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Quadrilingual experience of Albanian minority speakers in Croatia

Abstract
While minority speakers learning a foreign language through the medium of their second language are sometimes considered to be at a disadvantage, they are also at an advantage, due to their highly developed metalinguistic awareness. We study multilingual experiences of five quadrilingual Albanians residing in Croatia to show their positive attitudes toward language learning and instances of facilitation of their foreign language learning (English as FL1 and German/Italian as FL2) found at the levels of phonology, lexis and grammar. While the learning of foreign language grammar was reported to be facilitated by the knowledge of our participants' second language metalanguage of Croatian, they also reported instances of facilitation of English phonology acquisition by making associations between the phonological systems of their mother tongue and English. In the learning of their foreign languages' lexis, associations with the vocabulary of all their languages were used.

1. Introduction
Every day we witness migrations of peoples across the globe, pointing at an ever increasing national diversity and painting the future portrait of the world. Because of this, one may anticipate a more-or-less steady increase in the number of people and children using more than one language in their daily lives. Such speakers, alongside their mother tongue, learn and use the language of their environment in the course of their education, which is also the medium language in their foreign language learning. In such circumstances, we advocate the view that the knowledge of minority foreign language learners' mother tongue is an asset in learning a foreign language in the classroom, rather than a disadvantage due to the fact that the foreign language is learned through a medium language which is not the learners' mother tongue. We exemplify this view by reporting the experience of five members of one linguistically well-integrated national minority in Croatia, Albanian, whose speakers are often multilingual. In this preliminary descriptive study, we provide a screenshot of the dynamics of our participants' multiple language learning, and their attitudes towards their languages and language learning and we attempt to show how their multilingual knowledge and positive attitudes towards multiple language learning and use can be beneficial in a foreign language classroom in the learning of foreign language phonology, lexis and syntax. They are viewed as advantaged as they

can draw on their positive attitude towards language learning and the knowledge of more than one language to help them master a new one.

2. Albanian national minority in Croatia

According to the latest census from 2011 (Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske, 2011), 17,513 Albanian people live in the Republic of Croatia, forming the fourth largest minority group in the country. A great number of Albanian people arrived to Croatia from Kosovo in the 1980s. Both the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Croatia formed part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at that time. After World War II, the education system in Kosovo was underdeveloped which resulted in a considerably high rate of illiteracy (OECD, 2006). Due to a complex political situation in former Yugoslavia and an underdeveloped economy in their part of the country, people in Kosovo suffered a lack of job opportunities which led to small financial incomes (Vickers, 2001). Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, numbers of Albanian men decided to search for better life conditions for their families. They started migrating to states across Europe, including Croatia, where they thought they would be able to provide a better future for their families (ibid.). First, they would secure jobs and then they would bring along their families to organize their lives in the new country. They would still care for their language and culture, and invest efforts into preserving their Albanian identity, but they would also learn the language of the environment and become socially and linguistically well-integrated citizens of their new country (Extra and Yagmur, 2004).

3. Language identity and minority speakers

According to Blažević, Rončević and Šepić (2007), the notion of identity encompasses inner feelings about the qualities of each person and the values that are part of the group or the society that the person belongs to. There are several aspects involved in the development of each person's identity, e.g. gender, religion, race, age, language, profession, etc. Each individual seeks out common aspects of identity with the people in their environment, so that they can interact with others, and become well-integrated members of the society they live in. In order to achieve this, minority speakers commonly accept the language of the environment and so become bilingual or multilingual as they tend to preserve their minority language at the same time. Schmidt (2008: 2) names language as a key marker of ethnic/minority identity as many legal instruments for the protection of minority groups require a group of people to use a distinctive language in order for it to qualify as a minority. A speaker's minority language is likely to be changed throughout the years because of the constant pressure of the language of the environment. Blažević, Rončević and Šepić (2007: 53) stress that if a minority group is rather large and willing to preserve its language and culture, the vitality of their language tends to be enhanced. Because of that,

people who migrate to other countries keep using their minority language, not only to keep in touch with their cultural values, but also in order to preserve their true identity.

