
LANGUAGE GAMES AS A CONTEMPORARY METHOD OF TEACHING GRAMMAR CONTENT IN THE CLASS CONTEXT

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Abstract: Early language learning in the classroom context is primarily aimed at the development of students' competencies, ie language communication, and this is not possible without the adoption of the spelling and grammar norm of the standard language. According to the new subject curriculum, which was introduced in 2019 in Croatia, students from third to eighth grade learn about the language norm: orthographic, spelling, grammar and lexical at the usable level. Metalanguage knowledge is taught on the basis of already acquired language experiences, and new knowledge is expanded and deepened in accordance with the orderly language development of the child and individual learning dynamics. The subject area of Croatian language and communication is based on learning and teaching language skills and mastering the language as a system in use. In communication situations, the student acquires language skills, knowledge of the language and masters language activities. In order for a student to master communicative language competence, it is necessary to apply new approaches and methods in teaching in accordance with students' interests. Younger school-age children are in a specific developmental stage and play is an appropriate activity for them. When we can interest the student through play and develop a positive attitude towards language content, then learning is more successful, memorization is accelerated, and understanding of learning content is facilitated. Language games in teaching are not new, but their application in the classroom does not yet suppress traditional teaching methods. Therefore, a quantitative research on the application of language games in the teaching of spelling and grammar content in Croatia was realized in the paper. We were interested in whether the textbooks used by teachers included language games in the activities within the textbook unit and which games were involved. Textbooks from the first to the fourth grade for the Croatian language from 2015 to 2020 were researched. The second research interest was focused on teachers and attitudes as well as forms of application of language games in language teaching. This research was conducted by an anonymous online survey on a sample of 214 surveyed teachers from all over Croatia. The results of this search showed that almost half of the teachers use language games as a modern method in teaching, but somewhat more in grammar teaching than spelling. Teachers use voice and rhythm games as well as spelling and morphology, and to a lesser extent lexical, semantic and syntactic games. Teachers conduct the most common association games, competition games, crossword puzzles, memory, rebuses, twisters, digital games, drama games. In the teaching of spelling and grammar, language play as a method is most often used to repeat and determine the content at the end of the school lesson-

Keywords: early language acquisition, language games, teaching methods, mother tongue teaching, spelling and grammar teaching

1. INTRODUCTION - GAME IN TEACHING

Spelling and grammar content often cause students difficulties in learning their mother tongue because they are often abstract and boring, so it is important that teachers find a suitable method in imparting this knowledge to students according to their age. One of the ways is to apply the game as a teaching method since *learning by playing means learning unconsciously, which facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge, especially if it is about content that is too abstract and uninteresting for primary school children (eg grammar and spelling content)* (Pavličević - Franić, 2005: 77). Play also creates a positive atmosphere in the classroom, so teachers, especially in early mother tongue learning, should use play as a teaching method as much as possible when teaching language content. It amuses students and relaxes, entertains, improves concentration and reduces the fear of making mistakes. The benefits of playing in a mother tongue class were best structured by Adam Simpson (2015). He talks about the benefits of the game, which he divided into: affective benefits (games are a good affective filter, encourage creative and spontaneous use of language, improve communication competence, are stimulating and funny); cognitive advantages (games speed up learning, shorten and speed up learning, games use grammar at the level of communication); teaching dynamics (games are focused on the student, the teacher is only the leader of the activity, games build classroom community, improve the participation of all students in the class, promote healthy competition); games are adaptable (games are easily adapted to age, level and interests, apply all four language activities, do not require too much preparation after the initial level). Games encourage creativity and spontaneous use of language (Cam & Tran, 2017). Cicchino (2015) emphasizes that motivation, a pleasant atmosphere during

work, and the active engagement of students are the most valuable impact of games on teaching. The positive impact of games is also reflected on the teacher because it encourages many skills and abilities such as creativity, efficiency, student-centered teaching, communication skills. Thus Gruss (2016) points out that by creating games, teachers become innovative, select and rethink games, create and design them based on student interests. Nikčević-Milković et al. (2011) point out that play in teaching can be applied in all stages of the teaching process. They confirm that it is especially used as a motivation in the introductory part of the lesson or when repeating and determining the material, and can be used in the forms of individual work, pair work or group work. Using play in the classroom, intrinsically motivated students are created. According to Miljević-Riđički et al. (2000), the application of play in teaching leads to increased motivation and interest of students, increases concentration and provokes their attention, requires active participation, makes learning more interesting compared to traditional teaching methods and ultimately leads to success and progress in learning. Aladrović Slovaček (2019: 116) points out in his book: *Unfortunately, play is not often used as a teaching method, although the possibilities of use are diverse (computer games, puzzles, classrooms, interactive stories, etc.)* and states in the same text that research shows that 60% of younger primary school students really like to play, but only 15% of them play often in school, while 35% play very rarely or never. For this reason, in the early teaching of the mother tongue, it is necessary to teach children through the game in order to learn simpler and easier language content that is a problem for them or is demanding and dry (eg grammar) (Aladrović Slovaček, 2018: 16).

