

**THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING LEXICAL
COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES
AND THE INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE
WITH YOUNGER LEARNERS***

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to point out the importance of learning several foreign languages at an early age, creating a solid basis for lexical competence which would in the next phase develop into linguistic, and finally into communicative competence. We will point out the theoretical basis of learning a lexicon of a foreign language, but also in what manner the mother tongue may influence this process and how. The results presented in the paper are a product of a two-year empirical research – a case study. The set goal has conditioned two hypotheses that we have confirmed, and which relate to achievements in lexical competence in a foreign language and a transfer that the mother tongue can cause. Analyzing the results, we concluded that an early exposure to foreign languages simultaneously enriches the lexical fund of both the mother tongue and all other languages known to the learner, in our case, the Italian language. In addition, learning foreign languages early, by developing lexical competence in the first place, leads to an improvement of cognitive characteristics of younger learners, the development of divergent thinking, acculturation and openness to new knowledge.

Key words: mother tongue, foreign language, lexical competence, younger learners, early learning.

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ЗНАЧАЈ РАЗВИЈАЊА ЛЕКСИЧКЕ КОМПЕТЕНЦИЈЕ НА СТРАНОМ ЈЕЗИКУ И УТИЦАЈ МАТЕРЊЕГ ЈЕЗИКА КОД МЛАЂИХ УЧЕНИКА

Апстракт

Циљ овог рада јесте да укажемо на значај учења више страних језика у раном узрасту, чиме се стварају чврсти темељи лексичке компетенције, која у наредној фази прераста у језичку, а напослетку и у комуникативну. Указаћемо на теоријске постулате учења лексике на страном језику, али и на начин како матерњи језик може да врши утицај на поменути процес. Резултати представљени у раду плод су двогодишњег емпиријског истраживања – студије случаја. Постављени циљ условно је две хипотезе које смо потврдили, а у вези са постигнућима у лексичкој компетенцији на страном језику и трансфером који матерњи језик може имати. Анализом резултата дошли смо до закључка да рано излагање страним језицима истовремено обогаћује лексички фонд како матерњег тако и другог језика који ученик упознаје, у нашем случају, италијанског. Осим тога, рано учење страних језика развојем првенствено лексичке компетенције доводи и до побољшања когнитивних карактеристика млађих ученика, развијању дивергентног начина размишљања, њиховој акултурацији и отварању за нова сазнања.

Кључне речи: матерњи језик, страни језик, лексичка компетенција, рано учење, млађи ученици.

INTRODUCTION

The view that the mother tongue (L1) limits an early acquisition of foreign languages (FL) in a way that leads to confusion or interference has been contradicted by Titone, Cummins and Danesi (in Vučo, 2006, p. 44). Not only does an early learning of FL not lead to undesirable effects, but it leads to a better development of children's cognitive abilities as well as an easier acquisition of each of the future foreign languages. The results of recent research suggest that learning two or more languages in early childhood accelerates the development of both verbal and non-verbal skills in children, which also positively correlates with the skill of divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility (Cummins, 2001, p. 51). The fact that children spend very little time in school learning FL, and that the results, or success, that some of them achieve, are not in proportion to the time spent, reinforces *the principle of interdependence and Cummins' hypothesis of the iceberg* (Cummins, 1992, p. 18). "The principle of interlingual dependence can be visually illustrated by the metaphor of the iceberg whose common basis consists of all languages known to an individual. Increasing linguistic knowledge in any language increases the overall mass of linguistic knowledge of an individual" (Vučo, 2006, p. 44).

The essential elements of courses intended for children are activities aimed at reaching a high level of motivation and a concrete contextualized approach to learning through practical activities (Šuvaković, 2014, p. 1004)

which is initially based on memorizing lexical items and formulas using limited but functional vocabulary.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEXICAL COMPETENCE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT AN EARLY AGE

Teaching and learning foreign languages, either at an early age or later, is aimed at developing the communicative competence in FL. Children, at the beginning of the learning process, show the need to speak in the target language (TL), because for them it represents fun, that is, a game as an empirically proven way of acquiring knowledge (Milatović, 2006, p. 93). In order to perform a speech act, which is a performance of the linguistic competence, an integral part of the communicative competence, children must master, at least in part, the lexical knowledge. (Chomsky, 1979, pp. 3-5). "To know one word means to know its shape, meaning and use" (Cameron, 2001, p. 78). Lexical knowledge leads to the development of lexical competence as the basis of a wider language competence, or the brick we use to build" (Meara, 1996, 35).

Nation, according to Drljević, makes a division of lexical knowledge into the active and the receptive knowledge. Knowing the spoken or the written form of a word represents the learner's receptive knowledge, while the proper pronunciation and use represent the active knowledge and provide linguistic production, i.e. the speech act (Drljević, 2014, pp. 20-22).

