

# The Relationship Between Speaking Activities in the EFL Classroom and Croatian State School-leaving Exam

---

**Frančešević, Anita**

**Master's thesis / Diplomski rad**

**2015**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:833294>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-11-14**



**FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET**  
SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet  
Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti

Anita Frančesević

**The Relationship Between Speaking Activities in the EFL  
Classroom and Croatian State School-leaving Exam**

Diplomski rad

prof. dr. sc. Višnja Pavičić Takač

Osijek, 2015

## Table of contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction .....                                      | 3  |
| 2. Theoretical Framework .....                             | 4  |
| 2.1. Speaking skill .....                                  | 4  |
| 2.2. Context of the research .....                         | 11 |
| 2.2.1. <i>Croatian education system</i> .....              | 11 |
| 2.2.2. <i>Matura exam</i> .....                            | 12 |
| 2.2.3. <i>Matura exam in English</i> .....                 | 13 |
| 2.3. Backwash effect.....                                  | 14 |
| 2.4. Previous research.....                                | 17 |
| 3. Present study .....                                     | 19 |
| 3.1. Aim .....   | 19 |
| 3.2. Methodology.....                                      | 19 |
| 3.2.1. <i>Participants</i> .....                           | 19 |
| 3.2.2. <i>Instrument</i> .....                             | 20 |
| 3.2.3. <i>Procedure</i> .....                              | 21 |
| 4. Results and discussion.....                             | 21 |
| 4.1. Teachers' responses .....                             | 21 |
| 4.2. Students' responses.....                              | 26 |
| 4.3. Comparison of teachers' and students' responses ..... | 30 |
| 5. Conclusion.....   | 34 |

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to stress the importance of teaching and testing speaking skills in situations where English is learnt as a foreign language. The research was conducted in Osijek, Croatia where the fourth year high-school students have to pass a state school-leaving exam in English. It was hypothesized that due to the fact that the state school-leaving exam does not test speaking, it will result in reduction of speaking activities in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, which could be explained by the backwash effect. Messick (1996) referred to backwash as "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (p. 241).

The first part of the paper brings a literature overview of the main concepts in this research, as well as an overview of relevant research in the world based on similar situations. The second part of the paper reports on the research itself.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This section will deal with a selective literature overview of the two concepts (speaking activities and Croatian state school-leaving exam) included as variables in this research and their connection (backwash effect). They will be discussed separately in the following two sections. The last section will provide a short overview of previous research dealing with the same topic worldwide.

### 2.1. Speaking skill

This section will provide a short overview of language skills and at the same time contextualize the speaking skill and list its sub-skills. After that a categorization of speaking activities will be presented.

Language skills are: “the mode or manner in which a language is used. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are generally called the four language skills. Sometimes speaking and writing are called the active/productive skills and reading and listening, the passive/ receptive skills. Often the skills are divided into sub-skills (Richards and Johnson, 2002: 293).”

As we all know, the topic has been widely explored and researched. What everybody agrees upon is that the four skills can be categorized as shown in table 1. The four skills in this table are divided by two parameters. The first one is the mode of communication (oral or written) and the second one is the direction of communication (receiving or producing the message).

*Table 1. Model of the four language skills (based on Powers, 2010)*

|                   | <b>Oral</b> | <b>Written</b> |
|-------------------|-------------|----------------|
| <i>Receptive</i>  | Listening   | Reading        |
| <i>Productive</i> | Speaking    | Writing        |

All four skills are overlapping. We cannot have one without the other. “Productive skills would not exist without the support of receptive ones” (Golkova and Hubackova, 2014: 480). This has to be taken into consideration in teaching any language as a foreign language, including English. The learners have to be taught gradually and combining all the skills. As Golkova and Hubackova (2014: 478) state: “This should also prove that both types of skills are inseparable

and one cannot exist without the other. When learning a foreign language, receptive skills usually come first and should be followed by practical application of productive ones. If a learning process lacks one of them, the final outcome will not be complete.”

Now that we gave a broader picture, we will focus more on speaking, as it is the primary focus of this paper and needs to be elaborated in more detail. As mentioned before speaking is an oral productive skill. There are numerous books written and studies conducted regarding this topic. Many experts have tried to give a definition of speaking. Chaney and Burk (1998:13), for instance, defined speaking as "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts". Speaking has been recognized as very important, and maybe also the crucial skill of all. How important speech is corroborated by the fact that not all civilisations have a writing system to record their language, but they nevertheless, communicate with each other in a spoken form. Therefore, the ultimate goal when learning a foreign language is being able to communicate fluently in this language. “Speaking in a second language (L2) has been considered the most challenging of the four skills, given the fact that it involves a complex process of constructing meaning” (Martinez-Flor et al., 2006: 139). Nunan (2003) gives two main reasons why L2 learners find speaking the most difficult skill to learn. Firstly, it happens in *real time*, and your interlocutor expects you to speak right then. Secondly, there is not much time left for revision of what you want to say. If the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to primarily master communicating with someone in the target language, the teacher should use the method called communicative language teaching. This method provides the learner with a lot of opportunities to speak in the target language and thereby learn many linguistic elements that need to be gradually learnt. In order to show how complex the process of speaking is, figure 1 lists all units of spoken language that need to be mastered from the smallest unit at top towards the biggest at the pyramid’s base.

