demographic (a large number of whom began studying English as teenagers and young adults), digital media and sources of English input stemming from popular culture appeared to be among the most widely recognized features in respondents’ answers about most memorable ELLEs (see section 3.5.4. onwards for results about the experiences that participants of our study singled out as such). Furthermore, as was the case in our study, the respondents shared their attitudes towards language learning and the strategies they had employed. This was a somewhat unexpected type of data to come up, as none of the questions inquired about this aspect of language learning. However, it is a good indicator of language learning being a highly personal matter and of the fact that learners are eager to share their opinions and their experiences; and, simply, of their wish to improve and to become more engaged in the whole process.

### 3.5.3. Perception of early English language learning experiences

The students’ perception of their ELLEs was explored through thirteen Likert-scale items. For each item, the students had to choose one number from 1 to 5, according to their own opinion. The number stood for, as follows, 1 = ‘I completely disagree’, 2 = ‘I partially disagree’, 3 = ‘I neither disagree nor agree’, 4 = ‘I partially agree’ and 5 = ‘I completely agree’.

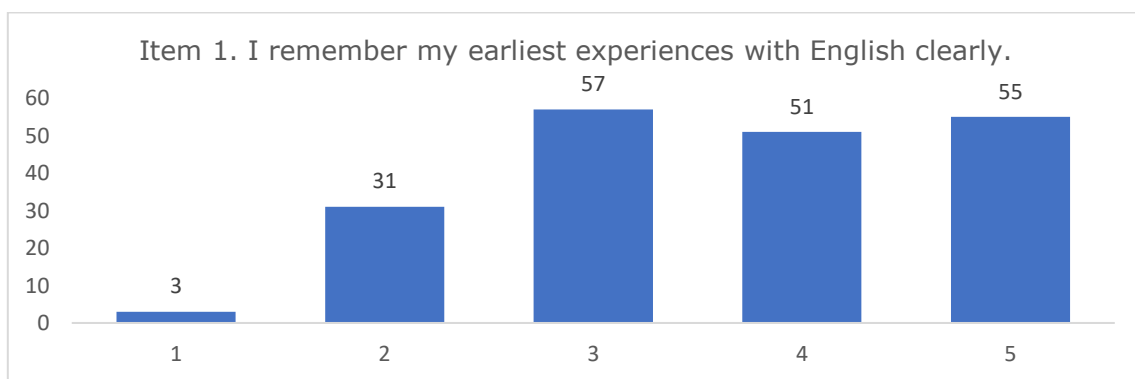


Figure 4: Item 1. I remember my earliest experiences with English clearly

The average value for this item was 3.63, and the most popular option was ‘I neither disagree nor agree’. Although this question is more a matter of memory, which is a complex issue within itself and goes beyond the field of this study, it provided some insight on how memorable the students’ earliest ELLEs were. The discrepancy between the two extreme options alone implies

that the earliest experiences were more memorable than not, likely due to the fact that they introduced them to a completely new and fascinating concept of hearing and learning a new language for the first time.

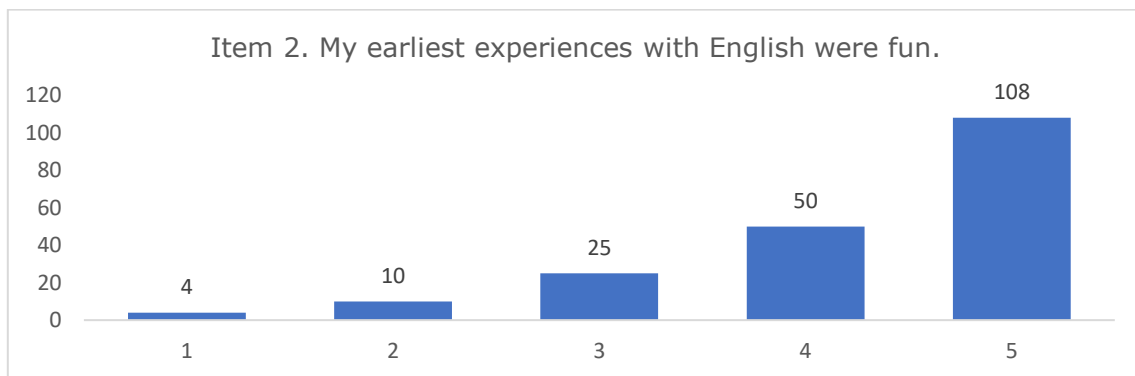


Figure 5: Item 2. My earliest experiences with English were fun

More than 80% of respondents agreed that their earliest ELLEs had been fun, with the average value of 4.26. As previously mentioned, very young learners are introduced to English through various content made for children’s entertainment. This is true for both the informal and the formal context of learning, as teachers increasingly incorporate various authentic materials into their lessons, from nursery rhymes and songs to computer games.

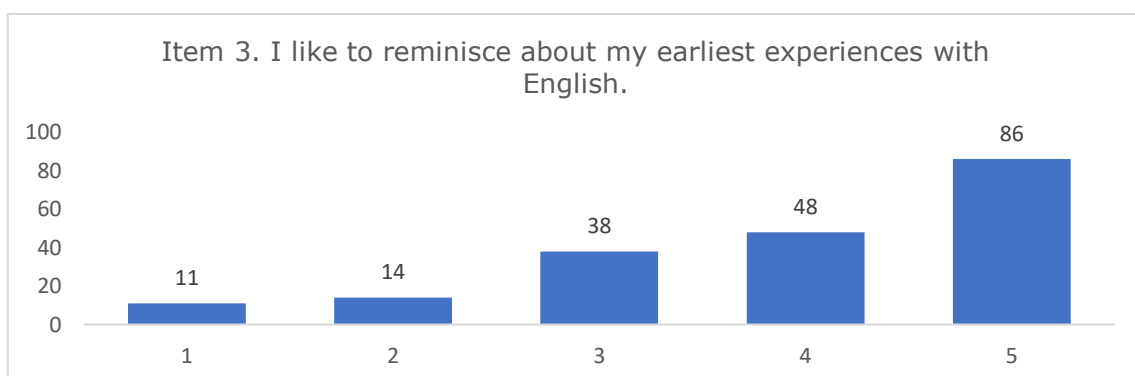
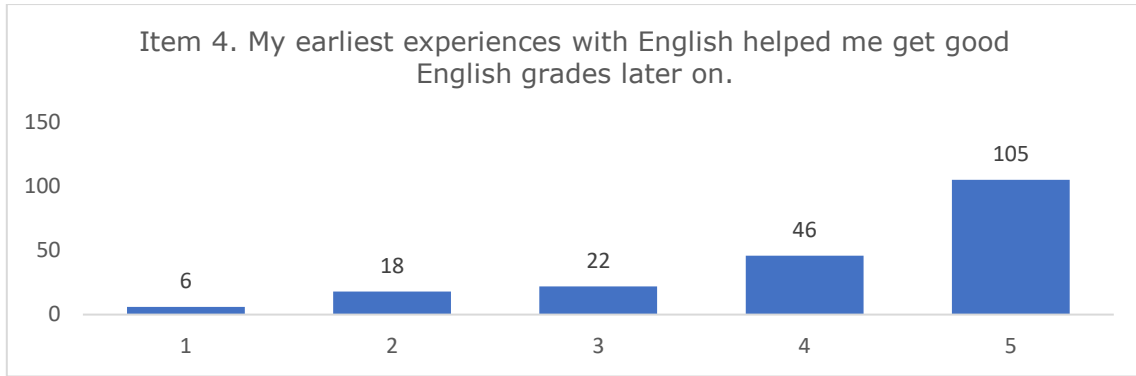


