

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE ABILITY IN SLOVENE AS L2: SOME RESULTS OF A STUDY



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Based on the results of tests compiled especially for this study, conclusions have been made regarding the development of communicative language ability in Slovene as a second language, as observed in learners in a year-long Slovene language course. The results indicated a) the characteristics of second-language acquisition (SLA) in general; b) the characteristics of the Slovene language acquisition process itself, and c) the characteristics of Slovene, as demonstrated through the process of its acquisition as a second language.

Key words: Communicative Language Ability, Slovene as a second language, language acquisition, morphological competence, syntactical competence

1. INTRODUCTION

For Slovenes living in Slovenia, Slovene is a first language (L1) and basic means of identification, as well as a means of interpersonal communication. However, for various reasons and purposes, people whose L1 is not Slovene also learn and use it.

Besides providing observations about the development of communicative language ability, our study attempted to highlight some characteristics, which accompany the process of acquiring Slovene as a second language (L2). The characteristics (from more general towards more specific) we focused on were:

a) Characteristics of the SLA process in general.

SLA is not a uniform and completely predictable process. However, there are some characteristics common to SLA in general (i.e. characteristics which do not depend on the language being learned or the individual learning it). Special attention was paid in our study to the order and sequence of acquisition, as well as to over-generalization and attrition.

b) Characteristics of the process of acquisition of Slovene as a second language.



Specific characteristics of the process of development of communicative language ability in Slovene as L2 could be partly connected to the language specific grammatical structure. The hypothesis was that appropriate and successful language use depends on the degree of development of specific, relatively independent competencies, for example knowledge of grammar (morphology and syntax), vocabulary, knowledge of proper sociolinguistic and sociocultural behaviour etc. This also means that the level of development of morphological and syntactic competencies necessary for successful communication in Slovene must be higher than in a less inflected languages, where these two competencies are not of such importance for successful communication. The results of the study supported this hypothesis.

c) Characteristics of the Slovene language from the standpoint of its acquisition as L2.

The hypothesis was that there are specific rules which govern the development of communicative language ability in Slovene as L2, and that these rules proceed more from the nature of the Slovene language as a highly inflective language than from the individual person studying the language, his/her cognitive abilities, his/her L1 and other individual, non-linguistic factors. The results of the study, e.g. recognition of marked and unmarked inflectional patterns and as a consequence over-generalization of unmarked patterns in all participants of the study, irrespective of their L1, supported this hypothesis.

The data presented in this article illustrate some of the aforementioned characteristics.

2. MORPHOLOGICAL AND SYNTACTICAL COMPETENCIES AS THE FOCUS OF THE OBSERVATIONS

Morphological and syntactical competencies are both components of grammatical competence. For the purposes of our study we define morphological and syntactical competencies as individual person's abilities to recognize words and understand them in such a way that he/she knows how to organize them in a sentence, according to their meanings and forms in comparison to the meanings and forms of words occurring in their co-text. Syntactical competence is knowledge of rules, which govern the proper ordering of words in utterances according to their syntactical roles (Cunningsworth, 1984), morphological competence on the other side is ability to recognize and use (in sentences) correct and appropriate forms of words according to their inflectional patterns.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was planned as a longitudinal study lasting from October 1999 till May 2000. During this period seven sessions were held. The study sample consisted of 36 learners in an intensive Slovene language course (560 hours) that took place in Ljubljana during the 1999/2000 academic year. The participants took part in the study voluntarily. Based on their

previous (non-systematic) knowledge of Slovene, the participants were divided into three groups: 18 beginners or false beginners, 10 intermediates and 8 advanced learners. The average age of the learners was 27 years (range 19 - 53). The F/M ratio was 0.66 : 0.33. The participants in the course were speakers of different L1s,¹ but all of them had learned English as L2.



3.1. TOOLS

In order to measure the development of linguistic competence, focusing on morphological and syntactical competencies, a battery of seven tests, each consisting of seven separate test tasks, was compiled especially for this study. Each task consisted of instructions (in Slovene and English), an example and several test items. All of the participants had been previously familiarized with the tasks.

The measurement tools, i.e. tasks that were equal in their content and difficulty, were used at different times; hence we concluded that performance measured at different times demonstrated the development of ability over the period of its measurement.

The aforementioned hypotheses (the characteristics of SLA in general, of SLA in the case of Slovene, and of Slovene from the standpoint of its acquisition as L2) are demonstrated below using some of the results from two of the seven tasks.

