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The HiT-1 e-course:

Ten years of successfully teaching and learning Croatian as a foreign, second, and heritage language¹

Abstract English

This paper explores ten years of experience from the Croatian Internet Course (HiT-1) of the University of Zagreb developed for students who do not know Croatian at all or only know its basics. Using an e-learning system, Moodle Community (MoD) students discover, study and practice new content. An above-average dropout rate, associated with a sense of loneliness and insufficient interaction with the teacher and other students, is considered a major shortcoming of e-courses. To counteract this, HiT-1 offers individual live lessons twice a week. During them the e-content is repeated, practiced, and expanded through similar materials. HiT-1 students have pointed out in evaluations that live lessons led to successful attendance and completion, and thus to a very low dropout rate. In live lessons, students are exposed to Croatian from the beginning and use it in conversation with teachers; sometimes the teacher is the only L1 speaker of Croatian with whom they can speak Croatian. Finally, language acquisition is greatly influenced by regular, systematic monitoring of student activities in the MoD system, an individual approach, constant support, and encouragement, either by chat or in live lessons. So far 260 students from around 50 countries have attended the course, and more than 6,200 hours of individual live lessons have been held.

Keywords: language learning and acquisition, e-course, Croatian as foreign, second and heritage language, individual live lessons

Abstract Croatian

U ovome se radu istražuje desetogodišnje iskustvo s Hrvatskoga internetskoga tečaja (HiT-1) Sveučilišta u Zagrebu namijenjenoga svima koji hrvatski uopće ne poznaju ili poznaju samo njegove osnove. U sustavu za e-učenje Moodle u društvu (MoD) učenici se upoznaju s novim sadržajima, proučavaju ih i uvježbavaju. Kako se velikim nedostatkom e-tečaja smatra iznadprosječni postotak odustajanja uzrokovan osjećajem usamljenosti te nedovoljnom interakcijom s nastavnikom i drugim učenicima, nastavni sadržaji iz e-sustava HiT-a obvezno se dopunjuju nastavom uživo. Na njoj se nastavni sadržaji dodatno objašnjavaju, uvježbavaju i proširuju uvođenjem sličnih sadržaja. Polaznici pak HiT-a u završnome vrednovanju upućuju na to da je upravo nastava uživo ključna za uspješno pohađanje i završavanje e-tečaja uz iznimno mali postotak odustajanja. Zahvaljujući nastavi uživo, učenici su od samoga početka izloženi hrvatskomu, mogu se njime služiti u razgovoru s nastavnicima, a mnogima od njih nastavnik je jedini izvorni govornik hrvatskoga jezika s kojim mogu razgovarati. I na kraju, na napredovanje pri usvajanju jezika zasigurno uvelike utječe svakodnevno sustavno praćenje učenikovih aktivnosti u MoD-u, individualni pristup, stalna potpora, ali i ohrabivanje učenika, bilo *chatom* ili nastavom uživo. Tečaj je do sada pohađalo 260 polaznika iz 50-ak zemalja, a održano je i više od 6200 sati individualne nastave uživo.

Ključne riječi: učenje i usvajanje jezika, e-tečaj, hrvatski kao ini, individualna nastava uživo

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1. Introduction

Following the introduction of modern technology, language learning methods have come to form a continuum. At its one end, there is learning in a traditional classroom with the support of technology. At its other end, there is learning in which only technology and students exist (cf. Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 97). In any case, nowadays technology is an integral part of learning, from sound and image reproducing devices, through computers, to interactive whiteboards. Moreover, the fast development of technology can best be observed in education since technology is not being adapted to teaching, but teaching is being adjusted to technology (cf. Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 97).

Note, however, that language learning via information and communication technologies (ICTs)² has been present in curricula since the 1960s (cf. Heift & Chapelle, 2012, p. 555), but the ICTs used nowadays are more sophisticated and diverse. Scholars (e.g., Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Ally, 2009; Bahrani, 2011; Mindog, 2016) have discussed mobile learning, including the use of mobile devices and text messages, for teaching purposes. Depending on the level of ICT use, there are four forms of learning: face-to-face (F2F), F2F enriched by ICTs, mixed or hybrid, and distance³ learning (cf. de Cássia Veiga Marriott & Lupion Torres, 2009, p. xxxi). Croatian as a foreign, second (L2), and heritage (HL) language is being taught in all these forms, but until recently hybrid and e-learning were far less common (cf. Kanajet Šimić & Cvikić, 2014, p. 157–161).⁴