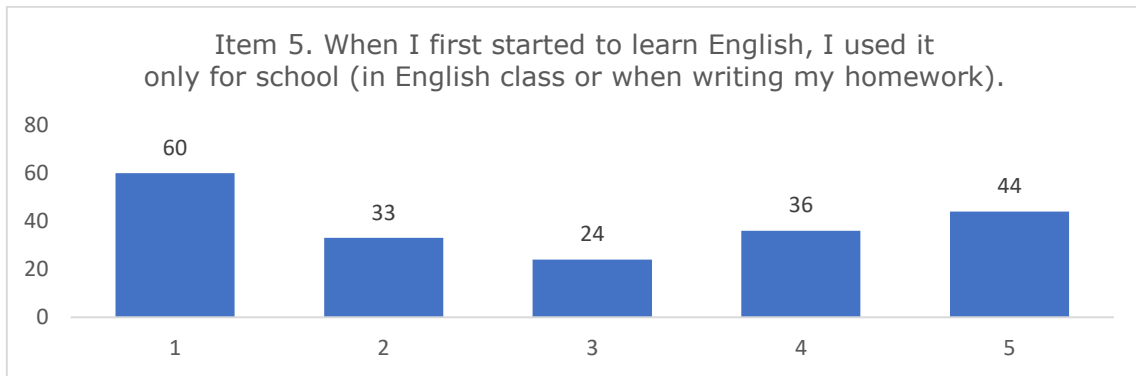
Figure 6: Item 3. I like to reminisce about my earliest experiences with English

Consequently, 68.02% of students reported that they liked to recall their first experiences with English; the average value for Item 3 was 3.93. The fact that many students’ first impressions of English language learning were positive is encouraging for EFL of very young learners in Croatia, which, we can presume, has only improved since the participants’ childhood days with the availability of new technology and materials.

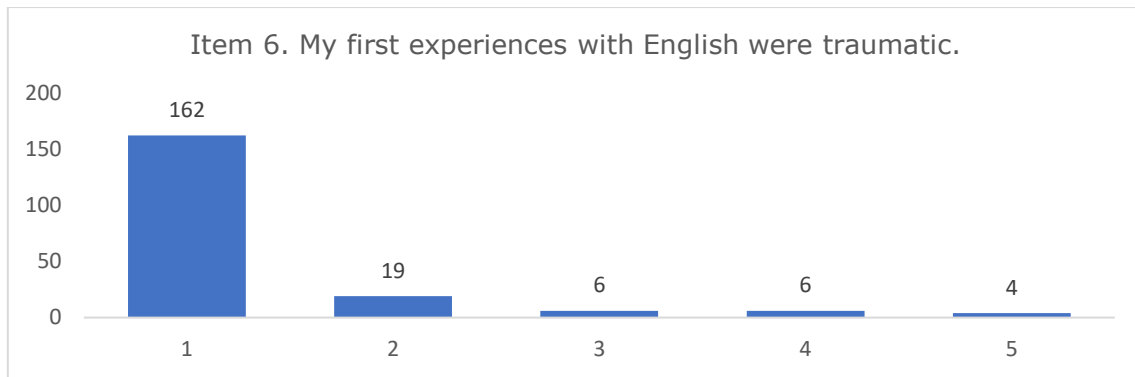




*Figure 7: Item 4. My earliest experiences with English helped me get good grades later on*  
 Next, 81.72% of students considered their early ELLEs beneficial for their subsequent English grades in their formal education. The average value for this item was 4.15.

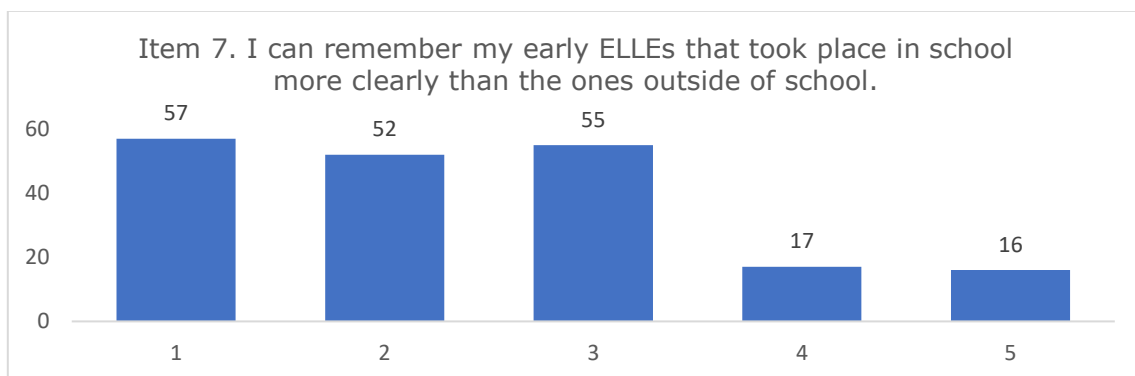


*Figure 8: Item 5. When I first started to learn English, I used it only for school*  
 Item 5 concerned students' early uses of English. As it can be seen on the chart, more students had regularly used English other than for school purposes, but the responses were very evenly spread with their average value being 2.85.



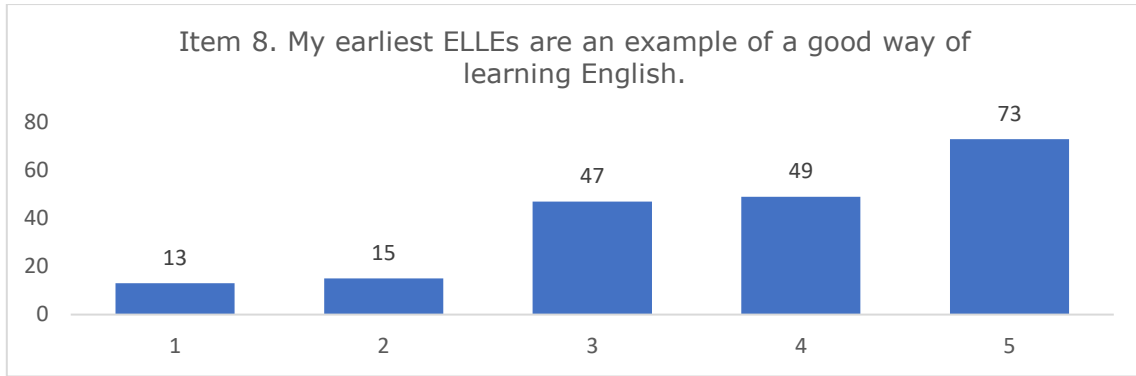
*Figure 9: Item 6. My first experiences with English were traumatic*

The sixth item examined the negative side of early English learning, inquiring about whether the students perceived their early ELLEs as traumatic. It is encouraging that there is a huge disparity between the two extremes in opinion, as 162 or 82.23% students stated that they completely disagreed with this statement, while only 4 completely agreed. Because of this, the average value was only 1.33.