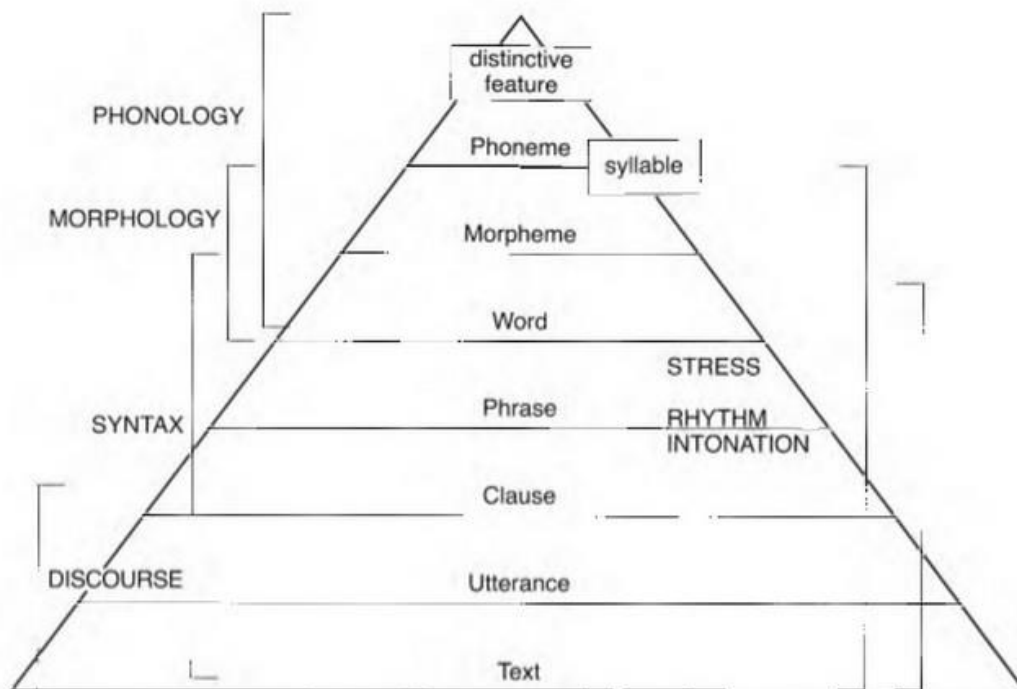


Figure 1: Units of spoken language (source: Van Lier, 1996, as cited in Nunan, 2003)

Besides the units of spoken language that are provided in figure 1, table 2 (Lackman 2010: 3) shows different sub-skills the speaking skill can be further divided into. Lackman believes the sub-skills are more helpful for learners than to duplicate real-world conversations in the classroom. Both of these representations should be carefully examined by all EFL teachers. It is important teachers are aware of all the components that make up the speaking skill in order to teach it to someone. This way they could use the same speaking activities but only change the focus of it by alternating the targeted sub-skill. The teachers' goal should be to offer learners a chance to master all these skills and units of spoken language in order for them to become independent and skillful speakers of the target language.

Table 2: List of speaking sub-skills by Lackman (2010)

| Sub-skills   | Application   |
|--|---|
| <b>Fluency</b><br><i>Students practice speaking with a logical flow without planning or rehearsing</i>                         | Activities which require students to focus on meaning in communication without immediate concern for accuracy (errors can be corrected afterwards)  |
| <b>Accuracy with Words &amp; Pronunciation</b><br><i>Students practice using words, structure and pronunciation accurately</i> | Students need to be able to use and pronounce words and structures correctly in order to be understood. Controlled practice activities are the most common way of working on spoken accuracy. |
| <b>Using Functions</b><br><i>Students use specific phrases for</i>   | Activities which stress that verbal communication is for a reason or function. Role plays and simulations are   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>purposes like giving advice, apologizing, etc.</i>   | ideal.   |
| <b>Appropriacy</b><br><i>Students practice using language appropriate for a situation and making decisions about formality and choice of grammar or vocabulary</i>      | Activities which stress that the purpose of talking determines what language is appropriate. Students are required to make choices about grammar and vocabulary and also other aspects of communication like intonation and length of turn. For example, „What's the damage? “is inappropriate in a four-star restaurant.  |
| <b>Turn-taking Skills</b><br><i>Students practice ways of interjecting eliciting an interjection or preventing one.</i>   | Turn-taking skills involve knowing how and when to interject, eliciting an interjection or preventing one. Students can practice listening for appropriate gaps in order to take their turn without irritating the speaker. While speaking they can practice techniques such as pausing which purposely allows others to take a turn or they can practice using hesitation devices such as 'ums' and 'errs' to hold on to a turn while they search for the next thing to say.  |
| <b>Relevant Length</b><br><i>Students practice speaking at a length appropriate to a situation</i>  | Activities which demonstrate that the purpose of speaking or the context determines the appropriate length of a turn. For example, a one-word answer is acceptable for a market research survey but would not be sufficient in a job interview. Activities which require students to elaborate or be concise are useful.   |
| <b>Responding and Initiating</b><br><i>Students practice managing a conversation by making responses, asking for a response or introducing a new topic or idea.</i>     | Activities which get students to practice managing a conversation in an appropriate way with specific words and phrases such as, „What do you think about...“, „Speaking of...“, „Really?“, etc. Gestures and other paralinguistic tools are also used in conversation management.   |
| <b>Repair and Repetition</b><br><i>Students practice repeating or rephrasing parts of a conversation when they suspect that what was said was not understood.</i>       | The spontaneous nature of conversation requires that participants constantly have to make sure that what's being said is understood. When misunderstanding is suspected, a participant will 'repair' parts of the conversation. The most common form of repair is repetition and individual words or groups of words can be repeated by either the speaker or listener. Students can practice repairing when they suspect they haven't been understood or as listeners they can repeat to seek clarification or correction from the speaker. |
| <b>Range of Words and Grammar</b><br><i>Students practice using particular grammar and/or vocabulary for speaking on a specific topic or for doing a specific task.</i> | Students need to know a range of words and grammar and have the ability to choose from that bank the most appropriate words and structures for a specific task or topic. They are taught or made aware of words or structures appropriate for specific tasks or contexts and then are required to use them appropriately.  |
| <b>Discourse Markers</b><br><i>Students practice using words/phrases which organize a talk (e.g. firstly, secondly, on the other hand, to summarize)</i>                | When speakers are required to take a particularly long turn, for example when giving a presentation, they use specific words and phrases to help the listener recognize how their talk has been organized. Activities can be used which teach discourse makers and then require students to use them appropriately.  |



Next speaking activities will be defined and listed. Speaking activities are activities specially designed to target either fluent or accurate speaking by learners. Therefore it should be stressed that not all instances of speaking during EFL classes can be counted as speaking activities. This section will first provide a categorization of speaking activities, and after that a short review of some speaking activities.

According to Thornbury (2005, 13-14) speaking can be categorized as:

1. Transactional vs. Interpersonal-transactional function has as its main purpose conveying information and facilitating the exchange of goods and services, whereas interpersonal function is all about maintaining and sustaining good relations between people.
2. Interactive vs. Non-interactive-the conversation that takes place when we buy newspapers at a news kiosk is interactive, whereas leaving a message on an answer phone is non-interactive.
3. Planned vs. Unplanned-planned is such as a lecture or wedding speech, and speaking that is unplanned, such as a conversation that takes place when we bump into someone on the street.

But according to Piccolo (2010, as cited in Navarro, 2014) there are two types of speaking activities:

1. Task-Based Activities: These are activities that ask students to accomplish a specific task by following simple instructions. These types of activities are generally preferred by students as they have a clear understanding of when they have accomplished what was asked of them. Tasks such as “reach an agreement,” “Find someone who,” “Describe the media” are common ways of presenting such tasks.
2. Topic-Based Activities: These are activities that allow the students more freedom. By choosing topics that your students will identify with, they are given a chance to express their thoughts and opinions in a more natural way. Activities such as Discussions or Debates are common examples of these types of activities. These tasks let students experiment with the language that has been presented to them in class over a longer period of time. It is a great way to see what students have retained from the lessons, as they must construct sentences by themselves. One must be very careful when choosing the topics to present in class. They must be age appropriate, appropriate for the cultural and religious beliefs of the students, but also thought-provoking and interesting.