3.1.1. FIRST TASK

The first task was designed to measure a learner's ability to recognise and understand the role of a particular word in a phrase or sentence and to use it appropriately, as evidenced by his/her use of a grammatically correct form. The exercise consisted of 16 different sentences. In the first eight sentences one noun was omitted (subject, object or noun in an adverbial role), while in the second eight sentences a verb was omitted (predicate role in the sentence). The appropriate word was given next to the sentence in its dictionary form. The task was to put the word into the grammatically correct form (Priatelj _____ v petem nadstropju. (stanovati) - A friend _____ on a fifth floor (to live)).

3.1.2. SECOND TASK

The second task was designed to measure the ability to recognise the dictionary meaning of words and the possible roles these words might play in phrases and sentences (according to the meaning and roles of the words in their co-text). Participants of the study were also asked to put the words into appropriate forms, i.e. to make meaningful and grammatically correct sentences using the given words. The task consisted of ten word-chains, which were to be transformed into ten meaningful sentences (e.g. oba, otrok, biti, bolan - both, child, to be, ill - Oba otroka sta/sta bila/bosta bolna. - Both children are/were/will be ill.)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SLA PROCESS IN GENERAL

4.1.1 PROGRESSIVENESS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION – REDUCTION OF ERRORS

In Figure 1 below, the number of all errors in the first task from the first (T1) through the seventh and final (T7) session is shown. From the first to the third session, the number of correct answers increased according to our expectations regarding the development of morphological and syntactical ability, i.e. the learners gave more correct answers. They were able to write more words in the correct forms according to their syntactic roles. In the fourth session, the rate of errors was almost the same as for the first session. We assume that this was the result of attrition: participants did not attend classes during the period between the third and fourth session, and some of them even left the country and, thus, were not in contact with the language. The level of the best results (i.e. the third session) was attained again after seven weeks of intensive instruction (fifth session). The data from the sixth session show the best results overall. During the seventh session, the results were on the level of the third and fifth sessions.

In accordance with our expectations, the task results became better in the later sessions. This can be seen from the negative trend of the error rate as shown in Figure 1. Compelling conclusions regarding the progressive nature of the aspect of language competence measured here, as well as the progressiveness of language acquisition in general, may be drawn from these results.

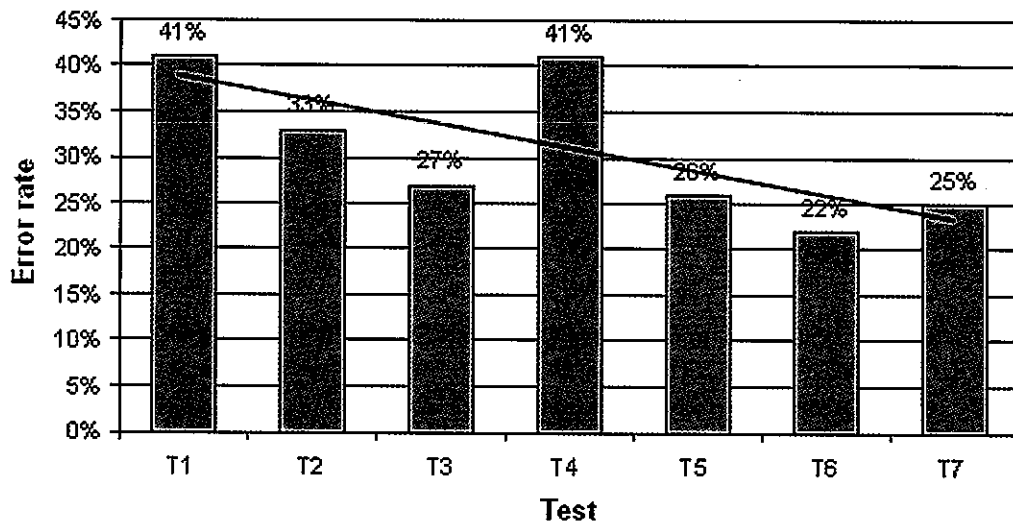


Figure 1: The results of the first task - error rate.

Similarly, Figure 2 below shows the results of the second task. The rate of correct answers increased from one session to the next, while the rate of errors decreased. Once again, the results of the fourth session were an exception (the rate of correct answers was lower than in the second and third sessions). We assume that this was due to attrition.