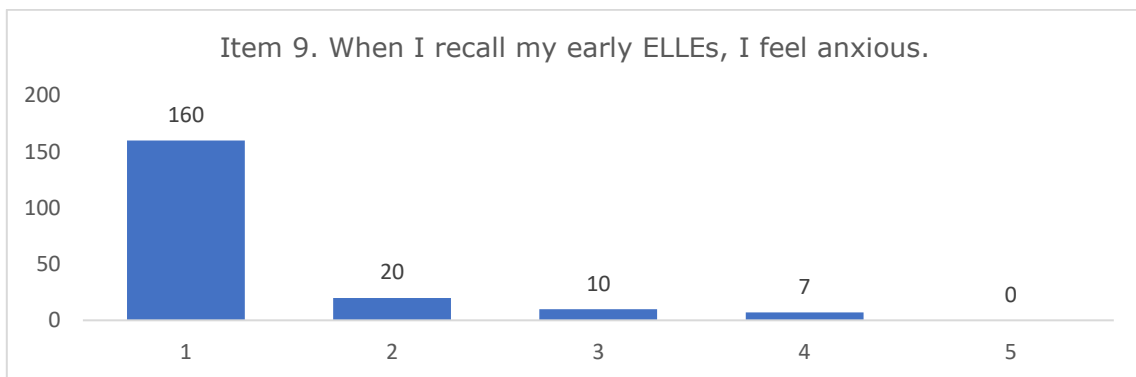
*Figure 10: Item 7. I can remember my English language learning experiences that took place in school more clearly than the ones that took place outside of it*

Similarly to Item 1, Item 7 dealt with the saliency of episodic memories of early ELLEs, but with regards to the nature of the context of learning. The average value was 2.41. As seen on the chart, more students overall did not feel that they remembered their school ELLEs more clearly than their out-of-school ones. However, a substantial number of responses fell into the ‘neither disagree nor agree’ option which can be related to the aforementioned complicated nature of memory and remembering. One must also be aware that some respondents did not have frequent out-of-classroom early ELLEs (see Figure 8: Item 5).



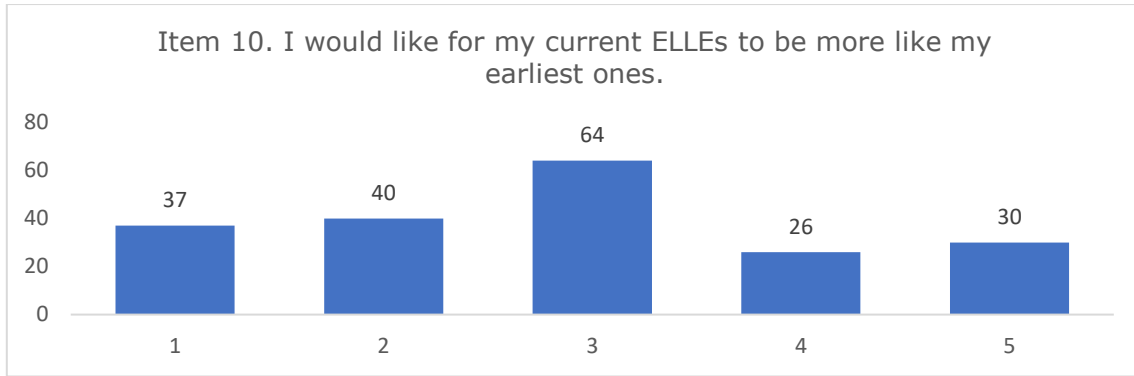
*Figure 11: Item 8. My earliest English language learning experiences are an example of a good way of learning English*

Next, the students were asked to give their opinion on the quality of their early ELLEs. The average value for this item was 3.78, with the majority of students stating that they had been taught English in a good way.



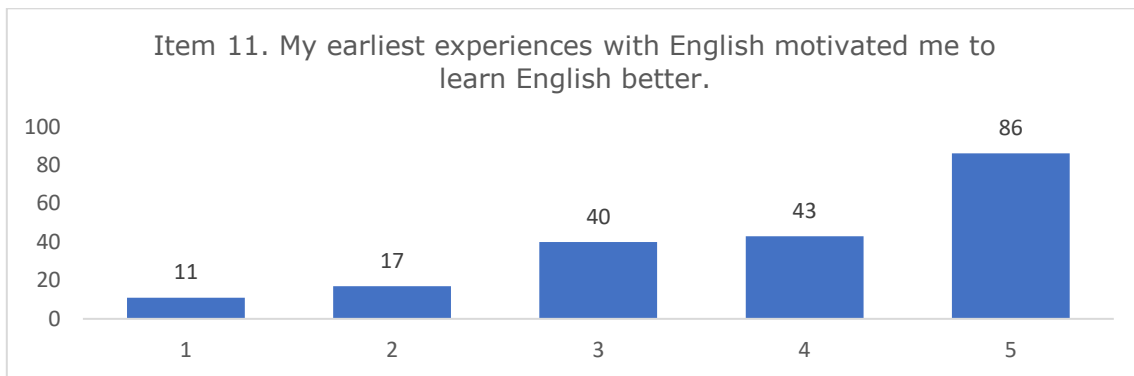
*Figure 12: Item 9. When I recall my early English language learning experiences, I feel anxious*

The score distribution for this item is almost identical as the one for Item 6, with the average value of 1.31. Interestingly, none of the participants chose ‘I completely agree’ with the idea of feeling anxious upon recalling their early ELLEs, even though some chose that extreme option when it came to perceiving their experiences as traumatic.



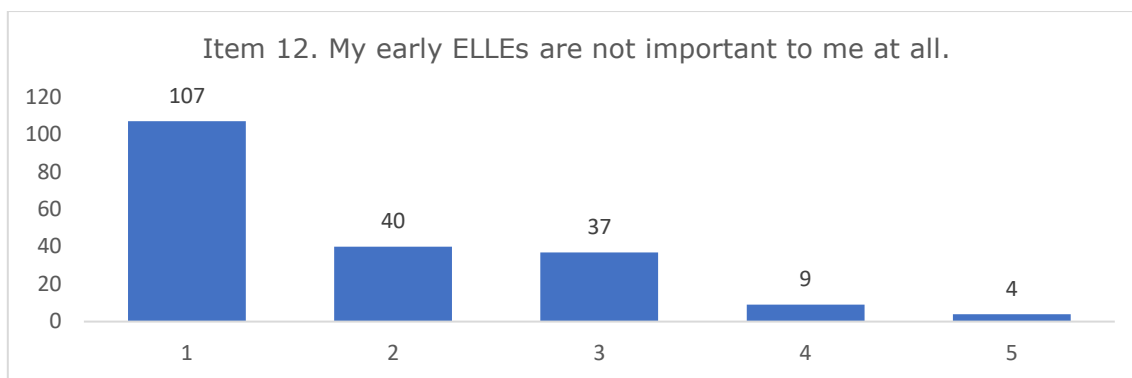
*Figure 13: Item 10. I would like for my current English language learning experiences to be more like my earliest ones*

The average value for Item 10 was 2.86 and the most popular answer by a margin was the neutral option, which indicates that the students did not feel strongly one way or another. However, more responses fell into the ‘I disagree’ portion, scoring at a combined 39.07% over 28.43% on the opposing side of the chart. Overall, it seems that the students were unsure about having the chance of learning English now in the same way as their onset even if they had had pleasant and enjoyable early ELLEs. We can only assume that one of the major reasons for this is, naturally, that the participants changed and matured as persons and English learners and therefore wish to have more challenging experiences than the ones aimed towards YLs.