Basically Thornbury and Piccolo mention the same activities, but categorize them differently. What we should infer from this is that all of the above mentioned speaking activities should be introduced to the learner, in order to prepare them for real-life situations.

Next examples of most common speaking activities will be listed (cf. Kayi, 2006). It is important to be aware of the wide palette of speaking activities that teachers have at their disposal, so that the classes can be versatile.

### *1. Discussions*

After a significant number of classes dedicated to a specific topic, which can be a good material for discussing, a discussion can be held. The purpose of a discussion is that the students arrive at a conclusion by sharing their ideas and arguments. Before every discussion it is essential that students first brainstorm ideas or research the topic in more detail. Every discussion has to have a pre-set purpose determined beforehand. The most common discussion is the agree/disagree type. The teacher forms groups and leads either herself/himself the discussion by presenting controversial sentences. The teacher needs also to ensure that all group members speak equally. This can be achieved so that he/she pre-sets some rules. For the discussion to be successful the groups have to decide together which group defended the idea in the best way. Although discussions are time-consuming they foster critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others. Also the students have to be on a certain knowledge level to be able to have discussions.

### *2. Role play*

Another common way of getting students to speak is role-playing. Students are assigned different social roles and contexts and have to deal with the predetermined situation in the best way possible.

### *3. Simulations*

Simulations are often mixed up with role-plays. Simulations are more elaborate than role plays. For example in simulations, students can bring realia to the class. If a student is acting as a singer, she brings a microphone to sing and so on.

### *4. Information Gap*

This activity can be organized only in pairs. The gist of this activity is that students will have the information that his/her partner does not have but needs to find out. Information gap activities can serve many purposes. Also, both partners play an equally important role. In order to

complete the task, partners have to cooperate. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

#### *5. Brainstorming*

Brainstorming is a very common speaking activity. It is often used to introduce a new topic. Students produce ideas or associations in a limited time on a specific topic/word. Brainstorming can be either individual or group, but in both situation learners generate ideas quickly and freely. A good characteristic of brainstorming is that students feel open to sharing new ideas because there are no right or wrong associations or ideas.

#### *6. Storytelling*

Students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody, or they may create their own stories. Story telling fosters creative thinking. While telling a story, students have to pay attention to the format of a story. It has to have a beginning, middle and end. Students can tell riddles or jokes too. For instance, it can be agreed upon that each class begins with a short riddle or joke told by one of the students.

#### *7. Interviews*

Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. It is a good idea that the teacher gives examples of good interview questions and gives some general instructions about what students have to pay attention to in order for the interview to be successful. Students should prepare their own interview questions. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and "introduce" his or her partner to the class.

#### *8. Story Completion*

This kind of activity can be very fun for the whole class. It is a free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add few sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on.

#### *9. Reporting*

Before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

### *10. Picture Narrating*

Students are asked to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures given. The teacher may add some vocabulary or structures that need to be used while narrating.

### *11. Picture Describing*

Another way to make use of pictures in a speaking activity is to give students just one picture and having them describe what it is in the picture. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.

### *12. Find the Difference*

For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures. For example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

## 2.2. Context of the research

This section will provide information about the Croatian education system, its state school-leaving exam (henceforth Matura exam) and the Matura exam in English in more depth. Each of the topics will be discussed in separate sections. The information was retrieved from the official website of the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

### *2.2.1. Croatian education system*

Education in Croatia is defined as a constitutional right and therefore primary education is mandatory and free, while secondary and higher education are mostly free, but not mandatory. The primary education consists of eight years. English as a foreign language is at this stage compulsory from the first grade. After primary schools children attend secondary schools according to their preferences. There are grammar, vocational and trade schools. They mostly last for four years, except some vocational and trade schools that last three years. English as a foreign language is obligatory in secondary schools. In order to enroll into colleges, students have to pass the state school-leaving exam.

### 2.2.2. *Matura exam*

As mentioned before, each student has to take the state-school leaving exam, i.e. the Matura exam, in order to be able to apply for a university.

Before 2009, secondary school seniors, i.e. students in the fourth grade of secondary school, had to write a Matura paper and take an oral examination in front of a committee of teachers from the school.

Matura exam as it exists today, which is in contrast to the previous one administered on a national level, was introduced in 2009 by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. It was the result of intensive reforms Croatia had to undertake in order to become a member of the European Union. Matura exam is a standardized, high-stake exam. Johnson and Johnson (2009) define high-stake exams as follows:

High stakes testing is so named because the test outcomes are used to make important, often life-altering decisions. Such decisions may include the denial of a high school diploma, the repetition of a grade, the labelling of students and schools in pejorative ways, the withholding of funding, and even the closing of a school. Students who may do well in school all year but fail a high stakes test may be required to attend summer school and take the test again or spend another year in the same grade.

High stake testing has its ups and downs, but a lot of countries have opted for this kind of testing, because it is believed to highly motivate students, teachers and administrators, as well as to be the fairest way to test pupils' skills.

The Matura exam is a set of exams the pupils have to take, whose goal is “to test and assess pupils' acquired knowledge and aptitude, obtained through education in accordance with the prescribed general education curricula”.<sup>1</sup> Mandatory exams are the Croatian language, mathematics and a foreign language. Each student can choose one of two levels for each of the exams. Higher and more difficult is referred to as level A, whereas B level is considered basic

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Science, Education and Sports web. (visited on August 5, 2015)

and is, therefore, also easier than level A. The National Center of External Education and Evaluation prepares catalogues, which list and describe the contents of the obligatory exams and their evaluation. Pupils can take the exams in two terms, either the summer or autumn term. The tests occur at the exact same time in all secondary schools throughout Croatia in controlled conditions. The results are presented in form of grades and percentages.

### *2.2.3. Matura exam in English*

It has already been mentioned that the Matura exam in English can be taken at either A or B level. Both levels comprise three parts, and those are listening and reading comprehension and writing. Each of the levels will be discussed separately. All information is taken from the 2013/2014 exam catalogue<sup>2</sup>.

The Matura exam in English, level A lasts in total 180 minutes. The test is so constructed that it should correspond to B2 ZEROJ level. Pupils first get an envelope containing tasks for reading comprehension and writing. The reading comprehension lasts for 70 minutes, whereas writing lasts for 75 minutes. The reading comprehension part consists of five tasks. Each of these tasks targets different sub-skills of reading e.g. global reading, specific reading, detailed reading targeting coherence and cohesion and detailed reading targeting lexical items. All of these tasks are either multiple choice, matching or filling in the gaps.