In the acquisition of the lexicon of the mother tongue, children up to 5 years old, but also younger learners in early stages of learning the lexicon of a FL, aged 7-11, use the so-called phonological working memory, which is of great importance at the beginning of the early learning of the lexicon. Based on the phonological features of spoken words or phrases in concrete situations (*bring the blue ball*) they form a phonological trace in their memory and quickly locate a new word even after a brief exposure to it. In this way, a predisposition is created that a learner permanently acquires a new word that is related to a particular subject or concept (Cardona, 2001, p. 102). The semantic working memory is activated after the phonological one and can be largely influenced by a positive and negative transfer from L1 (same).

According to Chomsky's findings (1959), the lexical and morphosyntactic development are two independent processes. Contrary to this assertion, constructivists believe that a morphosyntactic development requires a lexical minimum of 50 words, which they call a *critical mass*. In this regard, as a good strategy for the initial mastering of the syntax, Lieven, Pine and Dresner (1992, pp. 287-310) propose *frozen phrases* (solidified expressions), pronouncing certain facilitated syntactic constructions which do not necessarily contain the predicate or an adjective (for example, mum book, daddy keys), which greatly facilitates children's mastering of syntax

(D'Amico, Devescovi, Bates, 2001, pp. 124-152). Elizabeth Bates, observing 27 small children, aged 10, 13, 20 and 28 months, found that those who showed the greatest threshold of knowledge in the lexical sense had the best results when it came to initial-facilitated syntax (same).

The critical mass and the strategy of acquiring facilitated syntactic structures in the mother tongue suggest that a learner must master a particular vocabulary before starting to construct the first sentences in FL, thus acquiring the linguistic competence. Children learning FL, as it is done in the acquisition of their mother tongue, should be offered a lexicon that they can easily associate with objects and related situations (words related to games, family, school, animals...), since they first acquire the so-called content words (nouns, verbs and adjectives)" (Vilke, 1999, p. 183). A systematic repetition of the introduced words is also very important (Milatović, 2006, pp. 97-98).

It should also be noted that the acquisition of the FL lexicon can be quite different from the acquisition of the L1 lexicon. The learner has already developed a conceptual and semantic system of acquiring lexicon in L1, and the role that this experience can play can be twofold, depending on the degree of equivalence between L1 and FL. As the degree of equivalence is higher, the role that L1 accomplishes will be in the function of facilitating the acquisition of the FL lexicon and vice versa (Gass, 1997, p. 229). However, learners are not able to significantly increase their lexical fund simply by being presented with an input in FL, as is the case with the acquisition of the L1 lexicon.

*THE METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE EMPIRICAL
PART OF THE RESEARCH ON THE ACQUISITION
OF THE LEXICON OF A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE*

The aim of this paper is set in relation to the constructivist thesis on the indivisibility of lexical and morphosyntactic development and the existence of a *critical mass* of active lexical knowledge prior to a speech act, it is the importance of learning multiple foreign languages at an early age. This creates a solid basis of lexical competence, which in the next phase turns into the linguistic competence, and ultimately, into the communicative competence. The importance of learners' early exposure to the influence of multiple foreign languages lies behind the fact that they, despite *low* exposure, manage to master the lexical competence in a foreign language in a relatively short period of time, since they focus all their attention to a particular part of the lexicon they perceive as useful at a given moment and, therefore, remember it easily based on the trace in the phonological memory, which has already been discussed and which they already possess in the active vocabulary of the mother tongue. In line with this, we set the first hypothesis that *learners - participants in the*

research will show positive achievements in acquiring a lexicon of another foreign language (FL2), despite a brief exposure to it, which represents 72 school classes per year in the educational system of Serbia. The second hypothesis relates to the role of the mother tongue in the acquisition of the lexical competence in FL2, that is, we show that the positive transfer of L1 in relation to FL2 leads to the attainment of a higher level of lexical competence in FL2 with younger learners.

The strategy applied in our research is action-based and focused on analyzing the obtained results from lexical competency tests in the Italian language. We used qualitative and quantitative methods for the result analysis. The research was based on the application of the operational case study method. Our commitment to the case study as the operational method of research was a result of several factors. First of all, it is a method that allowed us to study a particular “case”, singled out from the overall social milieu, without breaking the link between the “case” and the environment. A group of first-graders from the elementary school “Jovan Dučić” in New Belgrade represents a singled-out case, since they were the only ones in the school environment for whom institutional language learning was made possible for two foreign languages (English and Italian) at an early age.¹ The research involved 27 first-grade pupils, Serbo-ponic monolingual speakers for whom the Italian language represented the second foreign language in 100% of the cases, since everyone had already learned English before starting school. The research lasted two school years, 2011/2012 and 2012/2013.