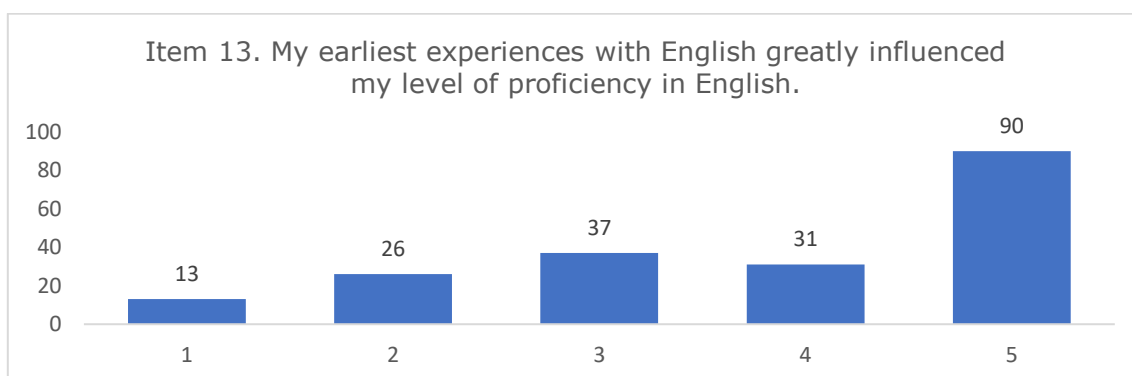
*Figure 14: Item 11. My earliest experiences with English motivated me to learn English better*

With an average value of 3.89 for this item, around two thirds of the students perceived their early ELLEs to have been motivating for their English learning.



*Figure 15: Item 12. My early English language learning experiences are not important to me at all*

The average value for this negatively phrased item was 1.8, meaning that 74.62% of the participants considered their early ELLEs of importance. Noted here is that not all early experiences necessarily have to be perceived as important in the academic, language learning sense, but that some students may have pleasant and cherished memories of the experiences that are personally important to them, e. g. for sentimental reasons.



*Figure 16: Item 13. My earliest experiences with English greatly influenced my level of proficiency in English*

The final item in this part of the questionnaire inquired about the perceived effect of the students' early experiences on their proficiency in English. The average value was 3.81, with the most popular option being 'I completely agree' with the statement that their early ELLEs greatly influenced their language proficiency.

Overall, the data from the responses to the Likert-scale items in the questionnaire imply that, on average, the students had very positive opinions of their early English learning experiences. The items with the highest value were Item 2. *My earliest experiences with English were fun* (4.26) and Item 4. *My earliest experiences with English helped me get good grades later on*

(4.15). The items with the lowest value were Item 9. *When I recall my early English learning experiences, I feel anxious* (1.31) and Item 6. *My first experiences with English were traumatic* (1.33).

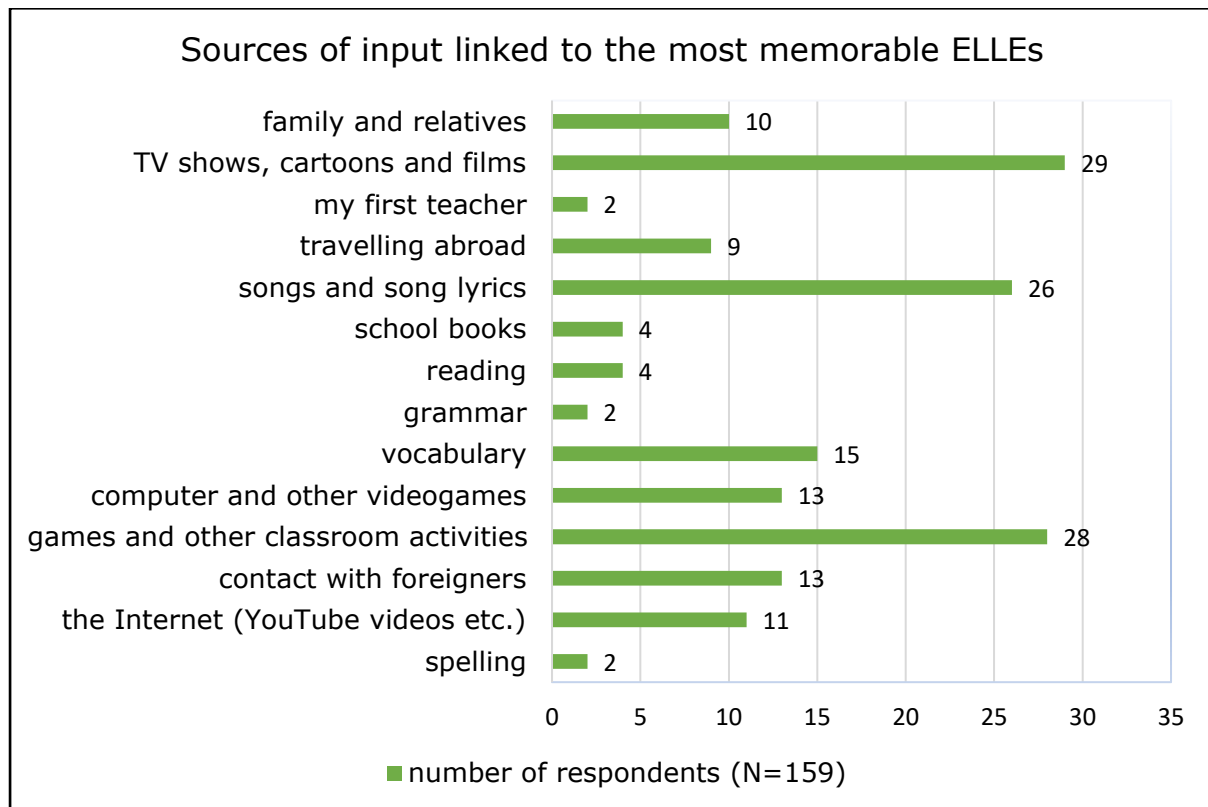
#### **3.5.4. Early English learning experiences that left a memorable impression**

Lastly, the students were asked to answer the following open-ended question: “Try to think of *one specific* early English language learning experience that left a particular impression on you. Why is this the experience that came to your mind? Describe the situation in a few sentences and with as many details as possible (when and where, what were you doing, who was with you, how did you feel, certain English words or phrases you encountered etc.)” Incorporating this question as a sort of a ‘semi-structured’ narrative inquiry was inspired by the aforementioned digital archive of learning study by Lee and Patkin, in which respondents were asked only two major questions: *What is your most memorable English learning experience?* and *What is your most memorable English reading experience?* allowing for “flexibility to recall, and at times, discover, memorable moments” (2017, p. 63). Not all of the participants responded to this question – 38 (18.78%) did not answer at all, whether because they did not want to or because they did not remember or consider any of their early ELLEs particularly memorable. A larger number of the remaining 159 students gave out simple, short one-sentence answers without expounding on them in much detail. They will therefore be analyzed only on a quantitative level to make a comparison between the sources of English input present in students’ highlighted experiences and those in the sources linked to general early ELLEs. Some of the responses that did, however, produce short language learning narratives will be analyzed individually. These stood out either as vivid personal memories or glimpses into learners’ individual state and thought processes, as reported by the learners themselves years after it had occurred.

##### **3.5.4.1. General overview of students’ most memorable ELLEs**

For the general overview of the data gathered from the closing question, slight changes were made to the categories for sources of input of the English language found in Figure 2. ‘Grammar exercises’ and ‘vocabulary exercises’ were simply changed to ‘grammar’ and ‘vocabulary’ to reflect that the responses exclusively referred to learning something for the first time, either grammar rules or new words. Additionally, ‘contact with native speakers of English’ was changed to ‘contact with foreigners’ as an umbrella term for all situations in which students used English as a means of communicating with non-Croatian people. ‘Writing

and copying English words’ was not mentioned in the responses to this question, which is why it was omitted from the chart. The results are shown in the figure below. It should be noted that in several responses two categories instead of one were accounted for in the data because of their perceived equal importance in the early ELLE.



