

Stručni članak
UDK 371.671.1:371.333:811.163.42'355:81'243

Primljen 01. 06. 2005.
Prihvaćen 15. 06. 2005.

TEACH YOURSELF... MYTH OR REALITY? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE PRONUNCIATION TAPES FROM THE *TEACH YOURSELF SERBO- -CROATIAN COURSE FOR BEGINNERS*

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Many publishing companies have tried their hand at constructing courses for people who want to learn a foreign language without having to go to classes or hire a tutor. These courses usually consist of a textbook/workbook and a set of pronunciation tapes, or more recently, CDs. They are usually advertised as the painless and quick way to learn a language at one's own pace and convenience. This article looks at the pronunciation tapes of one such course, David A. Norris' *Teach Yourself Serbo-Croatian; A Complete Course for Beginners*, to investigate whether such courses can indeed teach a beginner how to speak a foreign language. The claim is made that, while providing a helpful pronunciation tool in a classroom setting, these tapes cannot, by themselves, provide adequate pronunciation training to complete beginners.

Key words: language course, pronunciation, Croatian language

Many publishing companies have tried their hand at constructing courses for people who want to learn a foreign language without having to go to classes or hire a tutor. They are usually advertised as the painless and quick way to learn a language at one's own pace and convenience. Being a language teacher, I guess I should be a little intimidated by these teacherless courses. However, I never really believed in this kind of instruction, and have always been especially skeptical of the kind of pronunciation training they provide. Before I can make any valid judgments, though, I have to look at how a teach-yourself course attempts to teach pronunciation.

I have chosen to look at David A. Norris' *Teach Yourself Serbo-Croatian*^{1/}; *A Complete Course for Beginners*. Croatian has always been considered by its native speakers as a rather difficult language to learn, but with a simple pronunciation. Even Norris comments on this: "Serbo-Croat is an easy language to spell and pronounce. Each letter is pronounced separately, and each word is spelt as it is pronounced." (Norris, 4)

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This supposition might be true for those speakers whose native languages contain exactly the same sounds as Croatian does, however, the number of such languages is not very large. For English speakers, for example, this statement doesn't hold much truth, because they first have to learn to pronounce each of the letters of the Croatian alphabet individually, and not many of them are pronounced the same as their closest English counterparts.

So how does this course attempt to teach English speakers, for whom it seems to be primarily intended, Croatian pronunciation? The book provides a short guide of Croatian pronunciation and stress patterns. It begins with the Croatian alphabet, listing all 30 letters, which then correspond to 30 sounds. Immediately following is the explanation of eight Croatian consonants not found in English – č, ć, dž, đ, š, ž, lj, and nj. To facilitate learning the correct pronunciation of these sounds, the author lists some English words said to contain the same sounds, and instructs the learner to pronounce them as these English sounds would be pronounced, with certain modification in some cases. The list also contains consonants which do exist in English, but are pronounced differently in Croatian. Some of these instructions are quite good, and result in acceptable pronunciation of Croatian sounds:

č like the 'ch' in *church* but raise your tongue towards the roof of your mouth.

ć like the 'ch' in *church* but put your tongue behind your top front teeth...

j always pronounced like 'y' in *you*." (Norris, 5)

There are some instructions, however, that are at best misleading and do not result in the production of a native-like sound. If a learner was to follow them and pronounce those sounds as instructed, the communication would not fail, but it would be very easy to tell that he or she is not a native speaker. Such instructions include the following:

lj sounds like 'll' in *million*.

nj sounds like 'ni' in *onion*. (Norris, 5)

Yet another set of instruction, namely those for /h/ and /r/, can be problematic, as they require knowledge of some other foreign languages (French, German, Spanish, Scottish). The author uses these languages, and examples from them, to illustrate the proper pronunciation of Croatian sounds, without regard for the learners who don't have any knowledge of these languages.

Vowels are dealt with in a similar way, with lists of sounds and instructions on how to pronounce them using English words as examples. The instruction is fairly accurate, and the learners shouldn't have a lot of problems acquiring the correct pronunciation of Croatian vowels.

The section on stress patterns is even more confusing than the instructions for the pronunciation of consonants. First of all, the author attempts to explain to a lay learner what

stress is in general, but never mentions the most important rule for stress in Croatian – that stress is not always on the first syllable. Then the author introduces the notion of tone, and talks briefly about the four tones in Croatian, but does not define what exactly tone is. This might be confusing to some people, because they might not be familiar with the term. Finally, statements like “you will master the tones by imitating the sounds as you hear them on the tape”, (Norris, 6) are ambiguous and misleading. Based on such a statement, one would expect to find exercises for mastering Croatian stress and tones on the tape provided with the book, where none such exercises actually exist.



The material on the tapes starts out very similarly to the guide in the book. The learner is assured that the Croatian pronunciation is very simple, and then a native speaker of Croatian reads through the Croatian alphabet. The alphabet is pronounced very slowly and clearly, but without time for the learners to repeat the individual sounds as they hear them. It might be beneficial to the learners to have this time, so they could become comfortable with individual sounds of the Croatian language before attempting to pronounce entire words and sentences.

