

Interlanguage Development in Early EFL Learning in Croatia: An Insight Into Individual Learner Profiles

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The goal of this paper is to gain insight into the individual lexical and syntactic development of learners' interlanguage in early EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning in Croatia. The total sample included 108 Croatian L1 primary school learners (mean age 11-13). In this research, we selected 12 focal learners from two project schools, whose interlanguage development was observed over a period of three years. The research was based on the recordings of individual oral production when the students were at the end of their second, third, and fourth year of EFL learning. The quantitative analysis of the collected data included the number of utterances and morphemes count, mean length of utterances (MLU), and type/token ratio (FREQ). To gain better insight into student's individual development, learners' profiles were constructed consisting quantitative data analysis. The initial hypothesis is that students' oral production shows clear progress which supposes an increase in the mean length of utterances and in type/token ratio as indicators of linguistic and lexical diversity. We also assume that there is a decrease in the use of L1 in learners' oral production throughout the years of EFL learning. The research results confirmed the initial hypothesis, i.e., due to the exposure to EFL learning, participants' overall language proficiency gradually increased. The findings also showed expected interlanguage variations in early EFL learning.

Keywords: interlanguage, learner, oral production

Introduction

Interlanguage is a complex linguistic term introduced in the study of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) by Larry Selinker (1972; 1992) to describe a language learner creates in trying to produce the utterances in the target language (L2). It is a complex and dynamic system with elements of both languages, a continuum between the learner's native language and the target language. At any point along the continuum, the learner's language develops from L1 to the target language and has its own characteristics seen in constant changes, simplification, dynamism, and variability as the main features of interlanguage. It is the language produced by L2 learners, "both as a system which can be described at any one point in time as resulting from systematic rules, and as series of interlocking systems that characterize learner progression" (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p. 31). There have been different theoretical orientations and linguistic theories (structuralism approach, Error analysis, Contrastive Analysis, cognitivism) trying to explain interlanguage features of L2 learners that might influence interlanguage development. There are also many external variables (such as the specific task given to the learner, learning environment, and so forth) which affect learners' production and the developing interlanguage system. The result of these influences is that learners produce different L2 forms which can be

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considered as interlanguage variations (Gas & Selinker, 2008; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Variationist perspectives on SLA (e.g., Preston, 1996; Tarone, 1983) focus “on the correlations of social facts and linguistic forms, the influence of linguistic forms on one another, and the place of variation within the study of language change” (Long & Preston, 2002, p. 141). Preston concluded that there is a linking between sociocultural information and linguistic forms which has the influence on a learner which linguistic form to choose in L2 production. L2 learners construct their interlanguage creatively, depending to the social context relating to interlocutor, task type, and conversational topic. Sometimes L2 learners are faced with difficulties to express themselves correctly. That situation requires a communication strategy (Gas & Selinker, 2008) seen as deliberate attempt to express meaning when faced with difficulty. It is defined as an individual attempt to find a way to fill the gap between their communication effort and immediate available linguistic resources (Maleki, 2010). There are other definitions of communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1980), but in general, two approaches are the base for their classification: the linguistic and the cognitive approach. Tarone was the first one to suggest the linguistic approach in which she elaborated definition of communication strategy as “mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on meaning in situations where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared” (Tarone, 1980, p. 419). We often adjust our speech style according to the situation and the speaker with whom we are talking. In our study, learners are put in the classroom setting and “pushed” to answer the questions they were asked and they have to produce the utterances which were measured using CLAN (Computerised Language Analysis) tools with the aim to gain insight into lexical and syntactic development of learner’s interlanguage. In the classroom settings, learners adopt their speech using a wide range of linguistic features including speech rates, pause, and utterance lengths, viewed as a linguistic strategy (Gas & Selinker, 2008) where learners produce different interlanguage structures within different discourse domains. On the other hand, cognitive approach (Faerch & Kasper, 1983) is learner centred and communicative strategies are viewed as the means for resolving problems of self-expression. The most widely cited taxonomy of communication strategies is provided by Tarone (1980) and Bialystok (1990) which includes following elements: paraphrase, transfer, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance.