4. Multilinguals' languages and metalinguistic awareness

Members of a national minority who cherish and work on preserving their minority language and at the same time study a foreign language through the medium of the official language of the country they live in may be described as developing into multilingual speakers. The language that is spoken in the society where the minority group live becomes their second language (Jelaska, 2012). The people that belong to the minority group usually acquire their second language after acquiring their mother tongue, the minority language. This mostly happens when the speakers become exposed to the official language of the country they live in at the beginning of their formal education or while being around people who only use that language (e.g. children at the playground, co-workers). In school they learn foreign languages through the medium of their second language. In that process they may use their bilingual metalinguistic awareness to have their bilingualism help them in third and fourth language learning. The effects of the knowledge of two languages on third language learning have been shown and advocated for by a number of authors (e.g. Thomas, 1988; Herrarte, 1998; Ringbom, 2007; Jung, 2013; Jessner, 2008). As part of third language teaching methodology learners may be prompted by their language teacher, for example, to reflect on their second language learning experience and compare the systems of the languages they know with the system of the new language they are learning. For example, Hufeisen and Neuner (2004) write about tertiary language didactics (Ger. Tärziersprachendidaktik) advocating the teaching of German after English by using the experience of the knowledge of the existing languages in the learner's linguistic system for the purpose of the facilitation of third language learning. In the Croatian context this concept is also represented in German as a foreign language teaching (Horvatić Čajko, 2006; 2008). Jessner (2008: 19) provides three typical examples of third language learners as 1) children growing up with three languages from birth, 2) bilingual children learning a third language in school (often English) and 3) bilingual migrant children moving to a new linguistic environment. In this paper we deal with the second case of third language learning to which fourth language learning is subsequently added. We present a preliminary, small-scale study of the multilingual experience of five quadrilingual speakers of Albanian – their mother tongue, Croatian – their second language, English – their third language (first foreign language) and German or Italian as their fourth language (second foreign language). All of the speakers' languages belong to the Indo-European language family (Kapović, 2008). The Croatian language is further categorized as a Balto-Slavic language (Slavic, South Slavic), English and German as Germanic (West Germanic) languages and Italian as an Italic

language (Romance). The Albanian language is, apart from Greek, the only language that is not further categorized due to the fact that its first record dates rather late, in the 14th century (Kapović, 2008: 15, 16).

Metalinguistic awareness may result from the knowledge of two or more languages, facilitating the learning of the next language which thus becomes a different process than the learning of a second language (Jessner, 1999: 201) because the learner already has an idea of what it means to learn a language and can use that knowledge in the new learning process (the learning to learn competence, European Communities, 2007). Referring to her investigation of Italian-German bilinguals performing an academic writing task in a third language, English, using a think-aloud technique, Jessner (1999) showed that third language learners search for similarities between the languages they know and their third language trying to compensate for their lack of knowledge in the third language. Such learning dynamics are in accordance with the view of language development as a dynamic process in which various variables interact over time to result in language learning, maintenance or, if neither learning nor maintenance occur, attrition (e.g. Herdina and Jessner, 2002; de Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007). The foreign language teacher's facilitating role should draw on the recognition of the potential of metalingustic awareness in language learners belonging to minority groups by encouraging them to search for similarities between the language systems they are familiar with and the one they are learning.

5. Attitudes toward language learning

Previously mentioned language experience could hardly be of much use without learners' positive attitudes toward language learning. McGroarty (2009: 4) claims that "positive attitudes about language and language learning may be as much the result of success as the cause." She goes on to explain that a positive attitude towards language learning depends on the environment in which persons with whom the language is being learned as well as on the chosen learning strategies. If the learner is surrounded by family and friends while learning a language, he or she will feel accepted and affiliated because of his or her national origin or family history. For a representation of qualitative data on the factors emerging out of positive social and family circumstances boosting language learning and facilitating achievement of native-like proficiency even in late L2 learners see Pfenninger and Singleton (forthcoming). Naturally, it is expected that minority language speakers will report most positive attitudes towards their mother tongue, but overall positive attitude towards multiple language knowledge and usage is also expected. For example, Cenoz (2009) investigated language preference and attitude towards languages of multilingual students in Spain who used Basque, Spanish and English in various combinations. Based on their answers, she concluded that all the participants had a positive attitude towards languages and multilingualism. A more

important conclusion is that the students who were using Basque as their mother tongue have a slightly stronger preference toward the Basque language in comparison to other languages they are familiar with. In accordance with this, foreign language teachers should encourage positive attitude towards languages in order to facilitate foreign language learning.