2. LANGUAGE GAMES

Language games are *all games in which the means of expression is language in all its manifestations* (Peti-Stantić and Velički, 2008: 7). *Language game is the simplest and most accurate to define as a space in which adults and children are liberated in their own language, in which they really enjoy it by intuitively mastering the rules and gaining the ability to act in accordance with the rules or (consciously) break them...* (Peti-Stantić, 2019: 28-29) Language games are very useful in all stages of teaching because their application facilitates the acquisition of language content, especially spelling and grammar, which are usually a problem for students when learning. Language games are easier to motivate students to work and thus facilitate the work of teachers. The use of language games in teaching provides more lasting knowledge and prolongs students interest in continue, considering that the game itself is something natural for children and is always welcome as an activity. It is important that language games have their purpose and meaning and that they are adapted to the age and abilities of the students. Their application is extremely important for students of younger school age when the foundations are laid for successful communication, development of love and a positive attitude towards the standard or mother tongue. Children enjoy playing, so this advantage should be used in teaching because the application of games makes teaching interesting and dynamic, especially in those contents that are boring to students. Pavličević-Franić (2005) states that language games are used as a stimulus and starting point in teaching oral and written language exercises. *Apart from saturated texts, the teaching also uses appropriate communication situations from everyday life as a stimulus and starting point, as well as language games (counters, rhymes, twisters, brain teasers, imitation and association games, well-known social games...) during which the method of logical reasoning and creative applications adopt a certain linguistic content* (Pavličević-Franić, 2005: 118). According to Peti-Stantić and Velički (2008), language activity is divided into listening and speaking games and reading and writing games. They also list voice games, rhythmic, morphological, syntactic and semantic games. Aladrović Slovaček et al. (2013) state that games with rules are most often used in teaching, in order to better motivate students, which the teacher reshapes, i.e. changes and applies the content to them, and they are thus transformed into language games. They point out that in this way opponents and synonyms can be practiced with the help of playing with memory cards, uppercase and lowercase letters by playing towns and villages, pantomime verbs, and by imitating sounds students can be prepared to learn some new stylistic figures (Aladrović Slovaček et al., 2013).

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Nikčević-Milković et al. (2011) confirmed that play is used in the classroom, at most several times a week and that it is effective in working with children. They list games that have proven to be effective such as association games, word games, competition games, math games, crossword puzzles, and puzzles, and are mostly used in the introductory and concluding part of the lesson. The games that students love the most are competition games and association games. *Conducted research (Pavličević, 1996; Miljević-Riđički et al., 2004; Velički and Peti-Stantić, 2008; Pavličević-Franić and Aladrović Slovaček, 2011), confirms that students like to play in language teaching and that learning at play they adopt the content faster, more successfully and with less fatigue* (Pavličević-Franić et al., 2011: 114-115). Pavličević-Franić et al. (2011) state that the results of their research show a positive influence of creative language play as a teaching method on the attitude of respondents towards the Croatian language as a

subject and that respondents who participated in the Croatian language class have a more positive attitude towards the subject. They also show better results on the communication competence test and better mastery at all levels of language proficiency. They point out that students like the lessons in which the game is applied and that in that way they adopt information and new content faster and easier. They state that play is rarely used in teaching despite the large number of computer games such as the classroom and that language teachers generally use existing board games that they reshape depending on purpose, and rarely design new, creative language games. Aladrović Slovaček and colleagues (2013) came to the conclusion in their research that most teachers believe that play should be introduced in teaching, especially in Croatian language teaching with an emphasis on the implementation of language activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing through games. In this way, the communicative competence of the student is influenced and directed to mastering the mother tongue as well as possible. Reljac Fajs and Jerković (2014) in their research prove that students in the younger grades of primary school show greater interest in spelling content and have less difficulty in its adoption because the program requirements are lower. Greater difficulties arise with content that expands, such as capital letters, and thus the interest of students decreases. Interest in spelling exercises is equal, and in higher grades the interest is declining in proportion to the scope and difficulty of the content covered by spelling exercises (Reljac Fajs and Jerković, 2014).