*Figure 17: Sources of English input linked to the most memorable ELLEs (N=159)*

The most responses pertained to the categories ‘TV shows, cartoons and films’ (18.24%), ‘games and other classroom activities’ (17.61%) and ‘songs and song lyrics’ (16.35%). The least number of responses corresponded with ‘my first teacher’, ‘grammar’ and ‘spelling’, with these categories found in 2 responses each. There are clear parallels between the distribution of categories in Figure 3 and Figure 17, with TV shows (predominantly cartoons in an informal context) and songs (predominantly nursery rhymes in a formal context) appearing most frequently in students’ responses. On the other hand, the category ‘games and other classroom activities’ was evidently more prominent in the most memorable experiences. Students’ recollections about these included various games played in a formal context with the teacher (like Simon Says), and, notably, plays and recitals in English that the respondents had to perform in kindergarten for their parents. The plays and their performances stood out as unique and exciting events and as such proved to be salient episodic memories.

### 3.5.4.2. Individual responses

Finally, we will delve deeper into twelve individual student responses. As mentioned before, each response was translated from Croatian to English, with keeping the original language as authentic as possible. The responses will be presented and analyzed in no particular order, with pseudonyms being assigned to each student as a more practical way of referring to them.

#### 1. Abigail

*Well I'd single out what I've already mentioned [in a previous question] – the conference in the Westin [hotel in Zagreb], when I was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. I think that from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade is when you learn the most of a language, at least that was when I gained the most knowledge. Anyway we were at that conference which we attended for a couple of hours a day, the topic was violence prevention... we were having fun more than we were listening hahahha anyway there were people and kids from all over the world there so we all communicated in English. We played a variety of group games, did challenges, and then had lunch, dinner, dessert, we even made a movie in English with a Belgian girl. We talked with people from the UK the most, all in all it was very nice and worth experiencing. But I think that experiences with English depend EXCLUSIVELY on the teacher because my teach in elementary school was really amazing, and also on the teacher's creativity.*

Abigail is one of the few students whose most memorable early ELLE happened not in her early childhood, but when she was around 12 years old. The text above proved to be the second part of her response, as she had first written about it in her response to the question about sources of input of the English language as follows: “*contact with native speakers – THE BEST EXPERIENCE, we took part in the Enable project in elementary school, only a couple of people from my class went and for the full three days we only spoke English and attended English conferences, we met people from England*”. Eager to communicate her strong feelings towards the experience in written form, Abigail deliberately uses capital letters to highlight certain words and uses informal language and expressions. In more ways than one, her response resembles a text message, and one she would send to a friend. The experience was undoubtedly a positive one and allowed her and her classmates, without leaving the country, to spend three days inside an English-speaking bubble with people from other countries. She appears to have enjoyed these social interactions the most, as she singles them out from



the rest. While writing about her most memorable early ELLE, Abigail also reflects upon language learning in general. Drawing from her personal experiences, she finishes her story by concluding that the teacher is the key in language learning.

## 2. Bonnie

*When my sister and I were little, we would often play a game involving cards (I can't remember its name) with our mom and there were pictures on the cards with the word in Croatian and on the other in English. So that's how we would match the cards and learn English. The cards featured pictures of animals and objects. One time I lost the card with the frog, the lost card had the word in English and I came up to my mom and said: "Mom I lost the frogica." Because the picture was of a frog and I affectionately called it my frogica. The game was very cute and interesting to me so it was dear to my heart.*

Bonnie's most memorable early ELLE is, in its essence, a simple and personal childhood memory. She recalls learning English words by playing a picture card game with her sister and her mother at home, an activity they would regularly engage in together. In this particular experience, she vividly remembers worrying about a missing card and quotes the exact words she said when she realized she could not find it. What is especially interesting about it is its instance of learner language (see Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Having learned the word 'frog' from previous times she had played the game, Bonnie wanted to give the card a pet name and (sub)consciously turned to her first language for help. By adding the typical Croatian diminutive morpheme -ica to the English word, she created a portmanteau that only a learner with knowledge of both of these languages could create and fully comprehend.

## 3. Charlotte

*I learned English in a private school and I remember that when I was four, I was tested on colors, shapes and food and we got to plants. I remember that I was crying because I didn't know the word for oak but [the teacher] gave me an A anyway because it was kind of sad.*

Only a handful of the responses were accounts of experiences, like Charlotte's, which provoked negative emotional reactions. The experience she describes was possibly her first time taking an exam, as she was quizzed on words from certain vocabulary categories. She recalls the specific word (oak) she did not know, and this proved to be

stressful enough to make her cry at the time. Charlotte might have known all the other answers, but in her memory, she only got a good grade because the teacher felt sorry for her.

4. Daisy

*The first and most important experience I had was when my dad put on the song Green, Green Grass of Home for me. We were at home and bored so he told me he wanted to show me one of his favorite songs. I liked it a lot and to this day I still listen to it.*

Daisy refers to her most memorable early ELLE as her first and most important one. The song she heard for the first time as a child appears to be ingrained in her memory as inseparable not only from her father, but from the English language as well.

5. Evan

*In kindergarten we did a lot of songs, one of them was The Itsy-Bitsy Spider. That song was the most challenging yet, because the teacher used it to teach us vocabulary and grammar for the first time. I associate that memory with my “discovery” that English is a real language, and not just a thing to do in kindergarten where everybody makes up words. From that day I truly started to learn English, fully understanding what and why I was learning it.*

Evan vividly remembers the first time he realized that English was a real language with its own set of rules like his native language, and not just a kindergarten activity of inventing words. This “discovery”, as he calls it, is a prime example of metacognition, or of what Dulay et al. (1982) described as YLs displaying “a quasi-awareness of language, especially with regard to the notion that two languages are being learned” (p. 61). Evan can pinpoint the exact moment in which his conscious learning of English started, and describes the importance of this experience with a wonderful quote that bears repeating: “*From that day I truly started to learn English, fully understanding what and why I was learning it.*”

6. Felicity

*I had experiences with English before this one, but this is the one I remember best. Summer of 2012 in Pula when my older cousin showed me the game Wizard101. I immediately liked it, and that was when I started to write English*

*words [properly], because if you type them incorrectly, just “...” is shown. It’s been 9 years and I still play this game.*

Felicity recalls being introduced to an online videogame by her older cousin on summer vacation. What instantly caught her attention then seems to be an in-game chat feature, which highlights or even removes words misspelled by the player. Felicity evidently still feels a strong connection to the game as she still plays it to this day.

7. Grace

*I remember learning how to speak in English through YouTube. If I hadn’t watched videos on clothing, makeup, history... I think that I’d never have gotten the hang of English, speaking especially. I remember at first having problems learning English because I was trying to learn it by the rules (grammar and the rest) which I don’t think it’s possible because there are too many [exceptions] and a lot of the rules overlap.*

8. Graham

*I remember when I got my first cellphone and watched YouTube, most of it I didn’t understand but after a while things got clearer and I think I’ve learned 90% of my English from YouTube.*

Grace’s and Graham’s accounts are paired together due to their similarity of being connected to the same source of English input, that is, YouTube. Both of them see it as a turning point in their early learning. Grace views it as an alternative more natural than studying grammar rules, while Graham basically credits his English proficiency to the various videos he has watched. Their most memorable experiences are a testament to what Lightbown and Spada (2006) referred to as learners not learning what they are taught: “[Learners] are able to use their own internal learning mechanisms to discover many of the complex rules and relationships that underlie the language” (p. 192). This is something teachers and parents should be especially aware of when it comes to content available on the Internet.