Reading comprehension is followed by the writing part of the exam, which consists of writing a for and against essay on a given topic. The essay has to have between 200 and 250 words. The writing section takes into account grammatical and lexical correctness, cohesion and coherence of the text and fulfilling the task, which implies the correct number of words, appropriate form of the essay and argumentation.

Finally, the pupils get another envelope with a booklet for listening comprehension. The listening comprehension lasts for 35 minutes and is tested by four different tasks. The listening comprehension part targets sub-skills like global and specific listening. Each of the listening texts is played two times. The tasks are either matching or multiple choice, whereas the listening texts can be short stories, interviews, debates, lectures, presentations, chats etc. All three parts

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://dokumenti.ncvvo.hr/Ispitni\\_katalozi\\_13-14/Hrvatski/IK-eng.pdf](http://dokumenti.ncvvo.hr/Ispitni_katalozi_13-14/Hrvatski/IK-eng.pdf)

are worth the same number of points, i.e. each part is worth one-third of the final number of points.

In comparison to level A, level B of the Matura exam in English, lasts in total 85 minutes. The test is so constructed that it should correspond to A2 ZEROJ level. As in level A, pupils write the reading comprehension part and writing separately from the listening comprehension part. The reading comprehension part and the writing part last in total 60 minutes. The reading comprehension part comprises six tasks. They target the same sub-skills as in level A, and the types of tasks are the same as in level A. The only difference is the types of texts that can occur. Those can be short messages, articles, brochures and letters, which are almost twice as short as the texts in level A.

Reading comprehension is followed by the writing part of the exam. Pupils have to write a response to a message/letter, by answering questions below the message or letter. Their response is supposed to consist of 50 to 70 words. The writing section takes into account grammatical and lexical correctness and fulfilling the task, which implies the correct number of words, appropriate form of the letter and answering all questions.

Finally, the listening comprehension lasts for about 25 minutes and is tested by four different tasks. The listening comprehension part targets sub-skills like global and specific listening. Each of the listening texts is played two times. The tasks are either matching or multiple choice, whereas the listening texts can be short messages, chats etc. In contrast to level A, in level B reading comprehension makes up 40% of the total number of points, whereas listening comprehension and writing are worth 30% each.

### 2.3. Backwash effect

Although backwash is not explicitly mentioned in the title, it is very relevant for this topic. One can only explain the relationship between the two variables previously discussed while taking into account the backwash effect.

Defining the backwash effect is not as easy as one may think. There has been a lot of research in this area and yet there is no uniform definition of the term itself. The definitions range from very straight-forward to very complex. Here are some attempts at defining the backwash effect:

1. "The extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (Messick, 1996: 241).
2. "The effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as the backwash effect" (Hughes, 1989: 44-47).
3. "Widespread acceptance of the assertion that tests, especially public examinations, exert an influence on teachers, learners, and parents, with an associated impact on what happens in classrooms" (Andrews, 1994: 45)
4. "There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as *washback effect* by language testers) is, of course, very important; this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful" (Buck, 1988: 17).

The last, i.e. fourth definition mentions that backwash effect can be either beneficial or harmful. The official terms used for that in literature are positive and negative backwash. According to Bachman (1990: 296) positive backwash occurs when the assessment used reflects the skills and content taught in the classroom. However, in many cases and particularly in high stakes testing, the curriculum is driven by the assessment leading to negative backwash. This is exactly what this paper is trying to explore. Since the Croatian state school-leaving exam is a high stake exam, there is a legitimate reason to further investigate its relationship to speaking activities in the EFL classroom.

Backwash effect encompasses a great number of things and researchers have focused only on some of them, i.e. the ones they believe are most important. Figure 2 illustrates Bailey's model of backwash based on Hughes' examination of backwash (Bailey 1996).



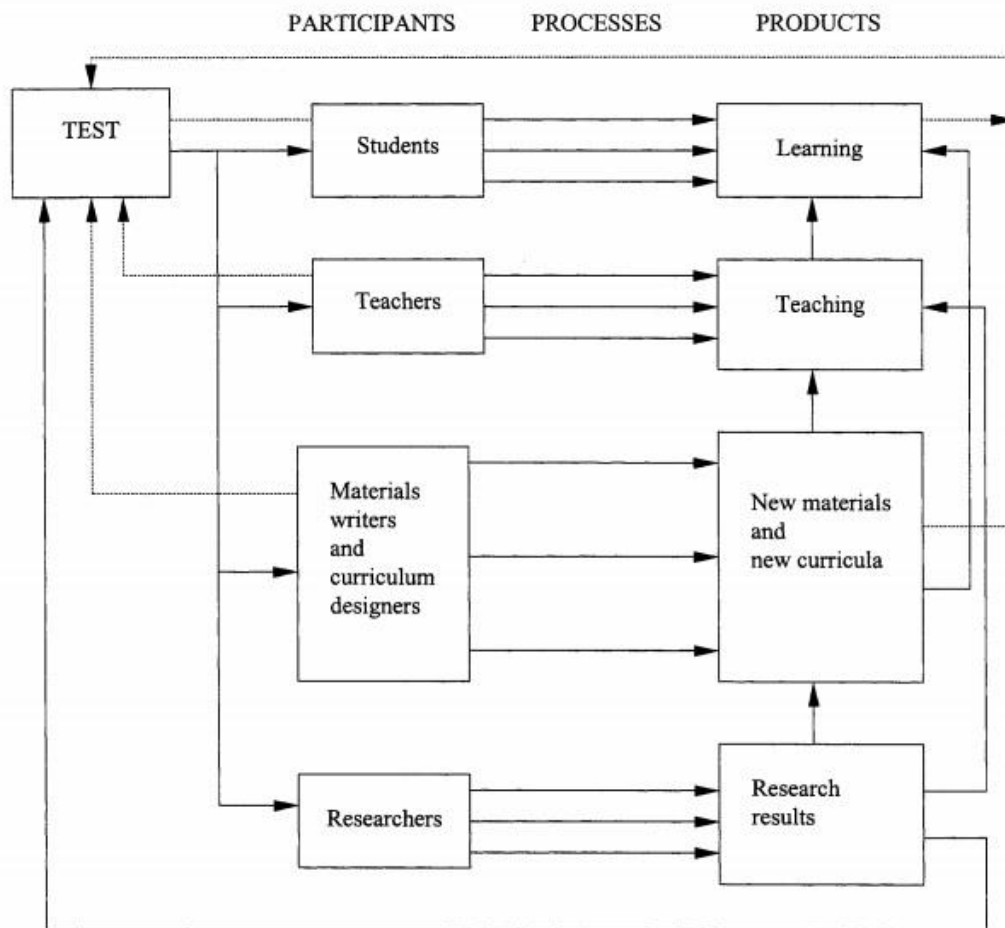


Figure 2. A basic model of backwash (Bailey, 1996: 264)

From figure 2 it can be seen that Hughes (1993) differentiates between participants, process and product in teaching and learning. The way in which these components interact with each other can be current and recurrent. This means that when the components influence the test, we can talk about positive backwash and vice versa, where the test influences the components, it is characterized as negative backwash. In the latter situation, the process of teaching is completely subordinate to the test.