In this preliminary study, we aimed to provide a description of our participants' language histories and their attitudes towards multiple language knowledge and use. Moreover, we looked for examples and experiences of our participants while learning foreign languages to see if we can distinguish a certain pattern in their metalinguistic awareness based on their quadrilingual Albanian-Croatian-English-German/Italian experience. We were interested in learning if and how this awareness helped them learn their languages; we hoped to isolate examples of such instances in their language learning process.

6. Methodology

The participants in this study were five students (three male and two female), aged 21-26 at the time the study was carried out, who live in Zagreb, Croatia and identify as members of the Albanian national minority group in Croatia. The first part of the research was carried out as a focus group conversation, a semi-structured interview. The aim of the first part of the study was to get familiar with the participants, investigate their general opinion on the subject of their multilingualism, attitudes toward language learning and their metalinguistic awareness in terms of using certain strategies in their third and fourth language learning that they based on the knowledge of their Albanian (L1) and Croatian (L2). After the interview, the conversation was analysed and individualized questions were prepared for each participant which they were asked in the second part of the research.

The second part of the study was carried out in the form of individual semi-structured interviews. Most of the questions were common for all the participants, but some were individualized, based on the knowledge gathered on the participants in the first part of the study. The questions used in the individual interviews were divided into four sets. The first set of questions was based on the historical background of the participants inquiring about the participants' arrival to Croatia and their Albanian identity. The second set of questions inquired about the Albanian and Croatian languages of the participants, how they acquired the languages and what their attitudes were towards them. The third set of questions focused on the participants' first foreign (English) language learning. More specifically, this set of questions was aimed at uncovering some learning strategies that the participants had used, if any, in the course of their schooling and learning of the English language that were based on their knowledge of Albanian and Croatian. The last set of questions was aimed at fourth (German/Italian) language learning, where the participants were

prompted to provide advice and recommendations on multiple language learning and dealing with its challenges.

All the individual interviews were carried out at different but comfortable locations so that the participants could feel at ease and not be distracted. The conversations lasted about 30 minutes each. All five conversations were transcribed and analysed. The participants signed informed consent forms agreeing that the interview could be recorded and the recording could be used for research purposes.

7. Participants' mother tongue and second language

Out of five participants (P) in this study, three of them were born in Croatia (P1, P2 and P3) and two of them were born in Kosovo but arrived to Croatia before puberty (P4 as a six-month-old infant and P5 at the age of seven). All five participants consider Albanian to be their mother tongue; P3 put this in the following way: "*My mother is Albanian. She speaks Albanian and she taught me to speak Albanian.*" P2 worded a very similar answer. According to Byram (2007: 104) "the ways in which languages mark identities are particularly evident for linguistic minorities" and this is clearly seen in our participants' (language) behaviour. All the participants spoke only Albanian at their homes in their early childhood. They keep in touch with their Albanian relatives in Kosovo and with other Albanian minority members in Croatia and have clear feelings about their Albanian identity (cf. Navracsics, 2016). During childhood, the five participants of this small-scale study, watched Croatian television and often listened to Croatian music, but spoke with their siblings in Albanian. The occasions when they would use the Croatian language were when: "*there weren't only Albanians in the company (...) so that the others wouldn't think we were gossiping about them*" (P4). All the participants agreed that now that they are older, they still use only Albanian with their parents, often in private situations, but with their siblings they tend to use both Albanian and Croatian. Four participants (P1, P2, P3 and P4) acquired their second language, Croatian, while watching television and playing with their Croatian peers. Only P5 learned the basics of the Croatian language with the expert help of a special tutor (as she came to Croatia at the age of seven) but P5 emphasized that, regardless of the tutoring, she mostly acquired the language by herself in the same way as the other participants. During their schooling, all the participants started using the Croatian language more than the Albanian one as the language of their environment started to take over. Thus the Croatian language became the language they now feel more confident speaking and using. They say that this is because they learned it at school, they are familiar with the grammar rules of the Croatian language and they believe that they have extended vocabulary in their Croatian linguistic repertoire. When asked which language they believed they knew better, they all agreed it was Croatian. They know their Albanian as a variety they use at home (a heritage language), they do not think they could