THE RESULTS OF ACQUIRING THE LEXICON OF A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE FIRST GRADE

In order to confirm the hypotheses, at the end of the school year 2011/2012 the first of the two tests on the acceptance of the lexical fund, both the active and the passive, i.e. the receptive one, was carried out. By means of a lexical video test, we measured the knowledge of the lexical units that pupils of the first grade were exposed to during the first year of learning Italian as a second foreign language. The instrument of the

¹ The fact that the case study does not have a specific method for collecting empirical data, but uses other methods (empirical methods of data collection: observation with and without participation, testing, content analysis, biographical method, experiment, measurement...) and their techniques (e.g., survey, test and interview as testing techniques), has provided us with an appropriate strategy for conducting the research. In addition, an important feature of the case study is the development, the history of the “case” (Milić, 2011, pp. 122-126). This fact was important for the selection of this operational method, since we were able to follow the progress of the same group of learners for two years: in the first and the second grade.

conducted measurement was a video test, that is, a PPT presentation that contained all the elements of the lexicon in a video form, while the examiner had all that was contained in the presentation in front of him/her in print².

Greetings

Table 1 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of greetings

<i>Greetings</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Ciao (Hi.)	96%	3.7%	0%
Buon giorno (Good afternoon.)	18%	11.1%	7.4%
Arrivederci (Goodbye.)	63%	18.5%	18.5%
Buona sera (Good afternoon and good evening.)	25.6%	29.6%	44.4%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	50.025%	15.7%	23.4%

During the first year of learning Italian as FL2, the first-grade pupils showed the best results regarding the active knowledge of the greetings: *Ciao-Hi*, then *Buongiorno-Good afternoon*, *Arrivederci-Goodbye*, and only then *Buona sera-Good afternoon (in the afternoon) and Good evening*. If we take into account that the classes of the Italian language mostly took place in the morning, it can be concluded that the pupils were least exposed to the greeting of *Buona sera*, and that the greeting *Ciao* was the result of a positive transfer from the mother tongue.

² There were three columns for each *item*. The examiner-teacher of the Italian language had the task to mark the first column if the pupil named an item in the Italian language correctly after its appearance as an image in the PPT. In some domains, e.g., greetings, images similar to a comic strip with empty clouds would appear in the PPT, and the teacher would ask questions: what do you say when you meet another person, how you greet the teacher, what do you say when you leave, etc. In the second column, the teacher had to mark the receptive knowledge tested in the second round by asking additional questions, or by expressing commands, for example, "take the doll", "show the blue color", "give me the pen", etc. The third column signified a complete lack of knowledge of the *item*, of both the active and the receptive fund. It is important to note that the atmosphere was relaxed during the testing process. In addition to the PPT, the teacher had a lot of toys, objects, drawings that were the subject of the test. Of course, during the work on this research, the researchers were of the fact that Krashen's formula $i + 1$ had been used throughout the year and there was a lexical test with 104 items, some of which represented facilitated morphosyntactic structures. Lexicon was divided into thirteen domains according to the areas it refers to.

*Introductions*³*Table 2 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of introductions*

<i>Introductions</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Come ti chiami (What's your name?)	88.9%	3.7%	7.4%
Mi chiamo... (My name is...)	92.6%	3.7%	3.7%
Come stai (How are you?)	37%	33.3%	29.6%
Bene (Good.)	59.3%	11.1%	29.6%
Grazie (Thank you.)	66.7%	11.1%	22.2%
Quanti anni hai? (How old are you?)	51.9%	25.9%	22.2%
Ho sette anni (I am seven.)	77.8%	18.5%	3.7%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	67.75%	15.33%	16.92%

First-grade pupils showed good results in the active and passive knowledge leading to introductions to their peers observed together, which is usually a common act in the first grade in L1, having entered the school system that was unknown to them and moving towards socialization, where the first step is precisely getting to know each other. The question *How are you?* is at the last position in terms of frequency, since at the age of seven it is rarely heard in everyday interaction in the mother tongue.

³ Checking the knowledge in the domain of introductions was done such in a way that the teacher gave precise instructions to the pupil what was expected of him/her, e.g.: "Now ask me what my name is, how old I am, introduce yourself, tell me how old you are, etc. If the teacher noticed an absence of active knowledge of some *item*, he continued by asking questions in the Italian language, checking pupil's understanding of the structure or the lack of it.