4. LANGUAGE GAMES IN TEXTBOOKS FOR LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE EXPRESSION

Pavličević-Franić (2011) emphasizes that texts in textbooks have a very important role in shaping students' vocabulary, as well as in the development of language competencies. *As the development of communication competence is one of the key tasks of teaching the mother tongue in primary school, and the communication-functional methodological model proved to be the most purposeful approach, the communication textbook should affirm with its conception such ways of learning the Croatian language in primary school classes* (Pavličević-Franić, 2011: 155). Textbooks are the first and basic tool that the teacher uses in teaching and they also influence the teacher's choice and approaches that are implemented in the classroom. The tendency of language games to appear in textbooks also influences teachers' attitudes towards language games as a modern method. Therefore, it is necessary to show how the tendency to include language games in textbooks increases diachronically. In newer textbooks, the number and variety of games is increasing because the positive attitude towards the language game in grammar classes is growing. By looking at several textbooks from different publishers for language and language expression from 1st to 4th grade of primary school, it is possible to see the type and character of language games in textbooks for language and language expression from 1st to 4th grade of primary school.

Table 1: The most common language games in textbooks for language and language expression from 1st to 4th grade of primary school, in the editions of more influential publishers from 2015 to 2020.

Textbook	Publisher	Year of publication	The most common types of games	Textbook unit
<i>Pčelica 1</i> <i>Svijet riječi 1</i>	Školska knjiga Školska knjiga	2019. 2020.	picture stories, crossword puzzles, riddles, nursery rhymes, wordsearch question sentences, supplementing sentences	Tell a story S s L l Č č G g F f, J j, Nj nj V v
<i>Moj hrvatski jezik 2</i> <i>Čitam i pišem 2</i>	ALKA SCRIPT ALFA	2019. 2020.	crosswords, nursery rhymes, picture stories, role play	Puzzle – Riddle – Language games <i>E e</i> <i>I i</i> , Storytelling according to a series of images Participation in the story, Capital letter in the names of holidays and celebrations
<i>Sunčani dani 3</i> <i>Hrvatski jezik 3</i>	ALKA SCRIPT ALFA	2014. 2015.	Role play, puzzles, picture stories, word matching	Dialogue, Reading by roles Pronunciation and writing č and ć in diminutives and augmentatives, Nouns - singular and plural, Creative writing - forming a shorter composition, Let's play with words

<i>Sunčani dani 4 Hrvatski jezik 4</i>	ALKA SCRIPT ALFA	2014. 2015.	Picture stories, role play, wordsearch, riddle, anagrams	Creating a story on your own, Expressive reading, Communicating through speech and writing, How to save mom, Puzzles - question marks - Language games, Literary language and native speech, Anagrams - puzzles - Language games
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Textbooks mainly contain language games based on many examples from everyday life through which students independently draw conclusions, connect, generalize and thus through the game adopt spelling, grammar and other language content. Language templates are stimulating and creative, sometimes based on language play and age-appropriate for students. Graphic and artistic solutions prevail in relation to the text. The amount of language games decreases with the expansion of language content and metalanguage knowledge.

There are many language games that are represented in textbooks, the most common are crossword puzzles, wordsearch, puzzles, riddles, question sentences, picture stories, language puzzles, a chain of words, a role play and an association game. They are most often related to the field of spelling and orthography and linguistic expression. The amount and variety of language games should not be reduced according to the age of the students as this is noted in some textbooks. Language games are always welcome in the acquisition of spelling and grammar content and their application greatly facilitates the adoption of content of this kind that is usually a problem for students.

5. THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

While games have a positive impact on the student, they have a particular impact on the teacher as they promote creative and innovative approaches to teaching content. The teacher must think about choosing appropriate games, planning and designing the lesson, preparing a presentation of content and techniques based on gender differences, time, interests, accommodation and even cultural orientation (Reyes-Chua, Wacnag Lidawan, 2019: 128). The role of teachers is very important in transmitting and pronouncing metalanguage knowledge to students, as well as the methods and procedures by which they do so. It is important to adjust the pace, rhythm and ways of teaching according to the abilities of each student. And it depends on the teacher how motivated the students will be to adopt the spelling content. *Thus, the material of grammar, spelling and expression is adopted in accordance with the cognitive and communication needs of students of a certain age, and is adapted to his emotional and sociocultural experience* (Pavličević-Franić and Aladrović Slovaček, 2011: 175). *The teacher should choose the content suitable for communication-humanistic presentation, method of presentation, methodological tools, degree of individualization, duration and form of work* (Pavličević-Franić, 2005: 74). He emphasizes that it is important to consider the individual characteristics of students. According to Pavličević-Franić (2005), it is important for teachers to be open and qualified for new concepts of teaching and to motivate students to act within the framework of the communication-humanistic approach, which leads to the modernization of the teaching process as a mother tongue. It requires enough time, will, desire and ability to accept something new.

6. RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to discover the forms of use and application of language games in the teaching of grammar in the classroom. The subject of this research is the way of applying language games in the teaching of the subject Croatian language in the lower grades of primary school. The aim was to examine the opinion and attitudes of primary school teachers about the implementation of the game in Croatian language teaching and to gain insight into how familiar they are with language games and whether they use them in language teaching. The following hypotheses were set in the research:

H1. Classroom teachers use language games in the teaching of grammar.

H2. Classroom teachers know the advantages of language games in Croatian language teaching.

H3. Classroom teachers are sufficiently prepared for the development and implementation of language games in the teaching of spelling and grammar.

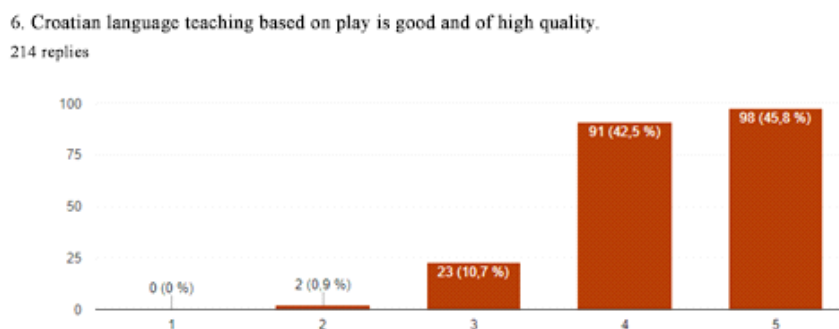
The sample is random and consists of primary school teachers in Croatia. The total number of study participants was 214, of which 212 were female (99.1%) and 2 were male (0.9%). The age range of participants is from 25 to 67 years, with an average age of 43.69 years (SD age = 10.32). Years of service range from 0.7 to 40.2 years, with an average value of 19.13 years (SD experience = 11.43). The method on which this research is based is a survey, and the data collection instrument is a survey specially prepared and independently developed for this research. It consists of 24 open-ended questions and those based on the assessment scale, ie the Likert scale. The survey is intended for primary school teachers in Croatia. The survey was conducted in the period from June 1, 2020 to June

14, 2020 through an online questionnaire that was posted on several social networks as a group of teachers that includes primary school teachers in Croatia. The results of the research are presented by the method of descriptive statistics. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity when completing the survey and could withdraw from the survey at any time. The questionnaire was designed and used exclusively for the purposes of scientific research.

7. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

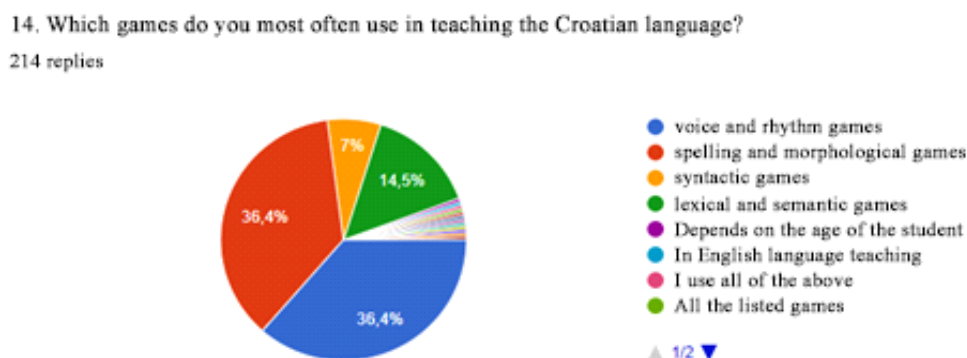
The aim of the survey was to examine the opinion and attitudes of primary school teachers about the implementation of the game in Croatian language teaching and to gain insight into how well they know language games and whether they use them in spelling and grammar. The results showed that teachers apply the game in the classroom and believe that such teaching encourages the work of students.