9. Henry

*When I was a kindergartener, teacher Claudia would come to my house three times a week. She was born in the USA, but she moved to Croatia. Every time she came, she would talk about her life in America and teach me using books she brought from America. It was all very fun and interesting to me and I always*

*liked it when she would come round. In a way, through her teaching, I got interested in English and that pushed me to keep learning. I couldn't single out a special experience because my learning occurred gradually over a long period of time.*

Although Henry's account is not of an isolated experience, what he found most memorable is a series of experiences in his early childhood with a single person – his first English teacher. The private lessons he received at home introduced him to the language and to American culture. Henry reflects on these experiences as highly important for his initial interest and motivation in learning English.

#### 10. Iris

*Listening to children's songs in English. I remember that I was little and that nobody had heard that song before, and when it comes to knowledge of English, my peers weren't as proficient. I remember feeling special because I was the only one who knew most of the words in the song and could translate it to others.*

Iris recalls “feeling special” for knowing a song that none of her classmates were familiar with. Unlike the previous responses, she does not mention what the specific song was and instead puts into focus the positive effect that her early ELLE had on her self-esteem, specifically her task self-esteem (cf. Habrat, 2018). Consciously comparing herself to her peers, Iris noticed that she was at an advantage and readily showed her knowledge in class.

#### 11. James

*When I was about 5 years old, I remember that we were sitting in a circle in the kindergarten and the teacher would show us pictures of vegetables, farm animals and other farm-related words (e. g. barn). We had to say what was on the picture and the teacher would correct us on our pronunciation if necessary. At that moment I was on the edge of my seat because it was actually a contest, whoever guessed the most words correctly would get candy.*

James's most memorable early ELLE is a vocabulary exercise that his kindergarten English teacher turned into a contest. This competitive aspect of the exercise with the winner getting a prize proved to be highly externally motivating for James. Besides the vocabulary theme, he also recalls the teacher's use of explicit correction of pronunciation.

## 12. Kaitlyn

*My first experiences with English were not all that great. I could never do anything in class because the teacher was absent a lot and we kept getting new substitute teachers. I was the worst pupil in my class. Of course, I was bullied because of that and I didn't have a lot of friends in elementary school. Whenever a new teacher showed up, he would get angry at me for not knowing [the course material] from previous lessons. I would barely get B as a final grade in English. My mom would try to help me with studying, but every night we would both just end up in tears. I didn't like English, as a matter of fact I hated it, up until the 5<sup>th</sup> grade when I met my English tutor. She was the one who taught me how to speak English fluently, in just one year my knowledge of grammar and vocabulary changed drastically. I am very thankful to her. To this day she tutors me every Monday. Thanks to her, English has become my favorite subject and I'm now the top of my class in English. The best thing is, she isn't even a teacher. She doesn't work in a school.*

Kaitlyn's response could, in fact, work as a LLH, as she summarizes her formal English learning as a whole. However, within it are contained possibly the most personal and emotional moments from isolated experiences we have received – one that is piercingly vivid is certainly the image of Kaitlyn and her mother at home, in tears after another unsuccessful studying session. Kaitlyn might not have been the only participant whose early ELLEs were so difficult and unpleasant, but she was the only one who shared them in the questionnaire, and, quite openly so. She associates her early performance in school with being bullied, which, unsurprisingly, made her outright hate English. Fortunately, Kaitlyn's story does have a happy ending, which she ascribes solely to her private tutor who helped her turn her struggles completely around in a year. Most probably due to her previously described negative experiences, she also feels the need to emphasize that her tutor is not involved in the school system in any way. Kaitlyn's newly found success in English at the time evidently helped her overcome her demotivation and increase her general self-esteem.

#### **4. Conclusions and implications for future research**

The study explored several aspects of early English language learning experiences of Croatian secondary school students. Firstly, participants reported coming into contact with English through a plethora of various sources of English input in both formal and informal contexts of learning. The most mentioned sources of input that students could recall clearly were various kinds of digital media in English – TV shows, cartoons and movies; songs and song lyrics; and, the Internet.

Secondly, students expressed their opinions about their early ELLEs by responding to thirteen different Likert-scale items. Posed as positive or negative statements, the items inquired about the saliency of episodic memories of learners' ELLEs and the perceived effects that early English language learning had had on learners' emotional states and subsequent language learning ability. Findings from these answers indicate that students overall had very positive perceptions of their early English learning, with the majority reporting on it as fun and pleasant to reminisce about, as well as beneficial for their subsequent success in English classes in school.

Thirdly, students described a specific early ELLE that they considered particularly memorable. Similarly to their early ELLEs in general, the highest number of responses was related to media (TV shows, cartoons and movies; songs and song lyrics). However, games and activities from the EFL classroom proved to be a popular common source of input as well. Accounts of most memorable ELLEs also produced valuable data on individual emotional and metacognitive states, strategies and important realizations about language learning.

Findings from the study are hoped to encourage EFL teachers to learn about what their students' early language learning was like and what was most important to them. In this way, data we have gathered could potentially help teachers understand modern generation students better and inspire them anew in choosing more interesting sources of input in the classroom.

By gathering and comparing data from a large number of participants of the same demographic in one particular area, we have managed to get a good insight into learners' perspective of what early English learning was like about 10 years ago in Croatia. Since this is the first study of this kind carried out in the Croatian context, it brings about the opportunity for conducting similar studies and gathering and comparing data from participants of different ages or from students living in different countries. Furthermore, since our study was only exploratory in

nature, it would be interesting to study whether there is a connection between salient early ELLEs and individual learner characteristics like proficiency or motivation.

## 5. Appendices

### 5.1. Questionnaire: Croatian version

Dio 1.

#### Rana iskustva učenja engleskog jezika

Dragi učenici,

upitnik pred vama izrađen je u svrhu istraživanja za diplomski rad Narde Štulić (kontakt: nstulic@m.ffzg.hr), studentice nastavničkog smjera anglistike na Filozofskom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.

Za ispunjavanje upitnika treba otprilike 10 minuta. U prvom dijelu upitnika od vas se traže samo neki osnovni podaci o vama kao učenicima stranih jezika, dok se u drugom dijelu istražuju vaša najranija iskustva s engleskim jezikom. U gotovo svim pitanjima samo trebate označiti ponuđene odgovore. Preporučamo vam da, ukoliko ispunjavate upitnik na mobitelu, ekran okrenete horizontalno na drugom dijelu upitnika radi lakše preglednosti pitanja.

**Molimo vas da na pitanja odgovarate u potpunosti samostalno i iskreno, jer ne postoje "pravi" odgovori niti se oni ocjenjuju na bilo koji način.**

Istraživanje je u potpunosti anonimno i svi se podaci skupljaju isključivo u svrhu istraživanja. Ukoliko iz nekog razloga želite odustati od istraživanja, uvijek možete izaći iz upitnika prije nego potvrdite i pošaljete svoje odgovore na kraju.

Unaprijed se zahvaljujemo na vašoj pomoći!

**Klikom na DALJE/NEXT potvrđuješ da želiš sudjelovati u istraživanju:**



Dio 2.