E-learning is highly appealing as “[i]t is particularly suited to support communicative language learning objectives and methods and shows a high level of compliance with the principles of learner autonomy, authentication, and collaborative learning”. In it “[r]elevant dimensions of language-focused learning (listening, reading, speaking and writing on the basis of multimedia materials, e. g. cultural or subject-specific texts and videos) can be pedagogically combined with written or spoken learning activities in forums, chats or voice/video conferences” (Kohn, 2009, p. 587). In addition to these reasons, over the past two years due to the COVID-pandemic hybrid and e-learning have become almost inevitable (cf. Gruber & Bauer, 2020). However, numerous language e-courses have existed for decades, and in 2011 the Croatian Internet Course (HiT-1), held twice a year (in both winter and summer semesters) at the University of Zagreb, joined the list (cf. Kolaković, 2011).

² Bilyalova (2017, p. 176) defines ICT in the context of foreign language teaching as a “set of methods and techniques designed to collect, organize, store, process, transmit and present the information which enlarge the socio-cultural knowledge of students and provides them with a socio-cultural competence.”

³ The terms distance learning, e-learning, and online learning are often interchangeably used without meaningful definitions (Moore et al., 2011, p. 129). Richards & Schmidt (2010, p. 179) define distance learning as “the linking of learners and teachers in different locations and often in real time, by telephone, telecast, satellite, computer and other technological support, or through the use of learning packages” and thus do not consider it to be synonymous with e-learning.

⁴ Both hybrid and e-courses inevitably include ICTs, as classes partially or completely take place in a virtual environment (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 99, 102). Moreover, they necessarily involve pedagogical control centers, which can be learning management systems (LMS) such as *Moodle* (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003), one of the most used in the world (cf. Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 102; Badia et al., 2019, p. 484). For the core pedagogical functions of an LMS see Kohn (2009, p. 586).

By examining ten years of experience from HiT-1, the first of its kind in the Republic of Croatia, this paper explores how a successful e-course can only be designed if previous studies are taken into account. Section 2 briefly presents the preparations for the HiT-1 e-course and its development. Section 3 gives an overview of the course’s design process, including underlying didactic principles and motivation strategies. It is followed by Section 4, focusing on the symbiosis between HiT-1 and research, and by Section 5, containing conclusions.

2. Preparations for the HiT-1 e-course and its development

An online questionnaire conducted by the Croatian Heritage Foundation over a half-year period identified more than 700 persons interested in a Croatian e-course (Cvikić et al., 2010, p. 121). Moreover, it turned out that many students did not have the opportunity to learn Croatian in their own country or could not come to Croatia. Thus, the survey showed that the need to learn Croatian was greater than the offer, indicating the need for a Croatian e-course for the Croatian diaspora in South America, Europe, and North America (Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2017, p. 654).⁵ In 2009 the Croatian Heritage Foundation, the University of Zagreb, and the University Computing Centre (SRCE), with the financial support⁶ of the Ministry of Science and Education and the Croatian Heritage Foundation, started developing an e-course for Croatian as an L2 and HL (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 319f.).⁷ The development of HiT-1 was a demanding, complex, and extensive four-stage project coherent with methodology for development and evaluation of e-learning content (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 102, 104; cf. Govindasamy, 2001, p. 290f.). HiT-1 made Croatian one of the languages that can be taught remotely, and put it ahead of many languages with far more L1 speakers (cf. Kolaković, 2011, p. 119).

As described, the preparatory phase consisted of learner analysis. Its first stage involved defining the technical prerequisites for the development of the e-course and training teachers to work in the e-learning system (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 102). The SRCE provided the *Moodle u društvu* (MoD) system based on *Moodle*, the open-source e-learning software⁸ (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003), upgraded it with modules needed for language learning that were previously not available, and organized workshops for the course authors.⁹ The second stage of almost two years (until the end of 2010) involved the development of HiT-1 (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 319). Under the guidance and expert advice of Zrinka Jelaska, course authors Marija Bošnjak, Lidija

⁵ The questionnaire also revealed that a formal confirmation of Croatian language knowledge (diploma, certificate) was desired (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 320).