Numbers from 1 to 10

Table 3 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of first ten cardinal numbers

<i>Numbers</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
1	96.3%	0%	3.7%
2	96.3%	0%	3.7%
3	100%	0%	0%
4	100%	0%	0%
5	100%	0%	0%
6	96.3%	0%	3.7%
7	100%	0%	0%
8	100%	0%	0%
9	92.6%	3.7%	3.7%
10	92.6%	3.7%	3.7%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	97.14%	0.74%	1.85%

The results indicate that all 27 pupils perfectly mastered the terminology pertaining to the first ten cardinal numbers. Only one pupil did not know the numbers 1, 6, 9 and 10, while two pupils showed only the receptive knowledge of numbers 9 and 10. A positive transfer from the mother tongue is only seen with numbers two and three, not being present with other numbers. Based on of the results obtained, we can conclude that the first ten numbers have the same value in terms of usage in FL2 as they do in L1.

Colors

When it comes to the names of colors in Italian, the results of the first-grade pupils are the following: the best-known word is the one denoting pink color (*rosa*), then yellow (*giallo*), red (*rossa*) and blue (*azzurro*) are best acquired. The best acquired *item* is a positive transfer from the mother tongue. The least acquired word is the lexical mark for purple color, *viola*. Purple, on the other hand, does not belong to the group of primary colors, such as white, black, blue, red, etc., but represents a fusion of red and blue, so younger pupils do not recognize it at that age as an undifferentiated color, and anything that is not their sphere of interest is suppressed during early learning of FL. It is also noticeable that lexical markings of bright colors are better acquired than colors such as gray, brown or black. The question of *What color is it? (Di colore è)* and the answer *It is... (è ..)* are located in the fifth and seventh place, which can be interpreted as an exceptional progress, since these are short sentences.

Table 4 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of items from the domain of colors

<i>Colors</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
1. Bianco (white)	74.1%	14.8%	11.1%
2. Giallo (yellow)	85.2%	11.1%	3.7%
3. Arancione (orange)	56.6%	29.6%	14.8%
4. Rosso (red)	85.2%	7.4%	7.4%
5. Rosa (pink)	92.6%	3.7%	3.7%
6. Azzurro (blue)	81.5%	3.7%	14.8%
7. Blu (dark blue)	66.7%	11.1%	22.25%
8. Viola (purple)	29.6%	25.9%	44.4%
9. Verde (green)	70.4%	25.9%	3.7%
10. Grigio (gray)	55.6%	14.8%	29.6%
11. Marrone (brown)	51.9%	14.8%	33.3%
12. Nero (black)	51.9%	14.8%	33.3%
13. Di che colore è? (What color is it?)	63%	22.2%	7.4%
14. è... (It is...)	74.1%	7.4%	11.1%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	67.02%	14.8%	17.19%

Objects in the Environment

Table 5 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of objects in the environment

<i>Objects in the environment</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Sedia (chair)	55.6%	18.5%	25.9%
Banco (bench)	40.7%	18.5%	40.70%
Porta (door)	51.9%	18.5%	29.6%
Finestra (window)	74.1%	11.1%	14.80%
Lavagna (board)	44.4%	22.2%	33.2%
Spugna (sponge)	37%	25.9%	37%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	50.63%	19.12%	30.2%

Based on the pupils' success in the lexical test, the conclusion is that the words were acquired in the following order: 1. Window; 2. Chair; 3. Door; 4. Board; 5. Bench; 6. Sponge. The frequency of words such as *board*, *bench* and *sponge* is very low in L1 before going to school, having in mind that children learn and acquire words that they feel are beneficial

to them, which these words are certainly not prior school, while *door*, *window* and *chair* are words of high frequency in L1, leading us again to the confirmation of Cummins' hypothesis that we first learn unfamiliar words we often use in the mother tongue.

*School supplies*⁴

Table 6 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of school supplies

<i>School supplies</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Zaino (backpack)	66.75	7.4%	25.9%
Astuccio (pencil case)	74.1%	18.5%	7.4%
Matita (pencil)	63%	22.2%	11.8%
Gomma (rubber)	85.2%	11.1%	3.7%
Penna (pen)	59.3%	18.5%	22.2%
Pennarelli (marker pens)	66.7%	7.4%	22.2%
Righello (ruler)	70.4%	7.4%	22.2%
Temperino (pencil sharpener)	55.6%	22.2%	22%
Libro (book)	59.3%	22.2%	18.5%
Quaderno (notebook)	59.3%	29.6%	11.1%
Colla (glue)	59.3%	29.6%	11.1%
Forbici (scissors)	51.9%	22.2%	25.9%
Che cosa c'è sul banco? (What's on the bench?)	7.4%	29.6%	63%
Che cosa c'è nello zaino? (What's in the backpack?)	18.5%	22.2%	59.3%
Di chi è...? (Whose...?)	7.4%	22.2%	66.7%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	49.65%	19.49%	26.21

⁴ In the domain of school supplies, we encounter three facilitated morphosyntactic structures, questions, that appear to be very poorly acquired. They were included in the research because they were present both in the video material and in the textbook in the dialogues between the characters.