Figure 1: Teachers' attitudes about game-based Croatian language teaching



The majority of teachers (N = 98) believe that Croatian language teaching is good and of good quality (45.8%). However, 23 of them (10.7%) do not have a definite opinion, and as many as 2 participants (0.9%) generally disagree that the Croatian language teaching based on the game is a good quality teaching (Figure 1). The median opinion of teachers for this research goal is 4, and the mode, ie the most common number of answers is 5. The absolute measure of dispersion of teachers' answers is St, 70, and the relative measure of dispersion, ie coefficient of variation is 16% (weak variability). Most teachers have a positive attitude towards play and that play facilitates learning which coincides with the results of previous research (Aladrović Slovaček et al., 2013), Pavličević-Franić et al. (2011).

Figure 2: The most frequently used games in Croatian language teaching

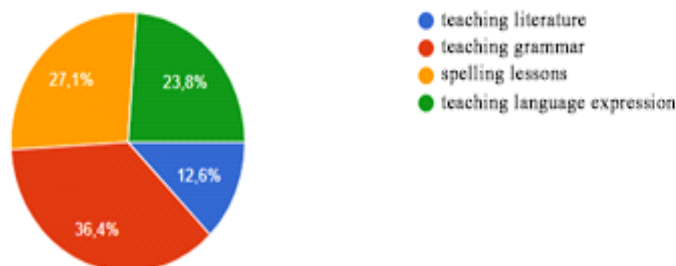


The first hypothesis that primary school teachers use language games in the teaching of spelling and grammar is confirmed since teachers use voice and rhythm games (36.4%) and spelling and morphological games (36.4%) (Figure 2). Also, most of the surveyed teachers (51, 9%, MED 3, StDev 0, 65) sometimes use the game in teaching Croatian language subjects. The results show that the majority of teachers (43.5%, MED 4, StDev 0, 97) absolutely agree with the statement that preparing games in class requires a lot of effort and time. Therefore, the question arises whether a lot of effort and time to prepare games is an obstacle for teachers to regularly use the game in class.

Figure 3: Game as a teaching method in the areas of the Croatian language

21. In which part of the Croatian language subject do you most often use play as a teaching method?

214 replies

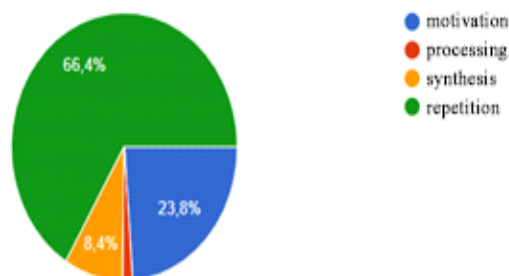


The results show that most teachers (N = 78), 36.4%, most often use the game in grammar teaching, followed by spelling (27.1%) (Figure 3). The analysis of the answers showed that teachers were aware of the complexity of the teaching content with regard to age and thus the need to change games, upgrade and adapt to the age and abilities of each student since more than half of surveyed teachers (N = 117) sometimes changed games according to the age of students (54, 7%, MED 3, StDev 0, 63). The second hypothesis is confirmed by primary school teachers who know the advantages of language games in Croatian language teaching in primary school because the majority of surveyed teachers (54.7%, MED 5, StDev 0.71) absolutely agree that play facilitates learning, which indicates the advantage of using games in teaching. The majority of teachers (N = 169) stated that their students responded excellently when they used the game while learning (79%, MED 5, StDev 0, 49) as expected. Therefore, the benefits of language games are noticed by teachers and therefore they should be implemented as often as possible in grammar teaching.