⁶ The Ministry of Culture and the City of Zagreb also supported HiT-1 financially, as did the Adris Foundation, which helped to equip the e-classroom (Bošnjak, 2015, p. 58f.).

⁷ Since 2015 the Central State Office for Croats Abroad (cf. Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2017, p. 654), and since 2022 the University of Zagreb have supported the course by providing scholarships.

⁸ Moodle supports constructivist and social constructivist approaches to education (cf. https://docs.moodle.org/311/en/Pedagogy#How_Moodle_tries_to_support_a_Social_Constructionist_view; Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 534).

⁹ The SRCE also provides constant technical support (Bošnjak, 2015, p. 59).

Cvikić, and Zrinka Kolaković¹⁰ designed the syllabus and all course materials, including multimedia content, interactive exercises, and assignments (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103).¹¹ In the executive phase, the units were perfected, and HiT-1 was tested during a promotional pilot semester in spring 2011. Helpful information obtained during the pilot semester led to the necessary supplementation and correction of content and materials (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 324; cf. Govindasamy, 2001, p. 291). The first regular semester started in autumn 2011 (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 102).

3. Developing HiT-1

3.1 HiT-1 prerequisites and scope

It is vital to prepare teachers for e-learning by training them so that they develop the required technical and didactic skills (cf. Hampel & Stickler, 2005, p. 311; Luke & Britten, 2007, p. 254). Therefore, prior to the development of HiT-1, teachers were trained to work with the MoD system. Furthermore, the course goals and learning focus were defined, the syllabus was designed, and the structure and the order of course content were set. Finally, the structure and presentation of course materials and teaching methods were elaborated (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103; cf. Whetten, 2007, p. 341).

The goals were set taking into account the needs of potential students (Cvikić et al., 2010; see Section 2), with A1 as the target language level (cf. Council of Europe, 2001). In other words, the target group of HiT-1 was defined as adult students¹² who do not know Croatian at all or only know its basics (Kolaković, 2011, p. 121).

HiT-1 combines students' independent learning via the MoD system and live lessons in a virtual classroom, meaning that there is a continuity of learning in between live lessons (Kanajet Šimić & Cvikić, 2014, p. 160). To be able to focus on the program's content students have to learn how to use the system and get to know it well (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 132). Therefore, an instruction manual with pictures and explanations in English and Spanish was written for the MoD system. Additionally, an introductory "getting started" unit was created. It aims to acquaint students with the system's modules and with different course activities in MoD. Each HiT-1 participant must complete the introductory part successfully before even starting e-learning Croatian (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103f.). E-learning in the MoD system consists of eight units,¹³ which cover more than 150 activities for students' independent work. Each unit has the same sequence of interrelated activities. Moreover, some activities cannot be accessed if the previous one has not been performed successfully (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 139; cf. Marius-Costel, 2010, p. 27).

¹⁰ The team mentioned here has extensive theoretical knowledge and applied expertise with respect to studying Croatian as a L2 and HL (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 138).

¹¹ Illustrator Mislav Tomašinjak and translators Gordana Dobravac (English) and Maša Musulin (Spanish) were the remaining contributors (Kolaković, 2011, p. 120f.). Maša Musulin has regularly taught individual live lessons since the autumn of 2013.

¹² HiT-1 students were from 18 to 74 years old.

¹³ The purpose of the last unit is not to acquire new content but to prepare for the final examination.