In this study, we explored the interlanguage of Croatian learners of English and their oral production observed over a period of three years. When our learners faced with difficulty to express themselves, they switched to their L1 (Croatian), i.e., they used language switch, the subcategory of language transfer as one of the elements of communication strategies. We assume that there is a decrease in the use of mother tongue in learners’ oral production throughout the years of EFL learning. In our study, instead of language switch, some learners asked a teacher for assistance (e.g., “How to say...?”). Other examples of communication strategies include approximation, literal translation, and avoidance (Tarone, 1983) of using the words unfamiliar to the learner. Bialystok (1990) concluded that communication strategies are the adjustments to the ongoing processes responsible for language acquisition and use that allow processing to be maintained. Most researchers, when dealing with this notion, include three components: problematicity, consciousness, and intentionality. Problematicity means that a learner must first recognize the problem in the communication, then, should be aware of it, and finally, have intention and various options to solve the problem in proceeding communication.

As seen from the previous chapters, there is considerable variation in the learner’s interlanguage which, according to Ellis (1994), can be of two sorts, free and systematic. Free variation occurs as an initial stage when two or more forms are involved. The next stage is systematic variation which includes overlapping forms and meanings. If a learner reaches the point of correctness, he/she comes to the final stage or categorical use stage

(Ellis, 1987 in Gas & Selinker, 2008). In our research, we assume that there is gradual development of lexical diversity and syntactic complexity in the learners' oral production with expected variability throughout the years of EFL learning.

Balenović (2012; 2015) previously conducted studies within the framework of a larger research project based on the recordings of individual oral production tasks of Croatian L1 learners of English in the primary school. The present study is a continuation of this research work taking account the development of learner's interlanguage in early EFL learning. The oral productions in earlier studies were analyzed using CHAT (Codes for Human Analysis of Transcripts) and CLAN tools as they were also used in this study. The quantitative research results of the earlier studies showed an increase in the overall number of morphemes in each year of recording and in the mean length of utterances, which showed progress in the development of the learner's interlanguage. The study (Balenočić, 2015) also showed an increase in the type/token ratio that indicated lexical diversity and syntactic complexity as well as a decrease in the use of mother tongue in the learner's oral production, especially between the first and second year of learning. Students in that study started learning English in the first grade, while in the present study students started learning English in the fourth grade of primary school.

Medved Krajnović and Kocijan Pevec (2015) conducted a study within the framework of the same research project with the aim to gain insight into the individual lexical and morphosyntactic development of learners' interlanguage focusing on expressing the present in learners' oral productions. The authors concluded that there was a gradual development increase in the correctness of the use of present forms as well as the gradual progress in overall number of morphemes, MLU, and type/token ratio which showed lexical diversity. In analyzing learners' utterances, authors focused on the errors learners made while using the present in English and they found that the development of lexis and grammar were interdependent. They also concluded that morphological and conceptual transfer in the time domain was the major source of errors in learners' oral production (Medved Krajnović & Kocijan Pevec, 2015).

The Study Aim and Methodology

The aim of our study is to gain insight into the individual lexical and syntactic development of learners' interlanguage in early EFL learning in Croatia. Our two initial hypotheses in this study were:

- (1) H1: Students' oral production shows clear progress which supposes an increase in the mean length of utterances and in type/token ratio as indicators of linguistic and lexical diversity;
- (2) H2: There is a gradual decrease in the use of mother tongue in learners' oral production throughout the years of EFL learning.

Sample

The total sample included 108 Croatian L1 primary school learners (mean age 11-13). In this research, we selected 12 focal learners from two project schools whose interlanguage development was observed over a period of three years, i.e., at the end of their second, third, and fourth year of EFL learning. In each school, focal learners (three boys and three girls) were with different levels of language proficiency: two high-proficiency, two average-proficiency, and two low-proficiency learners. One participant (a girl) withdrew from the study after one year and one (a boy) after the second year of our research. Their oral production was included into the whole research results when comparing results between the schools and recordings. All the participants started learning English in the fourth grade.

Instruments and Procedures

The study was conducted longitudinally within the framework of a larger research project titled “Acquisition of English from an early age: Analysis of learner language” sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. The students were informed about the aim and the purpose of the study and it was made clear to them that their participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous and that the information would be used for scientific purposes only.

Our research was based on the recordings of individual oral production tasks. The recordings were made at the end of fifth, sixth, and seventh grades, i.e., when the students were at the end of the second, third, and fourth year of EFL learning. The students were asked to select one from a set of pictures showing everyday life scenes. The interviewer had a list of questions directly related to the pictures and was also allowed to ask additional questions to get more extensive data for analysis. The chosen pictures were supposed to elicit learners’ oral production showing lexical and syntactic development of our learners’ interlanguage. The interviews were done individually and lasted about 15 minutes. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by using CHAT and CLAN, the tools developed for the analysis of oral production as a part of the CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) project (for details, see MacWhinney, 2008; 2010). The use of these tools provides a quantitative analysis of students’ individual oral production, which included the number of utterances, morphemes, type/token ratio, and mean length of utterances (MLU). In our study, we used the programs *FREQ* (frequency) and *MLU*. *MLU* calculates the total number of morphemes and utterances as well as the number of morphemes per utterance, which describes developmental changes in linguistic proficiency, from the onset of two-word combinations to more complex sentence structures. Program *FREQ* calculates the frequency of particular words and type/token ratio as indicators of lexical diversity. After doing the quantitative analysis of the learners’ oral production, a qualitative analysis of transcripts was done to analyze the utterances produced in learners’ L1 (Croatian) with the aim to find out the kind of communication strategy used by the learners when facing difficulty in communication.