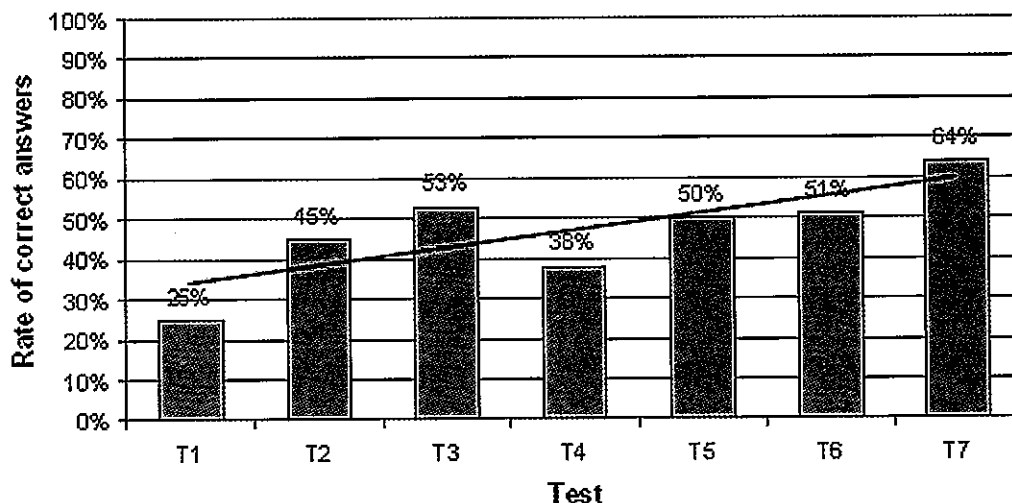


Figure 2: The results of the second task - rate of correct answers.

4.1.2. PROGRESSIVENESS IN RELATION TO TASK COMPLEXITY

In the first task, learners were only required to put the correct form of a word into an already existing pattern (sentence). Compared to the second task, this was relatively less complicated to perform. In general, the accuracy and correctness with which answers were produced increased more quickly for less complex tasks. This can be observed by comparison of Figures 1 and 2: errors decrease faster (in Figure 1) than correct sentences increase (in Figure 2).

4.1.3. OVER-GENERALIZATION

Over-generalization is one of the basic learning strategies widely used among L2 learners. In the typology of errors, which differentiates errors according to their sources (James, 1998; Ellis, 1994), over-generalization is one of four different types of intra-lingual errors, that is, errors that are not caused by language transfer.

In our study, over-generalization was visible as the formation of present-tense verbs using an infinitive form to which the endings for grammatical person were added (inf. živeti (to live); 3rd pl.* živejo; inf. stanovati (to live), 3rd pl.*stanovajo). Learners also generalized



the declination of nouns to the declination of adjectives: adjectives were given the same endings as nouns in the same noun phrase (for example: *Prijatelji živijo v novu stanovanju instead of v novem stanovanju - Friends live in a new apartment). Over-generalization was also observed in the category of nouns ending -e: as a result of over-generalization, all nouns with an -e ending were put into the group of neuter nouns (for example morje, srce), even if they were masculine (foreign words in Slovene, for example bife) or feminine plural (škarje, počitnice) nouns.

4.1.4. ATTRITION

From the results of our study we assume that attrition represents a strong negative factor at early stages of acquisition of Slovene as L2. During the period between the third and the fourth session, learners did not attend classes because of holidays and we assume that the very high rate of errors observed in the fourth session could be the result of attrition.

4.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROCESS OF ACQUISITION OF SLOVENE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

4.2.1. THE VERB AS THE MOST DIFFICULT CATEGORY FOR ACQUISITION

Analysis shows that participants in the study generally made more errors in the first task when appropriate use of a verb was required, rather than when appropriate use of a noun or adjective was required. Our conclusion was that appropriate use of verbs in Slovene causes more problems in the early stages of acquisition than appropriate use of nouns or adjectives. Figure 3 shows the percentage of errors for all 16 test items in the 7 testing sessions. In the items numbered 9 - 16, appropriate use of a verb was required.²