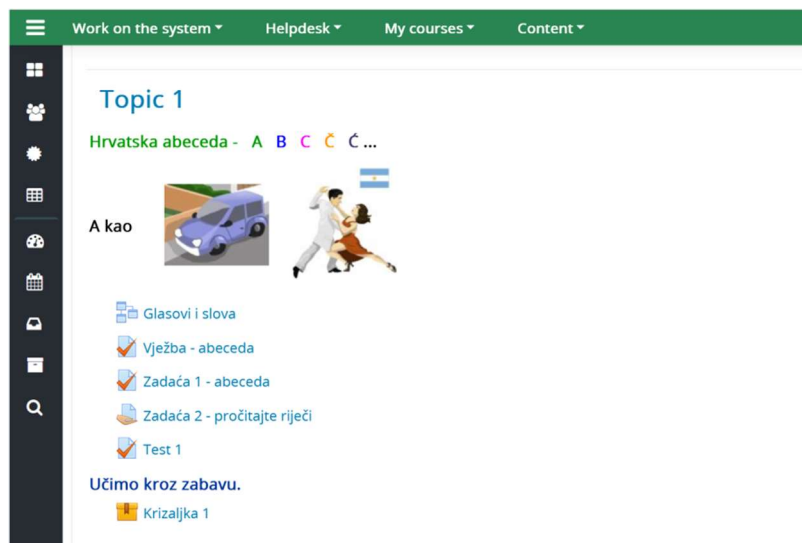


Figure 1: The first unit in the MoD system

The units consist of texts in both written and audio format, and texts in audio format only, which foster basic communication skills, exercises for reading, listening comprehension, speaking and writing, and explanations of basic grammatical structures written in Croatian, English, and Spanish (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 321). Moreover, each unit contains interactive pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical exercises,¹⁴ games, dictations, self-assessment activities, homework assignments, a morphological dictionary¹⁵ with translations into English and Spanish, and cultural information about Croatia (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103). In MoD, the *Abeceda Hrvatske* (Alphabet of Croatia) takes students on a virtual journey to Croatia during which they learn more about cultural landmarks, food, souvenirs, festivals, and the like (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 324).

3.2 Selected didactic principles underlying HiT-1

In teaching, principles are understood as teachers' beliefs and theories concerning effective¹⁶ approaches to teaching and learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 456). Most of the pedagogical principles that apply to the F2F delivery method also apply to e-learning (Govindasamy, 2001, p. 288).

Following the principle of appropriateness, the course materials were adapted to students who are learning Croatian for the first time (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322; cf. Težak, 1996, p.

¹⁴ Exercises are of different types (including yes-no, pairing, multiple or short answers, and filling in gaps) (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 324). This is in accordance with Lucariello et al. (2015, p. 30), who recommends that during (self)assessment a sufficient number of questions overall and a variety of questions and question types on the same topic should be posed.

¹⁵ Nouns and verbs are presented with their paradigms.

¹⁶ Note that effective teaching depends heavily on teachers being informed consumers of educational research (Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 31).

107). To avoid demotivation, they had to be neither too difficult nor too easy (cf. Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 20).

In an F2F course, a teacher can respond to students' questions, needs, and interests (partially or entirely) on the spot: content (such as vocabulary or grammatical exercises) can be omitted or added. In contrast, in an e-course the amount of content is usually determined in advance. In the case of HiT, it was essential to abide by the principles of economy: to strictly assess the amount of content, tasks, explanations, assignments and exercises,¹⁷ needed to reach A1 level in Croatian (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322; cf. Težak, 1996, p. 105).

It is well known that “[s]etting goals that are short term (proximal), specific, and moderately challenging enhances motivation more than establishing goals that are long term (distal), general, and overly challenging” and that “[s]tudents profit from a predictable structure” (Lucariello et al., 2015, 20, 26). As the MoD system does not provide direct interaction with a teacher, and in order to foster students' self-regulatory skills and motivation, in designing the course, great attention was paid to the systematic and gradual sequencing of contents (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322; cf. Težak, 1996, p. 104f.; Marius-Costel, 2010, p. 27; Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 13, 16). To allow students to follow and acquire lexical and grammatical units more smoothly, the presentation of contents needed clarity, interrelatedness, and logical organization (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322).

One of the essential didactic questions is directly related to the aforesaid and concerns the principle of visibility (cf. Težak, 1996, p. 108; Machin, 2014).¹⁸ The principle of visibility assumes that content should be explained and presented with as little text as possible. Instead, illustrations, videos and recordings should be used to replace direct contact with the teacher and their instructions (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322), see Figure 2.





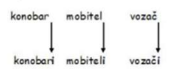

	ženski rod	muški rod	srednji rod
jednina			
	jabuka	konobar, mobilni telefon, vozač	more, pečivo
množina			
	jabuke	konobari, mobilni telefoni, vozači	more, pečiva

Figure 2: Formation of the nominative plural for nouns (principle of visibility)

¹⁷ Unlike in tasks, in grammatical or lexical exercises learners cannot use a range of language structures to achieve desired outcomes but have to use forms that have been specified in advance (cf. Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 173f; Nunan, 2004, p. 4).

¹⁸ This principle especially concerns the visual type of learners (cf. Grgić & Kolaković, 2010, p. 90; Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 629).