Based on the obtained results, the first-grade pupils showed the highest level of knowledge of the following words related to school supplies: 1. Rubber (gomma), which can be interpreted as a positive transfer from L1; 2. Pencil case (astuccio); 3. Ruler (righello); 4. Backpack (zaino), and their value in terms of usage is very high, and therefore the results correlate positively. The questions, facilitated morphosyntactic structures, were least acquired, in accordance with Chomsky's standpoint on the critical lexical mass.

Animals

Table 7 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of animals

<i>Animals</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Animale (animal)	7.4%	22.2%	70.4%
Cocodrillo (crocodile)	88.9%	3.7%	3.7%
Gatto (cat)	85.2%	11.1%	3.7%
Cane (dog)	66.7%	18.5%	14.8%
Asinello (donkey)	40.7%	29.6%	29.6%
Pecora (sheep)	40.7%	29.6%	29.6%
Rana (frog)	66.7%	11.1%	22.2%
Mucca (cow)	81.5%	7.4%	11.1%
Pesce (fish)	37%	29.6%	33.3%
Come fa il/la... (What does...say?)	25.95	37%	37%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	54.07%	19.98%	25.54%

The best acquired lexical items are: 1. Crocodile (since the pupils had learned the song *Il cocodrillo come fa* before the test); 2. Cat; 3. Cow; 4. Dog; 5. Frog ... All the words that denote animals, and are found in the aforementioned song, are among the first five most successfully acquired, as the length of exposure to a particular structure had an impact on the memorization process in this case, precisely through the phonological memory mentioned previously (note that all the aforementioned words were learned through a song). However, although the phrase *Il cocodrillo come*

fa..., i.e., *What does the crocodile say?* is mentioned in the song, the first-grade pupils obviously memorized it as a formula and did not recognize the structure without the possibility of analytical thinking, so it is in the second to last place in terms of acquisition. The last one is the general term *animal-animale*, which 70% of pupils did not acquire, leading to the conclusion that they still do not utilize a general way of thinking, but are based on the individual.

Family

Table 8 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of family members

<i>Family members</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Madre (mother)	59.3%	25.9%	12.8%
Mamma (mum)	100%	0%	0%
Padre (father)	66.7%	18.5%	14.8%
Papà (dad)	92.6%	0%	7.4%
Fratello (brother)	63%	14.8%	18.5%
Sorella (sister)	59.3%	14.8%	25.9%
Nonno (grandpa)	33%	22.2%	44.4%
Nonna (grandma)	40.7%	22.2%	37%
Zio (uncle)	29.6%	11.1%	59.3%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	60.47%	14.39%	25.14%

As you can see, the word *mamma*, although pronounced differently in Italian, due to a positive transfer from L1, has a score of 100%. Dad (*papà*) is in the second place, which, although not a product of transfer as the first one, belongs to the group of diminutives. Children aged seven usually refer to their parents as *mom* and *dad*, rather than *mother* and *father*, so they have better acquired exactly the words they need in their mother tongue, which brings us back to the significance of Cummins' metaphor of the *Iceberg* and a common language basis that is created in cases of the simultaneous learning of two or more languages. *Padre-father* is in the third place, then *Fratello-brother*, and only then *Madre-mother*, etc.

Christmas and New Year

*Table 9 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon
in the domain of Christmas and New Year*

<i>Christmas and New Year</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Albero di Natale (Christmas tree)	51.9%	22.5%	22.2%
Addobbi (ornaments)	14.8%	22.2%	63%
Regalo (presents)	25.9%	18.5%	55.6%
Pupazzo di neve (snowman)	37%	22.2%	40.7%
Babbo Natale (Santa Claus)	51.9%	29.6%	18.6%
Palla di neve (snowball)	18.5%	14.8%	66.7%
Felice Anno Nuovo (Happy New Year!)	0%	14.8%	85.2%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	28.58%	20.66%	50.76%

The results indicate that over 50% of pupils actively acquired the notions: 1. *Albero di Natale- Christmas tree*; 2. *Babbo natale- Santa Claus*; 3. *Pupazzo di Neve- snowman*; 4. *Regalo-present*. All of the words above are highly frequent in the mother tongue and at the age of seven have a great usage value. In the last place is the phrase used for congratulating the New Year -*Felice Anno Nuovo*. None of the 27 first-grade pupils showed active knowledge of the phrase, while 14% of the pupils showed the receptive knowledge. It is important to note that these items have no usage value in children's everyday lives, as well as the fact that the exposure to these structures is very brief and refers to a certain part of the calendar year.