Results and Discussion

In order to gain better insight into student’s individual development, we created learners’ profiles consisting quantitative data analysis with the use of CLAN, programs *FREQ*, and *MLU*. It included the number of utterances per interview, total number of morphemes, mean length of utterances (MLU), and type/token ratio with the aim of showing the development of lexical diversity and syntactic development of each participant. Only utterances produced in English were taken for CLAN analysis. Those produced in the learners’ L1 were taken into consideration to question our second hypothesis and to obtain better insight into the ratio between the learners’ L1 and L2 oral production over the years of EFL learning, as well as to analyze the elements of communication strategies (Tarone, 1980) used by the learners when facing with difficulty in communication.

Table 1

Individual Profile—Learner 1, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	101/7	245	2.426	1.444
6	87/2	315	2.621	2.172
7	89/1	435	4.888	2.537

As data in Table 1 show, learner 1 shows overall improvement in the development of learner's interlanguage. It is interesting to point out that the number of utterances in Grade 5 is higher than the number of utterances in Grade 6 and Grade 7. This could be explained by the use of greater number of shorter utterances at the beginning of EFL learning since the type/token ratio is 1.444. As seen above, there is a decrease in the use of mother tongue over the years of learning. Qualitative analysis shows that a learner switches to L1 when facing with difficulty in communication, i.e., L1 was used as a communication strategy (Tarone, 1980). Due to the exposure to EFL learning, learner language proficiency improves with lower number of L1 utterances as indicator of higher level of learner's L2 communication competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

Table 2

Individual Profile—Learner 2, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	133/13	341	2.564	1.917
6	102/7	318	3.118	1.972
7	85/0	369	4.341	3.020

As seen in Table 2, there is a decrease in the number of utterances and an increase in the number of morphemes in the seventh grade with the highest level of MLU and type/token ratio as indicators of lexical diversity and syntactic development. There is also a decrease in the switch to learner's L1 since the learner's communicative competence improves. Qualitative analysis shows that the learner switches to L1 when facing with difficulty and asking teacher for assistance (“...well, ...how to say?”) as the elements of communication strategies used to overcome difficulties in the process of communication and to allow language processing.

Table 3

Individual Profile—Learner 3, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	139/5	589	4.237	3.189
6	136/5	746	5.485	4.169
7	166/0	1041	6.271	3.841

All data in Table 3 show learner's constant progress, i.e., there is overall improvement in the learner's interlanguage. High level of MLU and type/token ratio shows that this is the learner with a high level of lexical diversity and syntactic development, very proficient English language learner. For example, when talking about his sister, he says: “...she's pretty smart but here grades aren't that good”. The only data showing slightly lower values are the type/token ratio in the seventh grade. This is due to learner's frequent repetition of the constructions “there is/are” while describing pictures. The analysis of learner's L1 utterances shows that the learner uses L1 when facing with difficulty and asking teacher for assistance. It is interesting to point out that the learner when facing with difficulty and when trying to find a word in English for the word “scale” pronounced Croatian word “vaga” as an English adjective “vague” to sound as an English word. Another example of learner's switch to L1 is when the interviewer also switches to Croatian the learner automatically does the same, what is expected in the mutual communication.

Table 4

Individual Profile—Learner 4, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	128/0	599	4.680	3.039
6	92/0	492	5.348	4.012
7	122/0	737	6.041	3.780

Data in Table 4 show that here is a case of very proficient English language learner, especially when it comes to MLU. MLU is on a very high level, if Brown's classification is taken (1.75-4.5). As seen from the above data, learner's language proficiency is very high from the very beginning of EFL learning. There are no utterances produced in learner's L1 which indicates excellent English language proficiency.