Given that, students are likely to be of different ages, have developed different abilities and interests, and undergone different language experiences (cf. Jelaska et al., 2005, p. 108), it is crucial to adhere to the principles of topicality and liveliness (cf. Rosandić, 2005; Aljohani, 2017, p. 104).¹⁹ Therefore, HiT-1 includes content suitable for different age and interest groups, useful in various situations (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 323).²⁰ Simultaneously, providing diverse content means that the principle of individualization (cf. Težak, 1996, p. 107; Aljohani, 2017, p. 104) is complied with. By respecting students' individual interests, as well as cognitive and other differences, the teachers encourage them to achieve the best possible results (cf. Grgić & Kolaković, 2010, p. 78, 80; Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 7).

3.3 Nurturing students' motivation

Experts (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner & Smythe, 1975; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) believe that motivation is one of the factors that strongly influence language acquisition. Motivation is a complex phenomenon that includes the desire to learn, attitudes toward learning the language, and the effort expended to learn the language (cf. Gardner, 1985, p. 54).²¹ Therefore, when compiling the course, the authors kept in mind that students would be learning independently on their computers. In HiT-1 students are responsible for their own learning progress. To successfully complete the course, students must be regularly active in MoD. They become acquainted with the course materials provided in MoD independently, and study and practice by themselves. They learn new vocabulary and grammatical elements, read and listen to texts, write essays and take dictation tests, and do grammatical and vocabulary exercises (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122; cf. Murphy, 2011, p. 108). As lectures are shifted out of the classroom, learning in HiT-1 has the form of a flipped/inverted classroom (cf. Lage et al., 2000). The advantage is that students can go through the language material at a time that suits them, and in addition they can determine the pace of learning, which helps them focus on acquiring mastery (progressing) in addition to performance (outcome) (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122; cf. Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 18). The independent learning process was taken into account in particular when developing the course's grammatical contents (tasks, explanations, assignments, and exercises). Special emphasis was also placed on developing listening, writing, and speaking skills via original video and audio content, as well as homework assignments in written or oral form. Thus, audio and visual materials are included in all teaching units and all texts are accompanied by image and sound. Moreover, students can communicate via chat with the teacher and each other. In that way, by using all these advantages, the authors tried to compensate for the disadvantages and limitations of e-learning (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 322ff.).

¹⁹ In Croatian these are called *načelo životnosti i zanimljivosti*.

²⁰ In the communicative approach to language teaching (cf. Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 98f) the main goal is to enable students to use the language appropriately in various communication situations. Accordingly, the purpose of grammar is not to acquire linguistic knowledge but to develop language and communication skills (Novak Milić & Cvikić, 2007, p. 145).

²¹ For recent studies on motivation in the context of teaching Slavic languages, see the first issue of DiSlaw (<https://doi.org/10.25651/3.2021.0001>).

Although e-learning has many advantages, an above-average dropout rate (more than 80%) is considered its major shortcoming (cf. Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013, p. 218). Lee & Choi (2011, p. 594) associate this with a sense of loneliness and insufficient interaction with the teacher and other students. Literature (e.g., Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999, p. 50; Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 126–149; Gunawardena & Mclsaac, 2013, p. 377) also suggests that in an e-learning environment, the student-teacher relationship is crucial for the successful completion of e-language courses because it reduces fear and increases motivation. Furthermore, for proper development of speaking skills in a language e-course, regular and direct oral communication with the teacher is necessary (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 132). However, in MoD, the most represented language skills are reading, writing, and listening, whereas the least represented is speaking, or to be precise, talking. As HiT-1 is an A1-level language e-course, a component of real-time communication within it was also vital. Therefore, to ensure successful course completion it was decided that real-time lessons should also be integrated into the course as teaching methods (Bošnjak & Kolaković, 2013, p. 323).²² Advantageously, the course's teachers participated in the HiT-1 design process and are fully aware of MoD's possible weak and strong sides. Each student has individual live lessons with a Croatian language teacher twice a week at prearranged times via Skype: 24 lessons of 45 minutes each (cf. Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103).^{25, 26, 27, 28}