Birthdays

The order of the acquired words looks as follows: 1. *Cake* (positive transfer from L1); 2. *Buon Compleanno-happy birthday*; 3. *Candeline-candles*; 4. *Auguri-Best wishes*. An extremely high level of absolute non-recognition of the words related to birthdays is noticeable with all items except the *cake*, and this score is over 70%. In line with the results, we can conclude that the weakest results so far have been shown in relation to the domain of birthdays. The pupils are not exposed to aforementioned lexical units every day even in L1, and such frequency is one of the key factors with which the results correlate.

Table 10 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of birthdays

<i>Birthdays</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Buon compleanno (Happy birthday)	14.8%	37%	48.1%
Auguri (Best wishes)	7.4%	14.8%	77.8%
Torta (cake)	81.5%	11.1%	7.4%
Candeline (candles)	11.1%	18.5%	70.4%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	28.7%	20.35%	50.5%

Toys

Table 11 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of toys

<i>Toys</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Giocattoli (toys)	48.1%	25.9%	25.9%
Figurine (album slides)	74.1%	14.8%	11.1%
Orsetto (teddy bear)	48.1%	29.6%	22.2%
Trenino (train)	66.7%	18.5%	14.8%
Bambola (doll)	63%	14.8%	22.2%
Bicicletta (bicycle)	29.6%	44.4%	25.9%
Pallone (ball)	25.9%	25.9%	48.1%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	50.79%	24.84%	24.37%

The best results are related to the active knowledge of the following lexical units: 1. *Figurine*; 2. *Trenino*; 3. *Bambola*; 4. *Orsetto*; 5. *Giocattoli*; 6. *Bicicletta*; 7. *Pallone*. Interestingly, two of the seven toys that are least well-acquired are the ones most commonly used by children of this age: a bicycle and a ball. Based on this, it can be assumed that the cause of this phenomenon is a poor exposure of pupils to the said lexicon during the course, in terms of their physical presence in the visual field, while all the other toys were in the classroom. We wish to remind that we previously

noted that, in adopting L1, children first learn the words they see at the moment of speech, and we can conclude that the same process applies to the early learning of FL.

Rooms and House Items

Table 12 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of rooms and house items

<i>Rooms and house items</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Casa (house)	40.7%	14.8%	44.4%
Camera (room)	74.1%	0%	22.2%
Salotto (living room)	40.7%	22.2%	37%
Cucina (kitchen)	51.9%	22.2%	25.9%
Bagno (bathroom)	37%	18.5%	44.4%
Letto (bed)	44.4%	3.7%	51.9%
Televisore (television set)	44.4%	22.2%	33.3%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	47.6%	14.8%	40.6%

With first-grade pupils, the percentage of the active knowledge and the lack of knowledge of the lexicon related to the house is around 50%, while the percentage of the receptive knowledge is about 20%. The order of the items in terms of successful acquisition is as follows: 1. *Camera-room*; 2. *Cucina-kitchen*; 3. *Letto-bed*; 4. *Television-television set*; 5. *Casa-house*; 6. *Bagno-bathroom*. As we can conclude, a high frequency lexicon from L1 correlates with the order in FL2.

Adjectives⁵

As it can be concluded, the structures that pupils were most often exposed to during the course became most successfully acquired: 1. *Assente-absent*; 2. *Presente-present*. The length of exposure to these two items and their memorization through the phonological trace resulted in none of the 27 pupils demonstrating the lack of knowledge.

⁵ Only four adjectives in the table were the subject of early learning of the Italian language during the school year.

Table 13 Results of the first-grade pupils' knowledge of the lexicon in the domain of adjectives

<i>Adjectives</i>	Active knowledge	Receptive knowledge	Lack of knowledge
Piccolo (small)	33.2%	22.2%	44.4%
Grande (big)	22.2%	29.6%	48.1%
Presente (present)	92.6%	7.4%	0.0%
Assente (absent)	96.3%	3.7%	0.0%
Total % of active and receptive knowledge, or lack of knowledge	61.07%	15.73%	23.2%

The share of the active knowledge of 104 lexical units among the first-grade pupils amounts to 54.9%; the receptive knowledge 16.62% and the lack of knowledge 27.38%.