I am very much impressed with the fact that native speakers of Croatian were used to record the tapes, although the course was designed and produced in the UK, and published in the US. I strongly believe in the importance of native input in the instruction of pronunciation of any language. It is especially important in cases of languages such as Croatian, where the learner is not regularly bombarded with native speakers on the radio, TV, in the movies or music, as would be the case with a learner of English. Chances are that the only native speaker the learner will have regular contact with will then be the teacher, or the voices on the tape of a teach-yourself course, where no teacher is present.

After hearing the alphabet, the learner is plunged straight into listening to the dialogues and exercises from the units in the book. There are no specific pronunciation exercises before that. I am surprised by this lack of basic pronunciation exercises, especially since this is marketed as a beginners course. Some exercises for pronunciation of individual sounds, as well as words in isolation (especially those words that contain particularly tricky combinations of consonants), should definitely be included.

Before each dialog begins, an English-speaking person explains what the dialogue will be about. Again time to pause and repeat the sentence heard is not given, so the learners are limited only to native input, without being asked to reproduce the sounds they have just heard. The dialogues are followed by comprehension exercises, with answers given in Croatian and English. Finally, ample time is provided to pause the tape and repeat the answers. This is the first time the learners are required, or even given a chance, to produce Croatian sounds.

This identical pattern of dialogue followed by exercises is used throughout the tape, and covers all 18 units from the book. With every exercise, the learners are supposed to repeat the given answers, until the latter parts of the course, when they are expected to produce the answers first, and then hear them on the tape to make sure their pronunciation was correct. This reoccurring pattern becomes very monotonous after a while and the learner might easily lose interest and motivation.

Even though the native input is very important, and this course does use native speakers



in all of its recordings, the way the native speakers speak on the recordings can be (and in this case is) problematic. The native speakers on these tapes speak very slowly, carefully, and sound extremely unnatural. They pronounce every sound carefully and exaggerate the differences between those sounds that might sound similar to the point where they themselves do not sound native any more. They also speak an almost obsolete variety of standard Croatian that is virtually not spoken by anyone in Croatia anymore. An ideal learner, who would learn to pronounce Croatian exactly the way the speakers on the tapes do, would still be easily recognized as a non-native speaker of Croatian, simply because he or she would sound archaic and as if hypercorrecting.

In many of the exercises on the tape, the learners have a chance to repeat dialogues. In such situations it would be extremely beneficial to have more than one learner going through the same exercise, so that their dialogues would sound more natural. However, the entire point of this course is to do it alone, to teach oneself. This is just one example how learning a foreign language in a small group would be more successful than doing it alone.

One positive aspect of the pronunciation exercises on the tapes I examined is that they are not simply designed to teach pronunciation, but also introduce some new lexical items and grammatical rules at the same time. For example, one exercise prompts the learner to repeat the pronunciation of a list of numbers. Before each number is pronounced in Croatian, though, the same number is given in English as well. In this way, learners are brushing up on their pronunciation skills at the same time as reinforcing the knowledge of Croatian terms for numbers they learned previously.

In conclusion, there are both good points and bad points about the pronunciation instruction this course offers. I would recommend both the book and the tapes as a good course for instruction (maybe not, though, for true beginners) to teacher planning a traditional classroom Croatian course. But I do not believe that anybody could really teach themselves Croatian simply by following the exercises in this book, without the help of a real, live teacher. We are definitely not replaceable.

REFERENCES

- Norris, D.A., (1997). *Teach Yourself Serbo-Croatian, A Complete Course for Beginners*. Chicago, IL: NTC Publishing Group.

(Endnotes)

¹ Although I do not agree with the label, nor with the international persistence on combining these two languages into one, I will not get into a debate on the issue in this article.

TEACH YOURSELF... MIT ILI STVARNOST? KRITIČKI OSVRT NA KASETE ZA VJEŽBANJE IZGOVORA TEČAJA ZA POČETNIKE: *TEACH YOURSELF SERBO-CROATIAN*



Sažetak:

Mnogi izdavači okušali su se u pokretanju tečajeva stranih jezika za ljude koji žele naučiti jezik bez pohađanja nastave ili uz pomoć instruktora. Takvi se tečajevi obično sastoje od knjige/vježbenice i kasete ili sve češće CD-a s vježbama za izgovor. Reklamiraju se kao brz i bezbolan način kako bi svatko naučio strani jezik tempom koji mu/joj najbolje odgovara. Ovaj članak sadrži kritički osvrt na kasete s vježbama za izgovor tečaja Davida A. Norrisa *Teach Yourself Serbo-Croatian; A Complete Course for Beginners*. Članak nudi odgovor na pitanje mogu li takvi tečajevi zbilja naučiti potpunog početnika kako da pravilno govori te izgovara neki strani jezik, uz tvrdnju da, iako mogu poslužiti kao pomoć pri učenju jezika u učionici, kasete za vježbu izgovora nisu dovoljne kako bi netko sam naučio jezik.

Ključne riječi: tečaj stranih jezika, izgovor, hrvatski jezik