Especially at the basic user levels, teachers have several vital roles: they pass on information and knowledge to students, stimulate learning, encourages communication, help students during conversations by offering them the needed words or correct answers, and correct grammatical, lexical and pragmatic errors and mistakes (cf. Bošnjak & Filipović, 2009). For HiT-1 teachers, live lessons are an excellent opportunity to respond to individual students' interests,²³ to encourage students to see their mistakes and wrong answers as opportunities to learn, and to help them to generalize learning to new contexts (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122; cf. Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 10f, 18). For some students learning Croatian as a foreign or ancestral language,²⁴ the teacher is the only L1 speaker with whom they have the opportunity to speak in Croatian. Therefore, several teachers hold live lessons so that students can hear and get used to as many different L1 speakers as possible (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 133, 144f).²⁵ Since acquiring long-term knowledge and skills is largely dependent on practice, individual live lessons give students a chance to practice the basic structures learned on MoD (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122; cf. Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 11).²⁶ “[L]anguage can best be learned [...] through communication, rather than for it [...], and second, [...] the language acquisition can be enhanced by working not only on language, but also on the

²² Kohn (2009, p. 586) sees blended language learning as a response to the pedagogical limitations and lack of success of an ‘e-learning only’ strategy. The present paper demonstrates that successful language e-learning does not necessarily include an F2F classroom setup.

²³ These are characteristics of any good one-to-one teaching in which the teacher is focused on their student the whole time (cf. Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 409; Ban & Matovac, 2012, p. 249).

²⁴ Unlike a heritage language, an ancestral language is a language used by ancestors that was not passed to or acquired by descendants, leaving them only with the awareness of their family connections to that language (cf. Jelaska, 2005, p. 52; Vuković, 2010, p. 79).

²⁵ Bear in mind that students differ in their learning styles and strategies just as teachers differ in their teaching. Having several language teachers promotes better learning within that diversity (cf. Grgić & Kolaković, 2010).

²⁶ Not to forget that live lessons are also essential for the auditory type of learners (Grgić & Kolaković, 2010, p. 88; Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 41).

process of learning” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. xii). Therefore, in live lessons, content learned individually on MoD is repeated, practiced, and expanded through introduction of similar content (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 134). Content that causes difficulties is paid special attention through additional exercises (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122). Note that in general this lesson type is rarely integrated into language e-courses due to organizational difficulties, because it requires additional staff (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 133).

3.4 Monitoring student activity, teachers’ feedback and support

Supporting students and respecting their emotional well-being influences educational performance and learning (Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 21, 23, 26). Therefore, they are an integral part of any teaching process. However, in e-learning conditions, support and respect are essential for students since in such conditions, students are alone at a computer for most of the time and have direct contact neither with the teacher nor with classmates (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 104). In e-learning conditions, encouragement and support from the teacher are invaluable (Bošnjak & Landsman Vinković, 2015, p. 25).

Giving clear, explanatory, timely and private feedback essential for students’ learning (cf. Dörnyei, 2001, p. 124; Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 12, 18) is substantially enabled by the e-learning system. The MoD system allows the lecturer to monitor the dynamics and amount of student activities, that is to see exactly when students visited the system and which exercises they did. To ensure the continuity of learning and closely monitor students’ progress, after each completed unit students take a test that checks how well the grammatical and lexical structures have been learned: instead of a single test there are multiple assessments (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 103; cf. Lucariello et al., 2015, p. 30). After 12 weeks, students take the final written and oral examination to demonstrate how well they have mastered the course material (Kolaković, 2011, p. 122f). The tests and examination are written at a prearranged time, can be accessed only once, and are time limited.

For students, it is essential to know that there is a person in charge of the system with whom they can discuss any technical issues at any time. In other words, they must not feel reliant only on themselves during the learning process (Shield et al., 2001, p. 81ff). In the HiT-1 course, the key to students’ progress and success, i.e., to learning and mastering the language and combating dropout, proved to be daily systematic monitoring of student activity combined with the individual approach offered by live lessons. HiT-1 students receive constant support and encouragement via email, chat, and live lessons (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 104).

In conclusion, the teachers’ responsibilities in HiT-1 are: monitoring students’ activities in the system, checking and giving feedback on speaking, listening and writing (homework) assignments, marking tests and verifying scores (some exercises have automatic feedback, others have to be checked manually), managing availability (opening and closing) of content in the e-system, developing additional teaching materials, and organizing and conducting live lessons (Cvikić et al., 2012, p. 104).