Table 5

Individual Profile—Learner 5, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	150/26	371	2.473	1.727
6	85/19	258	3.035	2.155

As seen from the above data in Table 5, learner 5 was not tested in the seventh grade, but all the data from Grade 5 and Grade 6 indicate a learner with difficulty in speaking English. There are a lower number of utterances and morphemes which result with a lower value for MLU in Grade 6. Since the learner was not interviewed in the seventh grade, we cannot absolutely confirm the language attrition (Gas & Selinker, 2008). The results also show a great number of utterances produced in learner's L1. When analyzing learner's L1 utterances, we can observe learner's asking for teacher's assistance (ex. ...*How to say..... in English?*) to continue the conversation in English. This language transfer is considered as subcategory of communication strategy (Tarone, 1983).

Table 6

Individual Profile—Learner 6, School 1

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	114/15	398	3.491	2.333

Data in Table 6 show that the learner was interviewed only in the fifth grade, so we cannot comment on the learner's interlanguage development. The number of utterances, number of morphemes, and other measured parameters are almost in line with other learners interviewed in the fifth grade.

Table 7

Individual Profile—Learner 7, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	75/3	366	4.880	2.455
6	82/1	473	5.768	3.586
7	71/0	419	5.901	4.289

Data in Table 7 show that the learner mostly makes progress in his oral production over the years of EFL learning. It is especially observed in the MLU as an indicator of syntactic development. The number of utterances is highest in the sixth grade, which can be explained a learner's talk about his personal experiences. As seen from the data, there is a decrease in number of utterances produced in learner's L1. The learner used his L1 when facing with difficulty and asking for teacher's assistance (ex. "*Kak' se kaže jedan ormar*"—*How to say a cupboard...?*).

Table 8

Individual Profile—Learner 8, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	59/1	209	3.542	2.466
6	54/1	169	3.130	2.126
7	84/0	410	4.881	3.364

Quantitative data analysis (see Table 8) shows the lowest number of all measured parameters in the sixth grade which could be an example of the U-shaped curve of learner's interlanguage development (Kellerman, 1987) where in the process of development, there is a temporary backsliding, in this case, in the level of communication competence. Qualitative analysis shows that the learner switches to his L1 when he, as in other examples of L1 use, faces difficulty and misunderstanding in communication.

Table 9

Individual Profile—Learner 9, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	66/0	176	2.667	1.470
6	56/0	213	3.804	2.247
7	73/1	276	3.781	2.394

Data in Table 9 show that learner 9 produces small number of rather short utterances, but there is an improvement in the MLU as an indicator of lexical diversity which makes his communication successful since he switches to his L1 only once (in the seventh grade), when asking for assistance of a teacher (asking for word "*stepenice*" (*stairs*) in English). Before asking for assistance, he was trying to remember the word by paraphrasing (used word "*steps*") the meaning as subcategory of communication strategy (Tarone, 1980).

Table 10

Individual Profile—Learner 10, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	49/0	179	3.653	2.181
6	68/1	394	5.794	3.779
7	62/0	367	5.919	3.629

As data in Table 10 show, there is overall improvement in the development of learner's interlanguage over the years of EFL learning. The number of utterances varies slightly as an indicator of interlanguage variability (Gas & Selinker, 2008), being highest in the sixth grade when the learner described the pictures in great details. We could say that this is a learner with a good level of linguistic and communicative competence. The learner switched to his L1 only once, when he could not remember the word "swing" and he used Croatian word "ljudljačka" instead.

Table 11

Individual Profile—Learner 11, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
5	90/7	269	2.989	2.032
6	67/0	266	3.970	2.343
7	72/0	347	4.819	3.181

As seen from the data (see Table 11), there is the highest number of utterances in the fifth grade with a lower type/token ratio as well as in the MLU. Learner oral production shows progress over the years of learning with a decrease in the number of utterances produced in learner's L1. This indicates a learner with a good level of linguistic and communicative competence. He switches to his L1 when he cannot remember the words in English. That happened when he was at the beginning of his EFL learning and as his communicative competence improves, he stops switching to his L1.

Table 12

Individual Profile—Learner 12, School 2

Grade	Number of utterances (E/C)	Number of morphemes	MLU	Type/token ratio
6	69/0	235	3.406	2.661
7	64/0	299	4.672	3.496

As seen from the above data, the learner was not interviewed in the fifth grade. Other data show that this is a learner with a very good level of linguistic and communicative competence. There is a progress in most measured parameters, especially in the number of morphemes and in the MLU as indicators of lexical diversity and syntactic complexity. The learner did not use L1 utterances since he had no difficulty with his L2 production.