Figure 4: Application of the game in a certain part of the lesson

22. In which part of the lesson do you most often apply the game?

214 replies

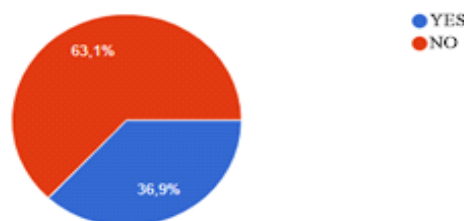


Most teachers (N = 142) use the game during repetition (66, 4%, MED 3, StDev 0, 94), while only 3 respondents (1, 4%, MED 3, StDev 0, 94) use the game for processing (Figure 4). The analysis showed that 98.1% (MED 1, StDev 0, 14) of teachers stated that the application of language games facilitated the acquisition of language content by students. The results show that most teachers (32, 7%, MED 2, StDev 1, 23) do not agree at all that a teacher does not have to possess good verbal skills and creativity to include play in teaching. Thus, teachers are aware that they must possess certain abilities in order to implement play in teaching. Good verbal skills are essential in order to adequately convey the teaching content to students and thus be a spoken / written role model to students. Creativity is important for enriching teaching by applying various activities to make the teaching content as interesting and understandable as possible for students. Almost half of the total number of surveyed teachers (49, 5%, MED 2, StDev 1, 02) do not agree at all that playing in teaching interferes with learning. Also, 43, 5% (MED 4, StDev 0, 81) respondents state that the application of the game is important to them. Therefore, teachers obviously recognize the advantages of the game itself in their teaching, so once again the second hypothesis is confirmed that teachers know the advantages of language games in teaching.

Figure 5: The issue of teacher education on the application of play in teaching

24. Do you attend trainings on the application of the game in teaching?

214 replies



Interestingly, 36.9% of teachers (MED 0, StDev 0, 48) have stated that they attend trainings on the application of the game in teaching, and as many as 63.1% are not interested in additional trainings (Figure 5). We can assume that teachers do not go to trainings for two reasons: either they think that they should not be further educated on this issue because they are already educated or they do not think that they should be specially educated for games because they do not consider them important. Therefore, we can say that the hypothesis which assumes that primary school teachers are sufficiently educated to make language games in the teaching of spelling and grammar has been partially confirmed. Deeper research is needed. In the survey, we have learned from teachers which games students like the most in class when teachers play them. They are: association games, competition games, puzzles, crossword puzzles, gallows games, octaves, quizzes, letter to letter, memory, puzzles, puzzles. Teachers like to organize the following games: association games, competitions, crossword puzzles, memory, puzzles, jumpers, digital games, Kaladont, Letter to letter, drama games. Given the times we live in, more and more children are playing digital games, so their application in teaching is also expected. That is why we wanted to find out in the survey whether teachers conduct computer games with students in the classroom. Most teachers, 153 of them (71, 5%, MED 1, StDev 0, 45) conduct computer games in the classroom. Teachers who have answered in the affirmative have stated which programs are used for computer games. Wordwall is most often mentioned, followed by Wakelet, LearningApps, Matific, Kahoot, Plickers, Genially, Toondoo, Bookwidgets. Play as a teaching method should be included in teaching as much as possible, regardless of which part of the lesson, since the conducted survey research, as well as previous research, confirms many advantages of the game in working with students.

8. CONCLUSION

The teaching of grammar in early mother tongue learning is mostly uninteresting to students because students at the beginning of formal education encounter metalanguage knowledge in the classroom context for the first time. Although this knowledge is carefully selected and transferred to textbooks and modern methods implemented by teachers, the encounter with abstract knowledge of one's own language is generally stressful. In order to overcome this transition and bring mother tongue learning closer to the students' affinities, language games are becoming a means by which we bridge the gap between students' interests and the goals of national curricula. Language games implemented in teaching have shown in a number of studies to date that they are an excellent method of work that not only accelerates and facilitates the learning of metalanguage knowledge, but through its use develops and improves the students' communication competencies and even stimulates interest in the subject. In this paper, reviewing relevant textbooks for the mother tongue of Croatian from 2015 to 2020, we have seen that language games in recent years at the level of the same class are increasingly included in textbook units, but that games are becoming rarer due to higher grades. The most common types of language games we have identified in textbooks are crossword puzzles, octaves, puzzles, riddles, question marks, picture stories, language puzzles, word chains, role play, and association play. They are most often related to the field of spelling and orthography and linguistic expression. On the other hand, the survey has found that teachers are aware of and recognize the benefits of language games, that they include them mainly in their work, but that only a third of teachers are further educated with regard to this topic. The results show that most teachers apply the game in grammar teaching, followed by spelling. Most teachers use the game in class during repetition, while few use the game to process the teaching content. Teachers use voice and rhythm games as well as spelling and morphological games. There is also a noticeable tendency of the growing influence of computer games, which teachers have increasingly begun to use in language teaching.

Language play as a modern method in early mother tongue learning has proven to be extremely positive in all aspects of language teaching. The language game encourages the accessibility of language content, the acceleration of language learning, interestingness and a good atmosphere in the classroom, which is imposed in working with

students in the first four grades of primary school. Therefore, quality teaching aids and instructed teachers must keep in mind that the potential of language games is still not fully exploited and that it opens the possibility for new and more comprehensive research in this area.

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