3.5 Course completion and student evaluations

Students who successfully pass the final examinations receive a bilingual Croatian-English diploma and a report from the University School of Croatian Language and Culture.²⁷ The report gives the number of teaching hours and lists two grades – for the written and for oral examination. The grade transcript is bicultural. In Croatian, grades are expressed in words and numbers according to the Croatian grading system: excellent (5), very good (4), and so on. In English, grades exhibit a more stratified distinction of success: they are expressed in words and letters that appear in three forms, for example excellent (A+), excellent (A), and excellent (A-) (cf. Valdevit & Jelaska, 2008, p. 233; Bošnjak, 2014, p. 139). Students who do not pass the oral or written part of the final examination receive a Confirmation of Participation (Kolaković, 2011, p. 123).

At the end of the course, students complete an evaluation survey comprising 26 open- and closed-ended questions. They give feedback on course quality, covering the teaching materials, live lessons, and teachers, sharing their suggestions, praises and objections (Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2017, p. 657). Students who took part in the HiT-1 course commented in their final evaluations that e-learning was much better than they had ever imagined, and they rated HiT-1 at an average grade of 4.8 on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) (Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2019, p. 64). In their words, HiT-1 allowed them to study when, for how long, and where they wanted, and it was precisely this liberation from time and place constraints as well as being responsible for their own learning that was seen as an advantage (Kanajet Šimić & Cvikić, 2014, p. 161; cf. Kohn, 2009, p. 587f; Lee & Choi, 2011, p. 593). Unlike F2F courses with limited teaching hours, HiT-1 allows students to access the MoD system as often as they need to master the contents, or as often as they want. Whereas in F2F courses the group determines the contents and speed, and individual needs are sometimes difficult to meet, HiT-1 provides a high degree of individualization (Kanajet Šimić & Cvikić, 2014, p. 161). In the students' opinion, the most significant assets of HiT-1 are as follows:

- temporally and spatially unlimited learning,
- rich multimedia,
- interesting and professional teaching materials that foster communication and other language skills,
- individualization of learning,
- constant monitoring of progress and support via live lessons, and
- expertise and professional approach of the teachers (Kolaković, 2011, p. 124).

What is more, in their final evaluation, HiT-1 students emphasized how essential they found the constant support from teachers, regular feedback, and the additional clarification of MoD con-

²⁷ On average, around 85% of the students successfully pass the final examination (cf. Bošnjak & Jelaska, 2016a, p. 427).

tent in live lessons (Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2017, p. 655). Moreover, the final evaluations revealed that all students considered organized and regular live lessons a necessity (cf. Bošnjak, 2014, p. 141; HiT-1 evaluations 2015–2021),²⁸ see student remarks (1) to (4) below.²⁹

1. I thought the live sessions were the best part of the course. The instructors are so good at making the student feel comfortable and at ease, seamlessly transitioning between languages -- gently pushing you to speak in Croatian but making sure you understand what is being asked of you and always leaving time for questions. I really thought I would dislike the sessions because I hate being put “on the spot” but I found the sessions to be engaging and fun, and I don’t think I would have learned nearly as much without them. I always looked forward to them. And it was also helpful having more than one instructor to learn from, with different perspectives and teaching styles.
2. I absolutely loved the live sessions. My dear *profesorice* made each session quite enhancing and fun by adjusting to my level of understanding and knowledge, and made sure to maximize the benefit of communicative learning. Without those sessions this course would never be the same!
3. I loved the use of Skype. It was great to review the material and interact in Croatian with the teachers to improve my vocabulary, grammar but also to train myself to speak in Croatian and to hear spoken Croatian in a conversation. This is crucial for learning another language, hearing and interacting with a native speaker is necessary.
4. The instructors were extremely helpful and patient and they go into details that are not available in the learning materials. There is no substitute for speaking with someone when learning the language.

None of the students reported that an e-course without a teacher would have been preferred. Furthermore, 15% of the students expressed a desire for three hours of live lessons per week (HiT-1 evaluations 2011–2021).³⁰ It seems that live classes were the key to successful attendance and completion with a dropout rate below 10% (Bošnjak & Jelaska, 2016a, p. 432).³¹ Note that there exist free-of-charge Croatian e-courses. However, the students’ willingness to pay for the course and their determination to complete it within three months also indicate how vital live lessons are (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 142f). The most common and most considerable objection was

²⁸ It is not unusual for students to participate in live lessons from different places: hotel rooms, taxis, trains, and concert halls. This also confirms the importance of live lessons and the students’ desire and willingness to participate regardless of their time and location (Bošnjak, 2014, p. 140).