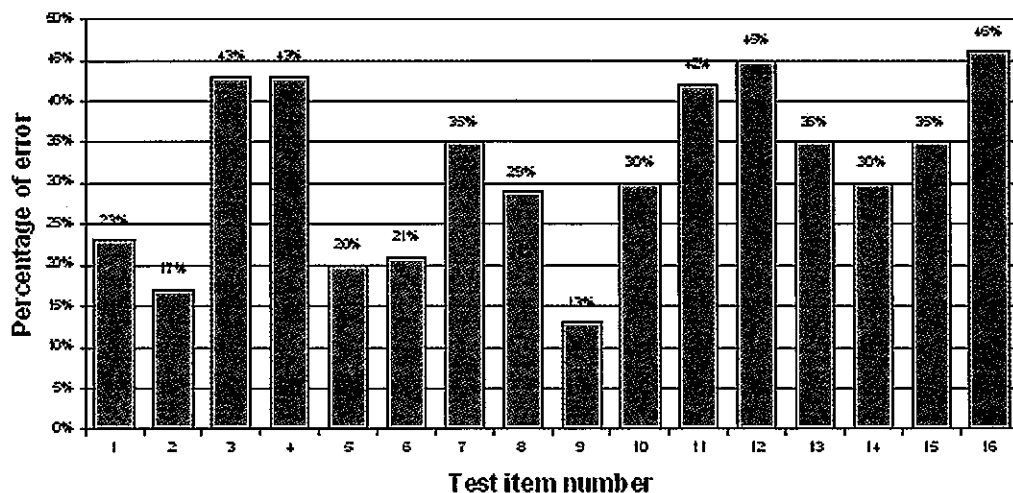


Figure 3: The percentage of errors in the first task for all 16 testing items in the 7 testing sessions.

It was also observed that the variety of errors in the category of verbs was greater than the variety of errors in the category of nouns or adjectives. Our conclusion was that these errors were caused by the numerous inflectional patterns in the verb category. The greater is the variety of inflectional patterns, the greater is the possibility of error. Moreover, errors in verbal phrases affect greater part of the syntactic structure, as well as the meaning of the sentence.

4.2.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING PARADIGMS

From the results of the study was discovered that the given lexical material caused particular types of errors. For example, the plural feminine nouns, such as *počitnice* (holidays) or *sanje* (dreams) were typically identified as a singular neuter noun in the locative case (**počitnicu*, **sanju*) in the sentence beginning *Pogovarjamo se o ...* (We're talking about...). By analogy with singular neuter nouns that typically end in an -e (*sonce*, *srce*, *morje* (sun, heart, sea)), participants declined these plural feminine nouns as singular neuter nouns. Such an error is the result of an unknown lexical item: not only the meaning of the word, but also its grammatical characteristics are not known. Such error is a result of over-generalization: the rule for declining neuter singular nouns is applied to plural feminine nouns. This type of error shows that appropriate use of words (e.g. nouns) requires knowledge of their specific paradigm, which is on the surface recognisable exclusively through case endings, but these endings can be misinterpreted, as observed in the example above.

4.2.3. MISUSE OF CASES – PROBLEMS OF ANALOGY AND TRANSFER



Learners typically confused locative case endings with accusative ones in noun phrases expressing location (**Sem v Ljubljano*). In Slovene grammar, the locative case is used to express location, while the accusative case (beside other functions) expresses direction – for example: acc.: *Grem v Ljubljano* i.e. *I'm going to Ljubljana*, but loc.: *Sem v Ljubljani* i.e. *I'm in Ljubljana*. The accusative form of a noun phrase tends to be the first noun phrase transformation acquired in the early stages of learning Slovene as L2. Instead of the accusative form, the dictionary or nominative form of the noun phrase is sometimes used in participants' answers as well. The results show that the prepositions used in such noun phrases (for example, those expressing location: *v Ljubljani* i.e. *in Ljubljana*) play a major semantic role as case endings for the learners. We assume that this is the result of an analogy with learners' non-inflected L1 (e.g. in English 'to Ljubljana' and 'in Ljubljana'). The process of analogy or transfer in these learners leads to a comprehension of case transformations as involving an arbitrary choice.

In further analysis was also found out that this did not apply to native speakers of other Slavic languages, who in this particular case tended to borrow endings from their L1: acc.: **Grem v Ljubljano* i.e. loc.: *Sem v Ljubljani*. In first shown example the strategy applied lead to an error, which can be understood as a sign of negative transfer, while the second example can be understood as a sign of positive transfer.