### Osnovni osobni podaci

Spol: \*

- M
- Ž

Koji si razred srednje škole? \*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

3. U koju školu ideš? \*

- 4. gimnazija
- 5. gimnazija
- 7. gimnazija

4. Koju si zaključnu ocjenu iz engleskog jezika dobio/la u prošloj školskoj godini? \*

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

5. Koju zaključnu ocjenu iz engleskog jezika očekuješ u ovoj školskoj godini? \*

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

6. Govoriš li engleski jezik od rođenja (rođen/a si u inozemstvu i/ili ti je roditelj izvorni govornik engleskog jezika)? \*

- Da
- Ne

7. Jesi li u dosadašnjem školovanju učio i neke druge strane jezike? \*

- Da
- Ne

7. 1 Ako si odgovorio/la Da na prethodno pitanje, o kojim se stranim jezicima radi? (Ako ne, označi "Ne" kao odgovor i na ovo pitanje) : \*

- Ne
- njemački
- talijanski
- francuski
- španjolski
- ostalo: \_\_\_\_\_

Dio 3.

### Najranija iskustva učenja engleskog jezika

Iskustva učenja engleskog kao stranog jezika su sva iskustva u kojima si se na bilo koji način susreo/la s engleskim jezikom, bilo u školi ili izvan nje. Prisjeti se svojih najranijih iskustava s engleskim jezikom općenito, pažljivo pročitaj i odgovori iskreno na sljedeća pitanja:

1. Moj prvi kontakt uopće s engleskim kao stranim jezikom bio je: \*

- u školskom okruženju s učiteljem engleskog jezika (u školi, vrtiću ili predškoli)
- izvan školskog okruženja (kod kuće i dr.)

2. Koliko dugo „službeno“ (tj. uz učitelja engleskog jezika) učiš engleski jezik? \*

- od 1. razreda osnovne škole
- od 4. razreda osnovne škole
- od vrtića/predškole
- drugo: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Označi odgovore koje možeš povezati sa svojim najranijim iskustvima s engleskim jezikom i kojih se **jasno sjećaš** :

- obitelj i rodbina
- TV serije, crtici i filmovi
- moj prvi učitelj/ica engleskog jezika (njihov naglasak i izgovor)
- putovanja u inozemstvo
- pjesme i riječi pjesama
- udžbenici i radne bilježnice iz engleskog jezika
- čitanje (knjige i slikovnice na engleskom jeziku)
- zadaci i vježbe za gramatiku
- zadaci i vježbe za vokabular
- računalne i ostale videoigre
- igre i ostale aktivnosti sa sata engleskog jezika
- kontakt s izvornim govornicima engleskog jezika ili strancima koji su govorili engleski
- internet (videi s YouTube-a i sl.)
- pisanje i prepisivanje engleskih riječi
- slovanje engleskih riječi
- nešto drugo (navedi): \_\_\_\_\_

3. 1 Molimo te da pobliže objasniš one odgovore koje si označio/la u prethodnom pitanju; odnosno, ako si označio/la npr. računalne igre, navedi o kojim se točno igrama radi itd.: \*

4. Na sljedeća pitanja odgovori brojem od 1 do 5 u skladu sa svojim mišljenjem (1 = uopće se ne slažem, 2 = djelomično se ne slažem, 3 = niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 = djelomično se slažem, 5 = potpuno se slažem): \*

1) Jasno se sjećam svojih najranijih iskustava s engleskim jezikom.

2) Moja najranija iskustva s engleskim jezikom bila su zabavna.

3) Rado se sjetim svojih najranijih iskustava s engleskim jezikom.

4) Moja su mi najranija iskustva s engleskim jezikom kasnije pomogla dobiti dobre ocjene iz engleskog jezika.

- 5) Kad sam tek počeo/la učiti engleski jezik, koristio/la sam ga samo u školske svrhe (na satu engleskog jezika ili za pisanje zadaća).
  - 6) Moja prva iskustva s engleskim jezikom bila su traumatična.
  - 7) Bolje pamtim rana iskustva učenja engleskog jezika koje sam imao/la u školi nego ona izvan nje.
  - 8) Moja najranija iskustva učenja engleskog jezika primjer su dobrog načina učenja engleskog jezika.
  - 9) Kad se sjetim svojih ranih iskustava učenja engleskog jezika, osjećam tjeskobu.
  - 10) Volio bih da su moja trenutna iskustva učenja engleskog jezika sličnija onim najranijima.
  - 11) Moja su me najranija iskustva s engleskim jezikom potaknula da bolje naučim engleski jezik.
  - 12) Moja rana iskustva učenja engleskog jezika mi uopće nisu važna.
  - 13) Moja najranija iskustva s engleskim jezikom uvelike su utjecala na moju razinu znanja engleskoga jezika.
5. Pokušaj se sjetiti **jednog određenog** ranog iskustva s engleskim jezikom koje te se posebno dojmilo. Zašto ti je baš to iskustvo posebno ostalo u sjećanju? Opiši tu situaciju u nekoliko rečenica i uz što više detalja ako je moguće (gdje i kada, što si radio/la, tko je bio s tobom, kako si se osjećao/la, određene engleske riječi ili izrazi koje si tada susreo/la i sl.). \*

Dio 4.

**Došli ste do kraja upitnika!**

Kliknite na gumb PODNESI/SUBMIT kako biste poslali svoje odgovore.

Hvala vam što ste sudjelovali u istraživanju!

## 5.2. Questionnaire: English version

### Section 1

#### Early experiences of learning English

Dear students,

the questionnaire in front of you has been made for the research study for the graduation thesis of Narda Štulić (contact: [nstulic@m.ffzg.hr](mailto:nstulic@m.ffzg.hr)), student of the Teaching Stream Graduate Programme in English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb.

It takes about 10 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. In the first section you are required to give out some basic data about you as foreign language learners, while your earliest experiences with the English language are explored in the second section. Almost all of the questions are multiple choice. We recommend, if you're filling in the form on your mobile phone, that you turn your screen horizontally so you can navigate the questions more easily.

**Please answer the questions completely honestly and on your own, as there are no „right“ answers, nor are they graded in any way.**

The study is completely anonymous and all data is collected for research purposes only. If for any reason you wish to not participate in the study, you can always leave the questionnaire form before confirming and submitting your answers in the end.

We thank you for your help in advance!

**By clicking on NEXT you consent to participating in the study:**

## Section 2

### General information

1. Sex: \*

- M
- F

2. What grade of secondary school are you currently in? \*

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd

3. What school do you attend? \*

- 4th grammar school
- 5th grammar school
- 7th grammar school

4. What was your final mark in English in the previous school year? \*

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

5. What final mark in English do you expect to get this school year? \*

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

6. Have you been speaking English since birth (you were born in a foreign country and/or your parent is a native English speaker)? \*

- Yes
- No

7. Have you been taught any other foreign languages during your formal education? \*

- Yes
- No

7. 1 If you answered Yes to the previous question, what foreign languages are they? (If not, answer “No” here as well): \*

- No
- German
- Italian
- French
- Spanish
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 3

#### Earliest experiences of learning English

Experiences of learning English as a foreign language are all of your experiences in which you came into contact with English, whether in school or outside of it. Think of your earliest experiences with the English language in general, read the following questions carefully and answer them truthfully:

1. My first ever contact with English as a foreign language was: \*

- in a formal school setting with an English teacher (in school, kindergarten or preschool)
- in an informal setting (at home etc.)