explain grammar rules of the Albanian language (not even the basics) and they sometimes feel that they are missing words while explaining something (as a consequence of not reading or speaking about a certain subject matter in Albanian). P4 says: *"I know when I have made a mistake in Croatian. In Albanian this is not the case"*. P3 says that he is *"always in Croatian-speaking company"* and *"I really know the language"*. P1 says that he maintains (and has recently improved) his Albanian in the Albanian Students' Club, although he is more confident speaking Croatian. This is in line with Pavličević-Franić and Aladrović Slovaček (2013) who carried out a test of communicative competence with Croatian children and youth aged 6-18 living in Germany whose first language (and the language of the environment) was German while their second language (and the mother tongue) was Croatian. The participants made syntactic, lexical, morphological, grammatical and spelling errors in the test. The authors concluded that the lexical mistakes in Croatian occurred due to the participants' lack of understanding of certain words' meanings which led to the usage of those words in the wrong contexts. The authors concluded that this was because the participants were more proficient in German than in Croatian.

Even though the Croatian language is the 'stronger' language of the participants, the one they prefer to speak is, reportedly, Albanian: *"When I speak Albanian, I feel at home"* (P3), P2 *"feels certain warmth"* when he speaks Albanian. They report using Croatian when speaking about feelings explaining that this is because they have a broader vocabulary in Croatian and they think that they probably very often speak about feelings with Croats. Emotion talk has been suggested to depend on the proficiency of the interlocutors in the languages of the bilingual (Pavlenko, 2006). But not all of them agreed on this; e.g. P2 said: *"I would say 'I love you' to a girl in Albanian because it sounds nicer and it feels right."* P4 says that she would use Albanian to talk about emotions at home and when in a Croatian company in Croatian, of course. *"But if somebody makes me really angry"* (she would express emotions) *"in Albanian as well"*. They count in Croatian, except for P3 who uses Albanian when withdrawing money from a bank machine when he is all alone. When describing the notion of his language mode as "the state of activation of the bilingual's languages and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time" (Grosjean, 2001: 3) proposes that even when only one language of the bilingual is being used, it is probably never completely deactivated. We were interested in learning which language, if any, the participants of this study thought was always active in their mind. So, when asked if there is a language they cannot turn off in their head while speaking some other language P1 thought that could be Croatian, P3 identified Albanian as the language that 'pops out' in a sentence while speaking Croatian, and for P4 this is Croatian although she believes that she *"can turn it off in some situations"*.

Dewaele (2004) investigated language preference of multilinguals in expressing emotions, inner speech and mental calculation by means of a

questionnaire. His participants reported that they would use the language they acquired first in all the mentioned situations, except for swearing. In 2004 Extra and Yagmur conducted a research study of minority speakers in six European cities (Hamburg, Brussels, Lyon, Madrid, The Hague, Gothenburg) where they investigated the extent of usage of other languages, apart from the official language of the country they lived in, in their participants' private space. The answers of the participants were categorized as: language choice, language knowledge, language dominance and language preference. The results of their research show that Albanian language speakers tend to use the Albanian language mostly in communication with their parents. They felt that they showed their knowledge of Albanian most while speaking it (as opposed to reading, writing and listening comprehension). Considering language dominance, they reported their Albanian language as becoming increasingly less dominant while the second language was getting 'stronger'. These results are mostly in accordance with the answers of the participants of the present research. What differentiates the two studies is the participants' reported language preference. Extra and Yagmur concluded that in the case of their participants language preference toward Albanian decreased over the years, while this is certainly not the case in the participants of the present study. Importantly, however, Extra and Yagmur's participants were between six and eleven years old. The participants of this research are all adults with a developed positive attitude toward multilingualism and the will to preserve their Albanian identity; we believe that therein lays the reason for the difference in the results between Extra and Yagmur's study and the present one.