One may argue that tests have the key role in this whole backwash process. As can be seen from the illustration, only tests are influenced by all the other components. Despite that Shohamy (1992: 514) notes that it is the teachers who should have the key role in this whole process “...when the writing of tests does not involve those who are expected to carry out the change- the

teachers; ... it is difficult to expect that the tests will lead to meaningful improvement in learning.”

This paragraph offered some definitions of the backwash effect, its relevance for this paper, as well as an illustration and its description of a basic model of the backwash process based on Hughes framework.

Next, previous research connected to the variables will be discussed.

#### 2.4. Previous research

There has been a lot of research worldwide about different aspects of backwash effect, beyond just the obvious testing effect on teaching. This paragraph will summarize the most important findings of five researches conducted in three different countries, one of which is also Croatia. These situations are not identical to the one in Croatia, but some of the findings can be related to the Croatian context.

The first research that will be discussed was conducted by Cheng (1997) in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in English (henceforth HKCEE in English) underwent some changes and Cheng wanted to explore how these changes affected teaching. She used a questionnaire for students as well as teachers and observed classes. The major changes occurred in the third (Integrated Listening, Reading, and Writing) and fourth part (Oral) of the HKCEE in English. One of her major findings was that public exams can change the contents of teaching. This is supported by the result Cheng got while observing classes. The change could be easily noticed, because Cheng had a control group available for her research. Some of the teachers taught both students who were taking the old exam and students who were prepared for taking the revised HKCEE in English. The revised HKCEE in English tested under oral skills not reading aloud as before, but gave some role plays or group discussion to the exam takers. The first group of students, who were taking the old HKCEE in English, practised choral reading aloud, whereas by the second group of students, who were taking the revised HKCEE in English, these activities were replaced by role plays and group discussions. This situation is similar to the Croatian context insofar that the present study assumes a similar outcome. The only difference is that the old HKCEE in English tested oral skills of the students and the new HKCEE just moderated it, whereas in Croatia the old Matura tested oral skills of the students and the new

Matura does not test oral skills of the students at all. By drawing a parallel between these two situations, the finding of the present study should also show changes in the contents of teaching. The second research was conducted by Riazi and Razavipour in 2011 in Iran. One of their goals of the research was to find out to what extent the centralized test affects teachers' test construction. The Iranian summative test does not test oral skills, just like the Croatian. One of the questionnaire items for teachers asked how they teach speaking and the result was unanimous. All of them answered that they did not teach speaking and listening. Riazi and Razavipour had an interview with the participants after the analysis of the questionnaires. They asked the participants why they do not teach speaking and listening. One of the answers was: "Right now the audio files of the textbooks are available in schools, but nobody uses them because they know that listening and pronunciation are not part of the final standardized tests" (Riazi and Razavipour, 2011: 276). Furthermore, by an analysis of the teachers' test, the researchers discovered that they are almost identical to the standardized test the test takers get at the end. This finding is another proof of existing backwash effect. In this case, the backwash is definitely negative. The Iranian situation is very similar to the Croatian in terms of their construction of the standardized test. Their standardized test also lacks testing speaking, which was proved to negatively affect the teaching process.

The Hong Kong context was investigated by yet another researcher. Lam (1994) conducted a research among 61 English teachers in Hong Kong in order to find out how the changes made in the Revised Use of English (RUE) influenced their teaching. Lam surveyed more experienced teachers, who taught students under the old as well as the new syllabus, and novice teachers, who taught only students under the new syllabus. Lam has come across negative as well as positive backwash and evident differences between more experienced and less experienced English teachers. The more experienced teachers were less prompt to embrace the changes in the new syllabus and therefore more likely to blindly follow the textbooks and teach only what is going to be tested. Lam concluded that "it seems that it isn't enough just to change/structure the exam in a certain way. The challenge is to change the teaching culture" (Lam, 1994: 96).

Andela Maleš (2013) analyzed the backwash effect of the Croatian state school-leaving exam on teaching of English as a foreign language in Croatia among 10 teachers. Her questionnaire consisted of 5 groups of questions, all of which were open-ended. Her findings proved the existence of the backwash effect on teaching.

Another very important research in Croatia was conducted by Truck-Biljan (2015). She investigated the effect of standardized testing on teaching and learning. The aim of the research was to prove the existence of the backwash effect of the writing part of the Croatian state school-leaving exam. The research involved a great number of participants as well as a number of instruments, which proves the complexity of the study. The findings of the research proved the existence of both negative and positive backwash effect on teaching and learning. Since this research and the present study examine the same context it is to expect that the same or at least similar findings will be found for the speaking part of the Croatian state school-leaving exam.

This paragraph summarised three relevant studies conducted in Hong Kong and Iran, as well as two Croatian studies. Their findings contributed greatly to the investigation of backwash effect.

### 3. Present study

#### 3.1. Aim

The aim of this research is to show that the Matura exam has an effect on teaching, particularly teaching speaking, and thereby confirms the existence of the backwash effect in language testing in the Croatian context. Research questions to be answered are:

1. Do teachers prepare their students for the state school-leaving exam during regular EFL classes?
2. Do teachers and students think the state school-leaving exam provides objective results of the students' knowledge?
3. Is there a relationship between the speaking skill and other language skills during regular EFL classes?
4. Has the feedback of their learners' success in the final exam affected their teaching in any way?

#### 3.2. Methodology

##### 3.2.1. *Participants*

For the first part of the research from 21 invited, 17 (N=17) teachers agreed to participate in the research. These 17 teachers were teaching in the First, Second or Third Grammar School in

Osijek. They were all female. Participants were heterogeneous in terms of their age ( $M=48.6250$ ,  $SD=8.17211$ ) and teaching experience ( $M=24.3529$ ,  $SD=7.50784$ ).