2. How long have you been learning English “officially” (i.e., with an English teacher)? \*

- since the 1st grade of primary school
- since the 4th grade of primary school
- since kindergarten/preschool
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Mark all of the answers you can associate with your earliest English learning experiences and that you can **remember clearly**:

- family and relatives
- TV shows, cartoons and films
- my first English teacher (their accent and pronunciation)
- travelling abroad
- songs and song lyrics
- student's books and workbooks for English
- reading (books and picture books in English)
- grammar tasks and exercises
- vocabulary tasks and exercises
- computer and other videogames
- games and other activities in English class
- contact with native English speakers or other foreigners who spoke English
- the Internet (YouTube videos etc.)
- writing and copying English words
- spelling English words
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. 1 Please specify your previous answers; that is, if you marked, for example, computer games, what specific computer games were you referring to, etc.: \*

4. Answer the following questions by marking each one from 1 to 5 according to your own opinion (1 = I completely disagree, 2 = I partially disagree, 3 = I neither disagree nor agree, 4 = I partially agree, 5 = I completely agree): \* (*multiple choice grid*)

1) I remember my earliest experiences with English clearly.

2) My earliest experiences with English were fun.

3) I like to reminisce about my earliest experiences with English.

4) My earliest experiences with English helped me get good English grades later on.

5) When I first started to learn English, I used it only for school (in English class or when writing my homework).

- 6) My first experiences with English were traumatic.
  - 7) I can remember my early English learning experiences that took place in school more clearly than the ones that took place outside of it.
  - 8) My earliest English language experiences are an example of a good way of learning English.
  - 9) When I recall my early English learning experiences, I feel anxious.
  - 10) I would like for my current English language experiences to be more like my earliest ones.
  - 11) My earliest experiences with English motivated me to learn English better.
  - 12) My early English learning experiences are not important to me at all.
  - 13) My earliest experiences with English greatly influenced my level of proficiency in English.
5. Try to think of *one specific* early English learning experience that left a particular impression on you. Why is this the experience that came to your mind? Describe the situation in a few sentences and with as many details as possible (when and where, what were you doing, who was with you, how did you feel, certain English words or phrases you encountered etc.). \*

Section 4

**You have reached the end of the questionnaire!**

Click on SUBMIT to send your answers.

Thank you for participating in the research!

### 5.3. Sources of English input mentioned in participants' responses

Category	Specific examples
<b>TV shows, cartoons and films</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sitcoms (The Big Bang Theory, Friends, Two and a Half Men, Family Matters)</li> <li>• crime TV shows</li> <li>• children's TV channels (Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, Baby Einstein, H2O: Just Add Water)</li> <li>• cartoons (Dora the Explorer, Scooby Doo, Looney Toons, Avatar, Winx, My Little Pony, Peppa Pig, Maya the Bee, Mickey Mouse, Dexter's Laboratory, Ben 10)</li> <li>• anime (Pokemon, Initial D)</li> <li>• films (Disney films, Marvel films, family films and comedies, SF films, Barbie films, Harry Potter, Shrek, classic Grimm fairy tales)</li> </ul>
<b>Songs and song lyrics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pop songs (Barbie Girl, Counting Stars, What Makes You Beautiful, Bad Romance, Green, Green Grass of Home, Poker Face)</li> <li>• songs by popular artists (The Beatles, Sam Smith, The Weeknd, Katy Perry, Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, One Direction, Little Mix, Queen, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Lady Gaga)</li> <li>• children's songs, mostly from English classes (Alphabet Song, Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes, 10 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, Baa Baa Black Sheep, Wheels on the Bus, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Halloween, Happy Hippos, London Bridge is Falling Down, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, <i>Six Monkeys on the Chair</i>)</li> </ul>
<b>Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bilingual picture books</li> <li>• picture books for learning English</li> <li>• activity books</li> <li>• picture books which came with a CD for learning English</li> <li>• Gruffalo</li> <li>• Snow White</li> <li>• Little Red Riding Hood</li> <li>• Robinson Crusoe</li> <li>• Winnie the Pooh</li> </ul>



<b>Computer and other videogames</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• online multiplayer games (Minecraft, GTA, Call of Duty, Fortnite, Wizard101, PUBG (Player Unknown: Battlegrounds), WOW (World of Warcraft), Counter Strike, WT (War Thunder), World of Tanks)</li> <li>• mobile games (Clash of Clans, Clash Royale, Candy Crush)</li> <li>• online flash games (Frv.com)</li> <li>• sports games (FIFA, PES06)</li> <li>• consoles (PlayStation, Nintendo)</li> <li>• educational games (Sunčica)</li> <li>• role-playing games (Dragon Age)</li> <li>• simulation games (The Sims, Sim City, Spore)</li> <li>• Lego multiplayer videogames (Lego Batman, Lego Marvel)</li> <li>• adventure games (Rayman, Barbie games, Winx, Pokemon, Sonic, Ty the Tasmanian Tiger, Crash Bandicoot, Life is Strange)</li> <li>• action videogames (Assassin's Creed, Red Dead Redemption, Tomb Raider, Uncharted, Fallout, Tekken, God of War)</li> <li>• first-person shooter games (Battlefield, Far Cry)</li> <li>• horror games (Until Dawn, FNAF (Five Nights at Freddy's), Tattletail)</li> </ul>
<b>Games and other activities from English class</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hangman</li> <li>• plays and recitals in English</li> <li>• Simon Says</li> <li>• Bingo</li> <li>• <i>Will the Cat Get to the Cheese</i></li> <li>• Memory</li> </ul>
<b>The Internet (YouTube videos etc.)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English-speaking YouTubers (Pewdiepie, Vintagebeef, The Sidemen, Morgz, Danny Aarons)</li> <li>• let's plays</li> <li>• children's videos with songs</li> <li>• Gruffalo</li> </ul>

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## Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje percepcije i razmišljanja učenika o svojim ranim iskustvima učenja engleskog jezika (ELLE-ovima) dobivene u istraživanju provedenu putem online upitnika na uzorku od 197 hrvatskih srednjoškolskih učenika iz tri različite gimnazije. Hrvatska dugi niz godina njeguje tradiciju učenja i poučavanja engleskog kao stranog jezika (EFL). Djeca se susreću s engleskim jezikom u učionici od prvog ili četvrtog razreda osnovne škole, a izvan učionice lako su dostupni sadržaji, primjerice digitalni ili tiskani, na engleskom jeziku. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da sudionici povezuju brojne izvore engleskog jezika uz svoje rano formalno i neformalno učenje, a najpopularniji među njima su izvori iz kategorija TV serija, pjesama i videa s interneta. Većina učenika je izrazilo vrlo pozitivne stavove prema svojim najranijim ELLE-ovima, smatrajući ih bitnima za svoje obrazovanje i/ili od osobne važnosti. Sudionike se također zatražilo da podijele rane ELLE-ove koji su ih se posebno dojmili. Ova izdvojena iskustva važna su zbog uvida u motivaciju, emocije i samopouzdanje učenika na individualnoj razini. Bogata raznolikost iskustava sudionika podsjetnik su na činjenicu da svaki učenik stranog jezika ima svoju kompleksnu prošlost učenja jezika. Nadamo se da će podaci proizašli iz ovog istraživanja o ranim ELLE-ovima sadašnjih generacija biti zanimljivi i korisni nastavnicima i učenicima engleskog kao stranog jezika budućih generacija, te da će im služiti kao poticaj da promišljaju i nalaze inspiraciju i utjehu u svojim vlastitim prošlim iskustvima.

**Ključne riječi:** iskustva učenja engleskog jezika (ELLE-ovi), engleski kao strani jezik (EFL), formalni i neformalni konteksti učenja jezika, afektivni aspekt učenja jezika, refleksija