Data from the individual learner profiles show an insight into the development of linguistic and communicative competence of learners after four years of EFL learning. Most of the learners progressed during the years in all measured parameters. There is an increase in the overall number of morphemes, an increase in the MLU as well as in the type/token ratio. This shows an improvement in the development of learner's interlanguage which is expected due to the exposure to instructed EFL learning. There is also a decrease in the use of learner's L1 since the learner's linguistic and communicative L2 competence improves. L1, seen as subcategory of communication strategy, was used when learners asked for assistance in most cases, i.e., learners used L1 when facing with difficulty and trying to remember the word in English. Only one learner, before asking for assistance, was trying to remember the word by paraphrasing the word (word "steps" for "stairs") which is also considered as subcategory of communication strategy (Tarone, 1980). One learner, when facing with difficulty and when trying to find a word in English, pronounced a Croatian word "*vaga*" (*scale*) as an English adjective "*vague*" to sound English. We also consider this "*sounding English*" as subcategory of communication strategy, since there was understanding between the listener and the speaker (the same L1) and communication continued. We also made comparison between the schools and found out that the learners from School 1 had significantly higher numbers of utterances than the learners from School 2, while the other measured parameters were similar. This is probably due to more subquestions that the interviewer asked in School 1. Higher number of utterances was followed by higher number of communication strategies used by the learners.

Further analysis included the use of repeated measures (ANOVA) for comparison of three recordings of collected data, i.e., after the first, second, and third year of EFL learning. There is a slight difference in the overall number of morphemes between the first and second recording ($MvY1 = 330.33$; $MvY2 = 376.22$), while there is a significant difference between mentioned parameters between the second and third year of overall learners' production ($MvY2 = 376.22$; $MvY3 = 489.00$). We suppose that after the second year of EFL learning, learners memorized, repeated, and used the words learned in the first year, while in the third recording, learners produced new learned words in their utterances. According to these data, we concluded that there is a significant improvement in the development of learners' interlanguage after the third year of EFL learning, i.e., in the seventh grade of primary school, since the students started learning English as a foreign language in the fourth grade. Comparison of mean length of utterances in the first, second, and third year of recording on a whole sample was also conducted. The results showed that there is a gradual progress in the learners' MLU, i.e., MLU increases over the EFL learning ($MvY1 = 3.51$; $MvY2 = 4.33$; $MvY3 = 5.20$) as an indicator of the improvement in learners' communicative competence. Comparison of type/token ratio in three recordings on the entire sample was also conducted. The analysis showed the lowest number of the ratio in the first year, which is expected, since it is the very beginning of EFL learning. Learners used very small amount of different words ($MvY1 = 2.24$) in the first recording, while the number is higher in the second ($MvY2 = 2.93$) and the highest in the third year ($MvY3 = 3.33$), as it is expected due to longer exposure to instructed EFL learning. These overall results confirmed our first hypothesis, i.e., learners' overall language proficiency gradually increased. The analysis also showed that due to the learners' L2 improvement, there is a gradual decrease in the use of learners' L1. The learners produced 77 utterances in their L1 in the first recording, 36 L1 utterances in second, and 2 L1 utterances in third, i.e., only two learners out of 12 used their L1 (Croatian) once in the third recording (when asking for teacher's assistance), seen as subcategory of communication strategies. These results confirmed our second hypothesis.

Conclusion

After the quantitative analysis (using CHAT and CLAN tools) of the transcripts of 12 focal learners, individual profiles were constructed to gain better insight into lexical development of learners' interlanguage over three years of EFL learning. Research results revealed that there is an increase in the overall number of morphemes, especially between the second and third recording. The results also showed that there is a gradual increase in the mean length of utterances (MLU) which showed progress in the development of the learner's interlanguage. The progress was also observed in the type/token ratio that indicates lexical diversity and syntactic complexity in most learners, while in the learners who already had high level of communicative competence in the first recording, there was no major progress in the second and third recording, (but the correlation exists) by which we confirmed our first hypothesis. That means that due to the exposure to EFL learning over the years, the learners' overall language proficiency systematically increases.

In the beginning of early EFL learning, learners in their oral production are likely to use their L1 more than their L2. The findings from this research showed that there is a gradual decrease in the use of L1 in the learners' oral production over the years of EFL learning. Qualitative analysis shows that learners switch to their L1 when facing with difficulty in communication, i.e., L1 was used as communication strategy (Tarone, 1980). Due to the exposure to EFL learning, learners' language proficiency improves with lower number of L1 utterances as indicator of higher level of learner's L2 communication competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

To gain better insight into the development of learner's interlanguage in early EFL learning, an interesting follow-up study would be to conduct a research on larger corpus of EFL learners using CHAT and CLAN tools to enable more L2 learners to be included into CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2010).

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