4.2.4. COMPENSATION STRATEGIES IN SLOVENE SLA

The dictionary form of words randomly occurred in both tasks in places where they were not appropriate or expected. The cause of such errors is unknown, but we suppose it is the result of a specific strategy used by participants or the result of their language transfer. Whereas in the early stages of learning, when such forms were most frequent, participants did not even perceive inflectional endings, in subsequent stages they considered them to be an arbitrary or non-mandatory choice.

The choice of a dictionary form could be strategic on several different levels – various authors have spoken about different SLA strategies, i.e. learning, communicative and test-writing strategies (Ellis, 1986, 1994; Gass and Selinker, 1994). From the point of view of communicative strategy, participants might perceive utterances without any inflectional endings, i.e. without the formal means of cohesion, more easily than ones with incorrect endings. The meaning of such utterances is understandable due to their lexical semantics. From the standpoint of learning strategies, dictionary endings might be the result of analytic comprehension of a language and its units: the dictionary form is comprehended as a basis, which acquires a different ending in the process of making an utterance (which, however, the individual language user has not mastered). The dictionary forms arising in our tests could also be viewed as a strategy of error avoidance. As a compensation strategy, this phenomenon is not connected exclusively with acquisition of Slovene as L2, but with SLA in general. We must keep in mind, however, that such a strategy is far more visible in more highly inflected

languages (such as Slovene).

Figure 4 shows percentages for the different types of errors encountered in the second task during the seven sessions. The first group of columns (*vocabulary*) represents the percentage of inappropriate use of the dictionary form of words. A larger percentage resulted only in the case of errors caused by mixing cases (*case*) and by using grammatically non-existent forms in Slovene (*non-paradigmatic errors*). For some types of errors the results in this figure do not show any improvement over the time (e.g. mixing cases or using inappropriate forms indicating grammatical number). Test materials used in individual sessions might cause this, but more likely this happened due to the difficulty of acquisition of these particular categories (expressed by numerous forms) in Slovene.

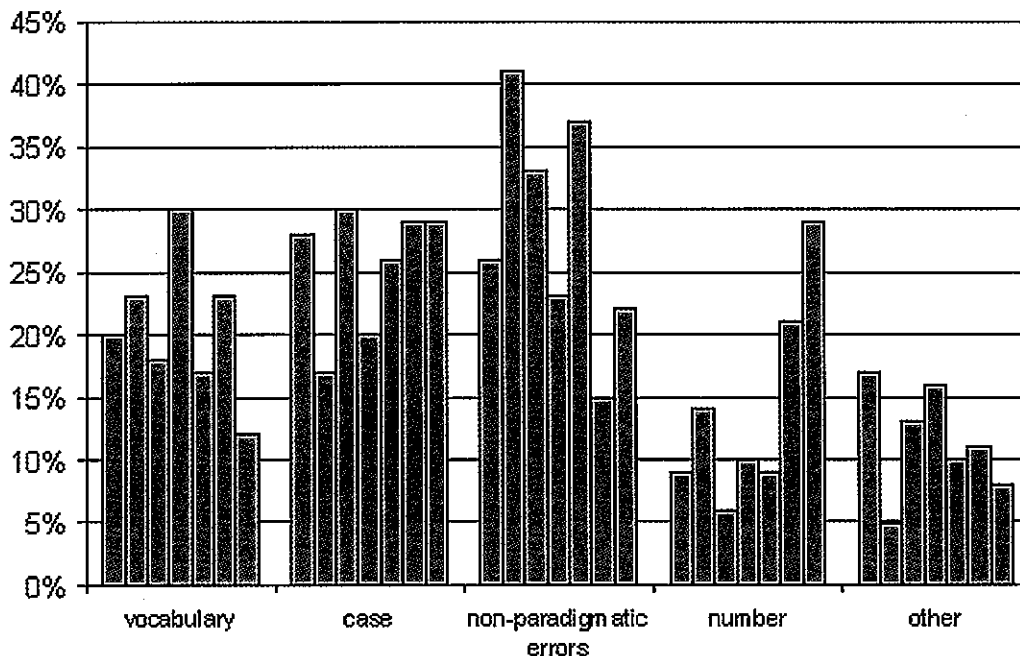


Figure 4: Percentages of the different types of errors in the second task during the seven sessions.