For the second part of the research, 266 ( $N=266$ ) students participated in the research. They were students of the First, Second and Third Grammar School in Osijek. Only students of the first and fourth grade of these schools participated in the research. They were deliberately selected, in order to see whether there are some statistically significant changes in the teaching process from the first grade to the point of taking the state-school leaving exam in English. The sample was homogenous in terms of sex (42.6% male and 57.4% female) and class they were enrolled in (47% 1<sup>st</sup> graders and 53% 4<sup>th</sup> graders).

Because the participants were only from Osijek, this cannot be considered as a representative sample of Croatian teachers and students.

### 3.2.2. *Instrument*

The instrument used for the research was a questionnaire in Croatian designed for the purposes of this study. The same questionnaire was designed in two versions: one for teachers and the other for learners. The questionnaire for teachers comprised 23 items, one of which was an open-ended question, whereas the questionnaire for students comprised 18 items. The questionnaire for students had one set of questions in form of ranking the items, whereas the teachers had the same set of questions but in a different form: each was a separate item. Therefore the questionnaire for teachers and the questionnaire for students differ only in one question. The one additional question for teachers was the already mentioned open-ended question, which will be analyzed separately. The participants had to circle the answer on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1=never; 5= very often), depending to which degree the statement applies to them or rank the given items from one to five. The first part of the questionnaire examines the teachers' methodology, followed by participants' opinion about the state school leaving exam in English, as well as two items in which they had to assess how much the learners like the four language skills and the importance of the language skills. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured by using Cronbach's alpha which reached 0.775.

### 3.2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was piloted in the First Grammar School in Osijek with one class. After the pilot slight modifications were made in the first and last item of the first set of questions. The questionnaires for teachers were given to one of the participants from each school, who then administered them to other participants from the same school. The questionnaires were collected after five days. Students were given the questionnaires during regular classes arranged in advance with their teachers. They were given instructions in Croatian and were told to be free to ask questions at any time. They were also told there was no time limit to complete the questionnaire. On average, it took them ten minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## 4. Results and discussion

The results of the research will be analyzed on three different levels. First of all the results of teachers and students will be analyzed separately, and then their results will be compared with each.

### 4.1. Teachers' responses

The first item of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) dealing with preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam during regular EFL classes will be analyzed separately.

Teachers' responses to the first questionnaire item are summarized and presented in table 3. The teachers unanimously agreed that they do prepare their learners for the English test in the state school-leaving exam.

Table 3: *Teachers' responses to the first questionnaire item*

|  | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|--|----------|-------------|-----------|
| Do you prepare your learners for the English test in the state school-leaving exam | 17       | 5.0000      | .00000    |

This finding may allude to the backwash effect. Madaus (1988 cited in Sprat, 2005: 5.) stated that "it is testing, not the "official" stated curriculum, that is increasingly determining what is

taught, how it is taught, what is learned, and how it is learned.” Due to the fact that teachers want their learners to achieve the best results possible, they prepare their learners for the final exam to prevent potential misunderstandings during the exam that may arise or go through the types of tasks that commonly occur in the exam. This finding corroborates the findings by Anđela Maleš (2013). She conducted a research in Zagreb and Split to prove the presence of the backwash effect in the Croatian context.

As for the next three items of the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) dealing with preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam during regular EFL classes, it can be seen in table 4, that teachers are of the opinion that they prepare their students for each of the sections that appear in the final exam and that to a very high degree.

*Table 4: Teachers’ responses to the set of items about preparations during regular classes*

|  | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|--|----------|-------------|-----------|
| I prepare my students for the section <i>reading comprehension</i> in the final exam   | 17       | 5.0000      | .00000    |
| I prepare my students for the section <i>writing</i> in the final exam                 | 17       | 4.9412      | .24254    |
| I prepare my students for the section <i>listening comprehension</i> in the final exam | 17       | 4.8235      | .39295    |

These results corroborate the earlier mentioned findings in previous research. Teachers take it as one of their responsibilities to prepare their students for the high-stake exam. This proves the existence of backwash effect, but not its nature of existence, whether it is positive or negative. Further on, teachers’ attitude towards the English test in the state school-leaving exam will be presented.

The findings were derived from the second set of items from the questionnaire (questionnaire items number 12, 13 and 14 in Appendix 2). They were supposed to find out more about the attitudes of the participants about the English test in the state school-leaving exam. These items were incorporated into the questionnaire in order to see whether the participants are aware of the fact that the test does not explicitly test the speaking skill and to see what their opinion as direct participants in this whole process is. Table 5 summarizes teachers’ responses to the above mentioned questionnaire items.

Table 5: Teachers' responses to the set of items about attitude

|  | N  | Mean   | SD     |
|--|----|--------|--------|
| I have adapted my classes to the needs of the final exam   | 15 | 4.4000 | .63246 |
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam correctly and objectively assesses students' knowledge in English                  | 15 | 4.0000 | .53452 |
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam tests all necessary components for the evaluation of students' language competence | 15 | 3.5333 | .91548 |

As can be seen, teachers agree with the statement that the English test in the state school-leaving exam gives correct and objective results of students' knowledge in English and even more strongly admit to adapting their teaching and classes to the same test. These two findings prompted me to additionally run another statistical test to see whether the variables *I have adapted my classes to the needs of the final exam* and *The English test in the state school-leaving exam correctly and objectively assesses students' knowledge in English* correlate with each other. Table 6, shows that they indeed significantly correlate at the level 0.05. This means that the more teachers believe in the English test in the state school-leaving exam and find it valid and reliable, the more they tend to adapt their teaching to the test. This means that they use it as a kind of orientation of what and how they are supposed to teach, which is an evident indicator of the backwash effect. There is one more variable in this set of items, which to no surprise ranked the lowest and that is that *the Croatian state school-leaving exam test all necessary components for the evaluation of students' language competence*. The mean value for this item should have been even lower. This relatively high score only shows that not all teachers are aware of the importance of the speaking skill. It is either that or that they are of the opinion that the speaking skill can be evaluated from the participants' written assignment, which thereby makes testing students' speaking skills redundant. An example of this approach was offered by Norris (1991), who suggested protocols testing learner's oral productive skills in form of a written assignment, which proved to be very accurate in predicting the learner's oral productive skill based exactly on their success on the written assignment.



Table 6: Pearson correlation of two items from the set of items about attitude

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | I have adapted my classes to the needs of the final exam |
| The ENGTinSSLE correctly and objectively assesses students' knowledge in English | .  |
| Pearson Correlation  | .634*  |
| N  | 15   |

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

For the last set of closed-ended questions, teachers were asked to assess to which degree they practice the given skills in class with their students. This set of items was included into the questionnaires because it gives an insight into the EFL classes, which is very important for this paper. Observational data would have been much more objective, but due to the fact that investing more time into the research was impossible, this particular set of items served as a replacement for it. Table 7 summarizes teachers' insight into the situation.