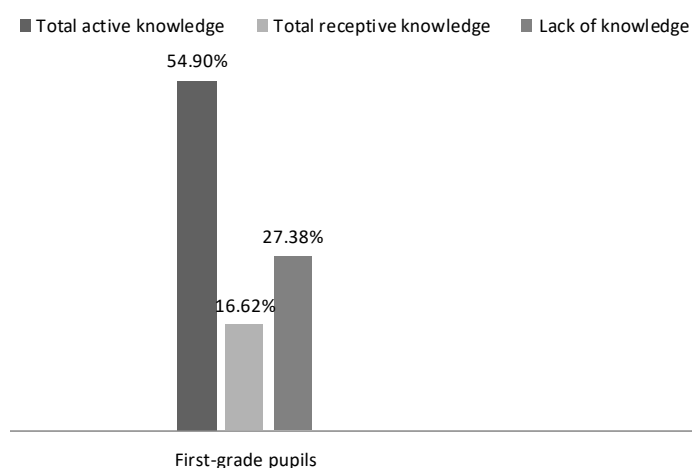


Chart 1 The distribution of the active knowledge, the receptive knowledge and the lack of knowledge of lexical units on the 2011/2012 test.

Identical testing was carried out during the next school year 2012/2013. It should be emphasized that during the second research year, the number of classes increased from two to three classes per week in accordance with the interest of younger learners, and the results of the lexical test were directly related to the length of exposure to FL.

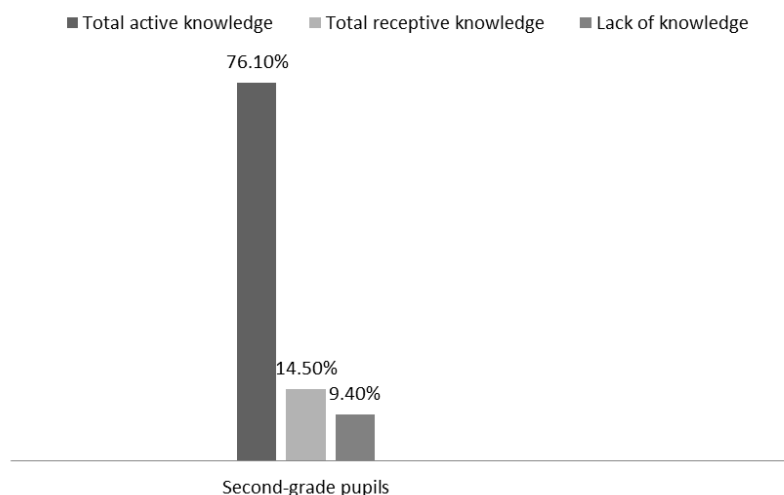


Chart 2 The distribution of the active knowledge, the receptive knowledge and the lack of knowledge of lexical units on the 2012/2013 test.

A higher exposure of second-graders during the second year of learning led to the percentage of the active lexical knowledge being increased from 54.9% to 76.10%, which makes a total of 22.1% in favor of the active knowledge. The receptive knowledge decreased from 16.62% to 14, 50%, but the percentage of an absolute lack of knowledge of the lexical units decreased from 27.38% during 2012/2013 to only 9.40%. In other words, 17.98% of words unfamiliar at the end of the first year of learning passed into the active or receptive fund of lexical competence during the second year of the learning process. The conclusion that arises is that the pupils achieved an enormous progress in the development of lexical competence during the second year of learning Italian as FL2.

Based on the presented results from 13 tasks containing 104 items, it can be concluded that the proposed hypotheses are completely confirmed. In spite of the short period of exposure to FL, the achievements in the lexical competence in FL2 are positive, as about 55% of items are in pupils' active vocabulary, even after the first year of study, which confirmed the first hypothesis of our paper. With all thirteen domains, it was found that the best acquired items are either the result of a positive transfer from L1, or that their value in terms of usage in L1 is very high, which is the reason that the pupils quickly acquired them in FL2. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Cummins' Iceberg hypothesis is fully well-founded, and that the second hypothesis we have proposed is fully confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research lead us to a reasonable conclusion that learning FL at an early age is not only feasible and achievable, but that it is also a very desirable process. An early acquisition of FL, besides linguistic benefits, brings other benefits to younger learners such as socialization, culturalization and self-realization, because the awareness that there are some people who speak another language and whose customs are different from the customs of the community they belong to opens the possibility of pluriculturalism, which again reinforces tolerance for what is different and respect for other cultures and peoples (Šuvaković, 2013, p. 87). Through the mentioned process, they develop awareness that many other foreign languages can be learned, their teacher being an example of this, and that the whole process can be an integral part of the game. All this leads to a better cognitive development of younger learners, since new knowledge is better organized (Vučo, 2010, pp. 56-57). Different studies mentioned in the paper suggest that the idea of “the sooner the better” is well-grounded. Precisely the fact that the most significant neurolinguistic shift occurs at the age between seven and eight has led us to start our research with the younger learners of the aforementioned age group (McKay, 2006, p.7)