4.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SLOVENE LANGUAGE IN TERMS OF ITS ACQUISITION AS L2: MARKEDNESS OF AND INFLECTIONAL PATTERNS

In different languages there exist different rules, morphological and other inflectional patterns, which, in comparison to others (unmarked rules), appear to be marked. There are different definitions of markedness, deriving from different linguistic traditions (Chomsky, 1965; Zobl, 1984), “but underlying all these different definitions is the notion that some



linguistic features are 'special' in relation to others, which are more 'basic.'" (Ellis, 1994: 319).



The results of our study supported existence of more basic, more universal and more productive inflectional patterns in Slovene. In these article we present just one example of such a universal and productive pattern for verb conjugation. In Slovene there is a group of verbs with identical roots in the infinitive and the present tense (-a-; *delati, delam* i.e. *to work, I work/I'm working*). The conjugation pattern of these verbs is acquired very quickly and, according to the results of our study, tends to be over-generalized to apply to other groups of verbs, which do not follow the same pattern. The results show that participants over-generalized this unmarked pattern in such a manner that they derived the present tense forms of all the verbs (not respecting their own, marked inflectional pattern) directly from their infinitive forms, which is correct for the aforementioned group of verbs but not for others (*poklicati* – **poklicam* instead of *pokličem* i.e. *to call /I call*; *ne moči* - **ne močim* instead of *ne morem* i.e. *can not/I can't*; *ne imeti*: **ne imejo* instead of *nimajo* i.e. *not to have/they don't have*; *stanovati*: **stanovajo* (also **stanovata, *stanovato*) instead of *stanujejo* i.e. *to live/they live*).

This process of over-generalization is not typical only for acquisition of Slovene as a second language, also children acquiring Slovene as their L1 follow the same pattern (*spati*: **spam* instead of *spim* i.e. *to sleep/I sleep*; *biti*: **bim, *bimo* instead of *sem, smo* i.e. *to be/I'm, we're*).

5. CONCLUSION

In the present study, we observed and measured the development of communicative language ability among learners of Slovene as a second language. Due to the complexity of this task, our research focused on several particular elements of the development of morphological and syntactical competencies. From the standpoint of characteristics of the SLA process in general we focused most on the progressiveness in language acquisition, resulting in reduction of errors. The results of the study also supported the negative correlation between progressiveness and task complexity.

The strategy of over-generalization and attrition were confirmed as strong negative factors in acquiring Slovene a second language. Results of the study also showed that participants in the early stages of acquisition Slovene as a second language regarded the use of inflectional endings as an arbitrary or non-mandatory choice. The results of the study also supported the existence of marked and non-marked nature of different inflectional patterns in Slovene.

This study is a significant one from the methodological point of view – as first of this kind in the field of Slovene linguistic researches. Its results are important for further research in this field, as well as for their practical implications for teaching Slovene as L2.

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**NOTES**

¹ Among the participants were speakers of different languages (according to alphabetical order): Bosnian, Croatian, Dutch, English (from USA, GB and Australia), French, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Italian, Macedonian, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish (from Argentina), Swedish, Turkish, and Ukrainian. As far as we were more concerned about general characteristics of the process of acquisition of Slovene as a second language as specified above, than about specific characteristics of individuals, learning Slovene as a second language, the L1s of the participants of the study in further analysis was partly neglected. However, in a qualitative analysis and interpretation of the results, which are not a part of this article (Pirih Svetina, 2001), L1s of participant were taken into account.

² Item number 9 required very basic use of the verb 'to be' - the results show that these was the less complicated item for participants.



RAZVITAK KOMUNIKATIVNE JEZIČNE KOMPETENCIJE NA SLOVENSKOME KAO STRANOM JEZIKU: REZULTATI STUDIJE

Sažetak

Na bazi rezultata testova, pripremljenih specijalno za ovo istraživanje, došli smo do nekih zaključaka, koji se odnose na razvoj komunikativne jezične kompetencije na slovenskom kao stranom jeziku. Rezultati indiciraju a) neke od karakteristika usvajanja stranog jezika općenito, b) posebne karakteristike usvajanja slovenskoga kao stranog jezika i c) neke karakteristike slovenskog jezika koje postaju značajne tijekom procesa njegova usvajanja kao stranog jezika.

Ključne riječi: komunikativna jezična kompetencija, slovenski kao drugi ili strani jezik, usvajanje jezika, morfološka kompetencija, sintaktička kompetencija