Table 7: Teachers' responses to the set of items about practice during classes

|  | N  | Mean   | SD     |
|--|----|--------|--------|
| During regular classes my students practice <i>reading comprehension</i>   | 17 | 4.8824 | .33211 |
| During regular classes my students practice <i>listening comprehension</i> | 17 | 4.8235 | .39295 |
| During regular classes my students practice <i>speaking</i>                | 17 | 4.8235 | .39295 |
| During regular classes my students practice <i>grammar</i>                 | 17 | 4.5294 | .71743 |
| During regular classes my students practice <i>writing</i>                 | 17 | 4.4118 | .79521 |

As indicated in table 7, all mean values are relatively high. Reading comprehension ranked the highest, and listening comprehension shares the second place with speaking. Taking into consideration that all textbooks stress reading and listening comprehension in almost every unit, this may be an explanation why these two skills ranked the highest. The most relevant finding for this research is the position of the speaking skill. According to the hypothesis of this paper speaking should have ranked low, if not the lowest, but as it turns out it is actually the second most practiced skill in class. This finding can be explained by the fact that either the teachers

were not as sincere as they should have been or that they misunderstood the concept of practicing speaking by counting all instances of speaking during a class, not only speaking activities. This may not be clearly stated in the questionnaire item, and therefore may have influenced the findings that do not corroborate the findings of previous studies. For example in Riazi and Razavipour's study (2011) all teachers admitted that they did not teach speaking and listening in their English as a foreign language classes. The reason for that is probably the fact that their state school-leaving exam does not test these skills, which proved the existence of the backwash effect in the Iranian context. The same outcome was expected in this study.

At the end teachers had to answer an open-ended question about the effect of the learners' success on teaching. The participants had to answer whether the feedback about their learner's success in the final exam affected their teaching in any way, and if yes how. The data was processed and grouped into categories. Three participants out of 17 skipped this question, whereas only one circled no as the answer. As for the 13 other participants five groups of answers were formed. The groups are as followed:

#### *1. Guidelines and organization*

Two participants said that the learners' success gives them some guidelines and helps them in the process of planning and organizing their classes.

#### *2. Satisfaction*

Two participants claimed, that they were satisfied with the results of their learners, and that their results prompted them to continue working as before.

#### *3. Types of tasks*

Two participants admitted, adapting and using types of tasks that occur on the Matura exam.

#### *4. Comparing grades*

Four participants said that they compare the grades they gave to the scores on the final exam and thus see whether they do enough preparations for the exam.

#### *5. Content of teaching*

Three participants said that they focus more on some of the content that was poorly graded.

Based on the answers to this question, it is evident that the feedback affects teachers in one way or another. The predominant answers teachers gave were that the scores gave them some insight into the situation, in particular whether they had enough preparations for the Matura exam and possible content to which they have to pay more attention to. Both of these findings corroborate

the existence of backwash effect. One of the teachers even said that their learners' success shows her that she had already made all the necessary changes and can now continue working like that. This means that since the introduction of the state school-leaving exam she adapted her teaching to the needs of the exam, and has now reached a point when she is satisfied with her students' results and does not feel the need to change anything anymore.

#### 4.2. Students' responses

Students were asked the same set of questions but from a different point of view. For the first questionnaire item (see Appendix 1) the results were not as high as expected.

Table 8: *Students' responses to the first questionnaire item*

|   | <b>Grade</b>          | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|---|-----------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| During regular classes we have preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam | 1 <sup>st</sup> grade | 125      | 3.8800      | .85760    |
|   | all                   | 266      | 3.5301      | 1.17784   |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 141      | 3.2199      | 1.33144   |

Table 9: *Independent t-test for the first questionnaire item (juniors vs. seniors)*

|   | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|---|----------|-----------|------------|
| During regular classes we have preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam | 4.859    | 241.887   | .000       |

It is not just interesting that the responses were quite low, but also that the students in their final year of education, on the eve of the Matura exam, think that they prepare significantly (table 9) less than juniors. One of the explanations for a finding like this could be that because juniors just entered a new stage in their life, find themselves on a relatively unknown territory and face many new things, they are more likely to take their teachers warnings seriously and thereby perceive the same situation differently from seniors.

As for the next three items of the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) dealing with preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam during regular EFL classes, it can be seen in table 10, that the responses are again relatively low and there is still the tendency that juniors are being prepared more than seniors. It should be noted though that the discrepancy between their mean values is not that high.

Table 10: Students' responses to the set of items about preparations during regular classes

|  | Grade                 | N   | Mean   | SD      |
|--|-----------------------|-----|--------|---------|
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>writing</i> in the final exam                 | 1 <sup>st</sup> grade | 125 | 3.4480 | 1.03531 |
|  | 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 140 | 3.3500 | 1.38816 |
|  | all                   | 265 | 3.3962 | 1.23306 |
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>reading comprehension</i> in the final exam   | 1 <sup>st</sup> grade | 123 | 3.2358 | 1.04866 |
|  | 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 141 | 3.3546 | 1.25433 |
|  | all                   | 264 | 3.2992 | 1.16240 |
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>listening comprehension</i> in the final exam | 1 <sup>st</sup> grade | 125 | 3.2000 | 1.05494 |
|  | 4 <sup>th</sup> grade | 141 | 3.0709 | 1.23430 |
|  | all                   | 266 | 3.1316 | 1.15317 |

Next, students' attitudes towards the English test in the state school-leaving exam will be analyzed.

The findings were derived from the second set of items from the questionnaire (questionnaire items number 7, 8 and 9 in Appendix 1). They were supposed to find out more about the attitudes of the students about the English test in the state school-leaving exam. Table 11 shows students' responses.