A child does not possess a utilitarian incentive to learn a FL as an adult does. Children satisfy all their needs by expressing themselves in L1, and the power of thinking or planning the future and what will be useful in life almost does not exist. Today, there are often cases when children's instrumental motivation appears at a particular moment. It can be a need to understand, for example, a particular word in the favorite game, to use a computer and so on, which certainly is not enough to ensure the sustainability of the learning process of foreign languages. From this we can conclude that children's interest is primarily related to the knowledge of the words that benefit them at a given moment, which provides us with a starting point: developing the lexical competence *word by word* slowly builds up the linguistic competence, through games it builds the cultural competence and then a much wider communicative competence. By acquiring a lexicon we aim primarily at one goal, the formation of a critical mass as the core of morphosyntactic development. By analyzing the presented results of the research, we confirmed that young pupils achieve good results in the process of an early acquisition of several foreign languages regardless of exposure. Younger learners choose lexical units that are useful to them at the moment, and they are first stored in the phonological and semantic memory, either in the vocabulary or in the passive lexical fund.

Although the role that a mother tongue can play in the early learning of foreign languages is twofold, there is a definite conclusion that a positive transfer is as important as the learner's inner feeling that a particular word or structure is needed and useful to them. As we have seen with the results

for words like: mamma-mum, ciao-hi, torta-cake, gomma-rubber and cocodrillo-crocodile, they are examples of a positive transfer, but there is also a high acquisition of structures like: come ti chiami-what's your name, mi chiamo ..- My name is ..., ho 7 anni- I'm 7 years old, which represent phrases of great importance at the given moment for the seven-year-olds because they use them more frequently in school and in L1. On the other hand, there are words such as papà -dad, numbers, school supplies (we especially emphasize the word astuccio-pencil case) whose high percentage of acquisition is in favor of the thesis that, despite the transfer from L1 being negative, learners perceive them as extremely necessary.

Through the results of the research, we have shown that younger learners gain a more substantiated knowledge over the years through early exposure to foreign languages. During the second research year, in a repeated testing process, the active knowledge increased from 54.9% to 76.1%; the receptive knowledge decreased to the benefit of the active from 16.62% to 14.5%, and, what is most significant, the lack of knowledge decreased from 27.38% to 9.4%.

This leads to a conclusion that not only does an early learning of foreign languages not lead to a negative influence on the mother tongue, but that it contributes to the enrichment of all the languages a young learner knows, and that, in time, all knowledge becomes more solid and fundamental. In addition, it is useful for a learner to become acquainted with other cultures and languages and thus become more open and tolerant, with the fact that the early learning of FL certainly leads to better cognitive achievements.

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ЗНАЧАЈ РАЗВИЈАЊА ЛЕКСИЧКЕ КОМПЕТЕНЦИЈЕ НА СТРАНОМ ЈЕЗИКУ И УТИЦАЈ МАТЕРЊЕГ ЈЕЗИКА КОД МЛАЂИХ УЧЕНИКА

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Резиме

Деца, односно млађи ученици, на почетку учења показују потребу да проговоре на циљном језику јер за њих то представља забаву и смех, односно игру као искуствено проверени начин стицања знања. Да би дошло до говорног чина, који је перформанса језичке компетенције, интегративног дела комуникативне, деца морају овладати лексичком компетенцијом.

Треба напоменути и то да усвајање лексике на СЈ може бити умногоме различито од усвајања лексике на Л1. Ученик је већ развио концептуални и семантички систем усвајања лексике на Л1 и улога коју ће то искуство одиграти може бити двојака, и то у зависности од степена еквиваленције између Л1 и СЈ.

Представљеним резултатима истраживања потврдили смо да ученици у раном узрасту постижу добре резултате у процесу раног учења више страних језика, као и тезу да без обзира на изложеност у неким случајевима, као и на фреквенцију одређених речи, млађи ученици бирају лексичке јединице које су њима употребљиве и њих прво складиште путем фонолошке меморије, било у вокабулар или пасивни лексички фонд. Као што смо и видели у резултатима, речи попут *mamma*–мама, *ciò*–ћао, *torta*–торта, *gomma*–гумица и *coscodrillo*–крокодил јесу пример позитивног трансфера, али исто тако висок постотак усвојености израза попут *come ti chiami* – како се зовеш, *mi chiamo* – зovem се, *ho 7 anni* – имам 7 година представљају синтагме од великог значаја у датом тренутку за седмогодишњаке јер исте користе учесталије при поласку у школу и на Л1, али, с друге стране, имамо и речи попут *papà* – тата, све бројеве, школски прибор, посебно истичемо реч *astuccio* – перница, чији нам висок постотак усвајања говори у прилог тези да, иако је трансфер Л1 негативан, млађи ученици их доживљавају као потребне и отуда висока успешност у активном и рецептивном знању. У овом раду смо кроз резултате истраживања показали да млађи ученици што ранијим излагањем страним језицима кроз године постижу утемељеније знање.