8. Participants' foreign language learning

The participants' first foreign language is the English language. They all learned English during their formal education but became familiar with it before learning it at school as they reported having watched cartoons in English, boosting their interest in the language (P1 and P2). P4 says that *"she got interested (in English) because she watched cartoons in English with Croatian subtitles and that is how she learned both languages simultaneously."* They generally reported the great influence of the media on both their Croatian and English language development. Croatian citizens are very much exposed to the English language in the media and learners often report awareness of this influence on their English language learning (e.g. Cergol Kovačević and Matijević, 2015; Cergol Kovačević and Kovačević, 2016) and motivation to study the language. Brodarić (2015) compares Croatian learners' English grades and self-reported exposure to the English language in the media and finds that the two are highly related; the students who reported being more exposed to English in the media achieved higher grades in their formal education in the related school subject. All five participants in this study said that they were interested in learning English and reported experiencing no problems while

learning it. The participants believe that they have learned it so well that they can sometimes switch from Albanian to Croatian and to English during a single conversation. They do it mostly when they feel that they cannot express themselves properly in one language but can do so in another language they know. They are not as confident using English as they are in their Albanian and Croatian but when they find themselves in a situation where there is a need to speak English, they report using it without hesitation. A point of interest to show how much they use all of their languages is found in their answers about code-switching. When asked how and when they code-switch, P3 shared a story from a summer job he had done not long before this research study was conducted. P3 and his Albanian friends had to speak English with their boss, but when they spoke to each other, they would switch to Croatian and when they wanted to gossip, they did it in Albanian. P4 pointed out that she tends to code-switch on a daily basis with her sisters: "*We start the conversation in Croatian, then we start to argue in Albanian and then again in Croatian and we always mix it with some English expressions.*" This is in line with Gardner-Chloros' (2009) observation that multilinguals usually code-switch when they find themselves in informal situations.

The second foreign language (fourth language) of four participants (P2, P3, P4and P5) is the German language and P1's fourth language is Italian. All five participants had never spoken these languages before they learned them in their formal education. Because they were not as exposed to it, P2 and P3 reported some problems with learning German. Even though they came across some difficulties, they all express a positive attitude towards learning the new language. The participants also agreed that people should start learning languages at a very early age. For example, P3 believes that when the learner is younger, language learning comes naturally and easily. They especially advise minority speakers to cherish their mother tongue but also not to be afraid of forgetting one if using the other language(s) more. The participants are aware that their knowledge of their mother tongue and second language helped them in foreign language learning. They were asked a series of questions about how they learned their first and second foreign languages. The participants reported using some direct strategies that are common to monolingual learners of a foreign language. Those strategies, as explained in Oxford (1990), are: placing new words into a context, using imagery and structured reviewing (types of memory strategies), repeating, getting the idea quickly, translating and summarizing (types of cognitive strategies). The results also show that the participants used some other direct language learning strategies given in Oxford (1990) in their third and fourth language learning; more precisely, the strategies of representing sounds in memory (type of memory strategy) and transferring (type of cognitive strategy). The strategy of representing sounds in memory is based on creating sound-based associations between the already known material and the new one (Oxford, 1990: 42). Our participants reported that while learning English, they

looked for and found similarities between Albanian and English in the following words: *koleg* and *colleague*, *llambë* and *lamp*, *aeroplan* and *airplane* and so on. P1 who learned Italian (as his second foreign language) made associations between the Albanian and Italian languages. P1 gave an example: "*We were reading in class about one boy who was travelling to 'Londra' and no one had a clue that 'Londra' is actually London but I remembered that in Albanian we say it 'Londër', which is quite similar.*" Moreover, P1 recognized that he could make (quite a few, as he reports) associations between the two languages which helped him in the learning of his L4, Italian. He reported feeling advantaged when compared to his Croatian colleagues who learned Italian as a foreign language because of his knowledge of Albanian. Another learning strategy used by the participants, transferring, refers to "directly applying the knowledge of words and phrases from one language to another in order to understand and produce an expression in the new language" (Oxford, 1990: 47). All the participants reported using this strategy and gave the same example of its usage. P2 explained: "*There are the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ that exist in English and Albanian and I immediately knew how to say, for example, 'think', while in Croatian there are no such sounds, and Croatian speakers have problems producing them properly.*" This example testifies to the participants' metalinguistic awareness of certain similarities between the phonological systems of the Albanian and English languages and their advantage in comparison with the monolingual Croatian speakers who do not have the mentioned phonemes in the phonological system of their language. Josipović Smojver (2010) describes the possible causes of transfer in the pronunciation of English by Croatian speakers, naming the phonemes identified by the participants of this study as possible frequent problems. She warns that Croatian speakers often substitute the phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ by their most similar Croatian correlates, the dental realizations of /t/ and /d/.