²⁹ The provided feedback comments were neither proofread nor revised.

³⁰ This is in accordance with Kohn’s (2009, p. 589) observation that “[a]utonomous learning needs to be accompanied by suitable tutorial measures in the sense of ‘guided autonomy’”.

³¹ It is worth pointing out that the vast majority are early dropouts: people who realize within the first few weeks that they cannot fit the language course into their busy schedule.

that there is no e-course of this kind for higher levels, so most students could not continue learning Croatian (Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić, 2017, p. 657).

4. Symbiosis between HiT-1 and research

The previous sections demonstrate how HiT-1, a strategically important project for the Republic of Croatia, has proven to be highly successful because its design followed research findings. Furthermore, since its teachers themselves are interested in conducting research, HiT-1 is considered a first-class tool for data gathering on various aspects of language usage and acquisition (Bošnjak & Landsman Vinković, 2015, p. 20). Consequently, HiT-1 has become the topic of dozens of scholarly and best practice articles, and also of numerous conference presentations (for a thorough overview, see Bošnjak, 2022).

Kolaković (2011) described the preparations for and the designing of HiT-1, including its pilot semester. Cvikić & Kanajet Šimić (2012) discussed the use of technologies in Croatian language teaching, with emphasis on the HiT-1 e-course. Cvikić et al. (2012) provided a didactic perspective on Croatian as an L2 in an e-environment, while Bošnjak & Kolaković (2013) presented basic methodological, pedagogical, and didactic principles to be followed in the design of a language e-course. Bošnjak (2014) discussed the workload of Croatian e-teachers, including their schedules while working with students from different time zones. Kanajet Šimić & Cvikić (2014) explored e-learning of Croatian as an HL, whereas Bošnjak & Jelaska (2016a) studied the impact of the Croatian as an HL vs. L2 factor on results in final written and oral exams. Bošnjak & Jelaska (2016b) investigated whether the share of English as the intermediary language decreased in the speech production of two students (HL and L2 student) and one teacher compared to Croatian as the target language by the end of the e-course. Bošnjak & Landsman Vinković (2015) dealt with the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning Croatian and German as an L2. Bošnjak & Kanajet Šimić (2019) provided a retrospective look at the past 20 semesters of HiT-1. Moreover, HiT-1 was used as a data source for the first PhD dedicated to the lexical development of L2 Croatian learners during a beginner's e-course. Based on transcripts of individual live lessons, Bošnjak (2022) described and compared morphology in the speech production of L2 and HL speakers over the three months of the e-course.

5. Conclusion

A new online era in learning Croatian as a foreign, second, and heritage language started in 2011. HiT-1 placed the Croatian language alongside major languages for which similar e-courses exist. In the ten years of its existence, 23 winter and summer semesters of HiT-1 have been held, and 260 students from around 50 countries on various continents have attended the course. More than 6,200 hours of individual live lessons have been taught. HiT-1 is ideal for students who cannot learn Croatian F2F in their own country or in Croatia, but also for those who simply prefer a more flexible way of learning a language than in F2F courses.

On the one hand, this case study shows how a successful e-course can only be designed if previous studies have been taken into account. On the other hand, during the last ten years, the

case of HiT-1 has demonstrated how regular, systematic monitoring of student activities in the MoD system, an individual approach, constant support, and encouragement, either by chat or in live lessons, greatly influence learners' progress in language acquisition. Moreover, in live lessons, students are exposed to Croatian from the very beginning and can use it in conversations with their teachers. For many of them, the teacher is the only person with whom they can speak in Croatian. Finally, experience from HiT-1 teaches us that incorporating live lessons into a language e-course can help drastically decrease drop-out rates (to less than 10%). A teacher's role seems to be crucial in keeping the motivation of language e-learners at a high level. Therefore, they should be included in as many e-courses as possible, either in online live lessons or in a blended F2F learning setup.

To conclude, as evaluation surveys testify, HiT students eagerly expect a sequel due to its exceptional quality. Since there is undoubtedly a need for e-courses at higher levels it seems crucial to promote and support the HiT project in the future.

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