The participants used their knowledge of the Croatian language in learning the grammar of the foreign language(s). They explain that they only had the metalinguistic knowledge of their Croatian in that aspect (the knowledge of grammar) that they could compare with the foreign language (P1: what is passive, what is past tense, etc.). P5 said that she would not know how to write about the grammar of Albanian in order to help her learn a foreign language. Thus, the knowledge (acquired in Croatian school) of the metalanguage learned and used to talk about Croatian grammar helps them in learning the grammar of their foreign language(s). According to the Association for Language Awareness (ALA), language awareness is "explicit knowledge about the language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (ALA, in García 2008: 386). García advises that teachers work on developing language awareness in their students. If they encounter a bilingual or multilingual student in their classroom, they need to draw on their students' knowledge of other languages to develop their multilingual awareness. Such

awareness is found in the five participants of this study. P2, P3, P4 and P5 (who learned German as their fourth language) reported using some lexical associations from English in learning the German language; she mentioned some semi-cognate examples (P4: Eng. *friend* – Ger. *(der) Freund*, Eng. *house* – Ger. *(das) Haus*).

Finally, when translating the vocabulary of their foreign language(s) in learning, the participants reported translating it into Croatian. Not one of them mentioned that this might have resulted from the fact that Croatian was the medium language in their foreign language learning; rather, they thought that their Croatian vocabulary was more elaborate, which is why they would use it in learning a new language (P1, P5) and because they are more dominant in Croatian (P2). P1, P2 and P5 all used the same words in explaining why they used translation into Croatian when learning the vocabulary of their foreign language(s); they said: "*I found that easier*". Harley (2010) studied Albanian minority speakers in Sweden and also found that her participants translated English (FL) into Swedish (L2) rather than into Albanian (mother tongue).

9. Conclusion

In this preliminary study involving five members of the Albanian minority group in Croatia we give an overview of the dynamics of our participants' quadrilingual development process. The participants report a very positive attitude towards their languages and language learning in general. In terms of their metalinguistic awareness in foreign language learning (English as FL1, German/Italian as FL2), they reported making associations between the Albanian and English phonological and lexical systems, while they use their knowledge of their second language Croatian grammar (primarily referring to the metalanguage used to describe grammar) in learning the grammar of their foreign languages. They are well aware of their bilingual advantage in additional language learning and take certain pride in their multilingualism.

We agree with Jessner (1999: 201) that "prior language knowledge should be reactivated in the language classroom" and that "multilingual education should also focus on the similarities between languages in order to increase metalinguistic awareness in both teachers and students". While students often develop this awareness on their own and out of necessity, teachers are the ones who need to be educated to recognize the mentioned potential. This seems to be becoming a must in the modern world where monolingual nations have become an exception rather than the rule. This does not necessarily mean that the teachers need to know the languages of all their multilingual learners. Nevertheless, they should treat their learners' bi- or multilingualism as an asset in their foreign language learning and raise the learners' awareness in that sense. We believe that this awareness can be a motivating factor in foreign language learning. For example, in the case of the learners of the linguistic profiles represented by the participants in this study, teachers could draw on their

learner's second language (also medium language) knowledge in teaching foreign language grammar (as the metalanguage used to describe grammar will already exist in that language), the knowledge of the mother tongue in teaching pronunciation, and the knowledge of all the languages a learner knows in teaching the lexis of a new (foreign) language.

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