Table 11: Students' responses to the set of items about attitude

|   | Grade           | N   | Mean   | SD      |
|---|-----------------|-----|--------|---------|
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam will correctly and objectively assess my knowledge in English               | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 125 | 3.9120 | .98387  |
|   | all             | 266 | 3.7444 | 1.01054 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 3.5957 | 1.01404 |
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam tests all necessary components for the evaluation of my language competence | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 125 | 3.7920 | .96967  |
|   | all             | 266 | 3.5338 | 1.07140 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 3.3050 | 1.10804 |
| The classes are adapted to the needs of the final exam  | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 124 | 3.7984 | .96255  |
|   | all             | 265 | 3.2981 | 1.22698 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 2.8582 | 1.26819 |

Table 12: Independent t-test for the questionnaire items about attitude (juniors vs. seniors)

|   | t     | df      | Sig   |
|---|-------|---------|-------|
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam will correctly and objectively assess my knowledge in English               | 2.574 | 264     | .011  |
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam tests all necessary components for the evaluation of my language competence | 3.793 | 263.959 | .000* |
| The classes are adapted to the needs of the final exam  | 6.843 | 257.651 | .000* |

Students' responses have once more relatively low mean values. This corroborates the findings from the previous section and makes the explanation even more compelling. Students do not find that their regular EFL classes are focused only on their preparation for the exam. There is still the tendency that seniors have even lower mean values than juniors, which is in contrast to the expectations based on the hypothesis of this paper. Two out of three items differ significantly (table 12), those are: *The English test in the state school-leaving exam tests all necessary components for the evaluation of my language competence* and *The classes are adapted to the needs of the final exam*. Findings like these could be explained by the fact that seniors may be incensed at the fact that they have to pay extra money to get prepared for their final exams because the teachers do not intensely prepare them. That is exactly what has been said in the media on many occasions since the introduction of the final exams in Croatia. Parents are forced to pay expensive intensive programs with the aim of preparing their children for the final exams. "With the introduction of the state school-leaving exam emerged a new trend- intense preparations for the exam."<sup>3</sup> At the end it is not important why the mean values are as low as they are, but the sole fact that they are. This is in contrast to teachers' responses.

The last set of items for students deals with the relationship between the speaking skill and other macro skills in the EFL classroom. Students had to rank the given skills from the least practiced (1) to the most practiced (5) one. Table 13 shows students' results for the same set of items.

<sup>3</sup> M.D., Pripeme za državnu mature nisu učinkovite bez truda učenika, Narodni list

Table 13: Students' responses to the set of items about practice during classes

|   | Grade           | N   | Mean          | SD      |
|---|-----------------|-----|---------------|---------|
| During regular classes we practice <i>speaking</i>                | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 121 | 3.8182        | 1.44914 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 3.2199        | 1.49806 |
|   | <b>all</b>      | 262 | <b>3.4962</b> | 1.50287 |
| During regular classes we practice <i>grammar</i>                 | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 120 | 3.2833        | 1.13154 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 3.0426        | 1.46810 |
|   | <b>all</b>      | 261 | <b>3.1533</b> | 1.32704 |
| During regular classes we practice <i>reading comprehension</i>   | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 120 | 2.7667        | 1.19335 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 3.1418        | 1.34473 |
|   | <b>all</b>      | 261 | <b>2.9693</b> | 1.28864 |
| During regular classes we practice <i>listening comprehension</i> | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 119 | 2.6807        | 1.30145 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 2.8723        | 1.26971 |
|   | <b>all</b>      | 260 | <b>2.7846</b> | 1.28541 |
| During regular classes we practice <i>writing</i>                 | 1 <sup>st</sup> | 121 | 2.4463        | 1.55430 |
|   | 4 <sup>th</sup> | 141 | 2.7234        | 1.44473 |
|   | <b>all</b>      | 262 | <b>2.5954</b> | 1.49983 |

The results from table 13 show two very important findings, both of which corroborate the backwash effect. First of all, seniors have ranked three out of five skills higher than juniors. Those are reading and listening comprehension and writing. These three skills are all tested in the state school-leaving exam. This means that teachers tend to practice the skills that occur on the final exam the more the students are closer to the exam itself. This is a clear indicator of the backwash effect. The next major finding which can be seen from table 13 is that juniors are of the opinion that they practice speaking more than seniors. This difference is significant, which can be seen from table 14. The difference means that due to the fact that speaking is not tested in the state school-leaving exam, teachers do not intensely prepare seniors for it, as they do with the other skills that are tested. This is the most important finding of this research. Speaking activities are neglected due to the fact that they are not tested in the state school-leaving exam, which is proven by the significant difference between juniors and seniors for the questionnaire item about practicing speaking during regular classes.

Table 14: Independent t- test for responses to the questionnaire item about practicing speaking (juniors vs. seniors)

|  | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|--|----------|-----------|------------|
| During regular classes we practice <i>speaking</i> | 3.280    | 256.276   | .001*      |

#### 4.3. Comparison of teachers' and students' responses

In order to get a more objective picture of the situation teachers' and students' responses have to be compared by running an independent t-test for each of the items.

The independent t-test showed that students' responses are significantly lower than teachers' for the first questionnaire item (table 15). Teachers think that they have sufficient preparations for the final exam during regular EFL classes, whereas students perceive it differently. This may mean that either the students do not perceive the preparations as seriously as they maybe should, or that the teachers "...tend to subconsciously answer like a 'model teacher'- teachers are shrewd and know how they ought to answer" (Lam, 1994: 90).

Table 15: Independent t-test for the first questionnaire item (teachers vs. students)

|   | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|---|----------|-----------|------------|
| During regular classes we have preparations for the English test in the state school-leaving exam | 20.337   | 265.000   | .000       |

The independent t-test was used also to compare teachers' and students' results for the set of items about preparations during regular classes (see Appendix 1 and 2). The findings are presented in table 16.

Table 16: Independent t-test for the set of items about preparations during regular classes

|  | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|--|----------|-----------|------------|
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>writing</i> in the final exam                 | 16.109   | 96.904    | .000       |
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>reading comprehension</i> in the final exam   | 23.773   | 263.000   | .000       |
| During regular classes we have preparations for the section <i>listening comprehension</i> in the final exam | 14.258   | 37.769    | .000       |

It is interesting to see how particularly for this set of questions the results are significantly different. Teachers' mean values are significantly higher than students' mean values for all three variables (see tables 4 and 10). These results could be explained in a way that teachers have adapted their teaching by now so much, that it seems to the students naturally to have a listening activity each time, or that they have more writing assignments than previous generations. It has become an integrated part of the classes so that the teachers do not stress it anymore that these specific tasks should prepare them for the state school-leaving exam. That could be the reason for the fact that students do not think of these instances of practice during regular classes as preparations because they are not labelled as such by their teachers.

Even some results from the section about attitude towards the English test in the state school-leaving exam differ significantly.

Table 17: Independent t-test for the questionnaire items about attitude (teachers vs. students)

|   | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|---|----------|-----------|------------|
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam will correctly and objectively assess my knowledge in English               | 1.690    | 20.169    | .106       |
| The English test in the state school-leaving exam tests all necessary components for the evaluation of my language competence | -.002    | 279       | .999       |
| The classes are adapted to the needs of the final exam  | 6.127    | 20.551    | .000*      |



Only the last item in table 17 differs significantly between teachers and students. Teachers' mean values are significantly higher than students' mean value for this particular variable (see tables 5 and 11). This can again be explained by the fact that students are not aware of everything teachers have changed. They may have changed textbooks for those that have more listening texts, or they do more tasks in which the students have to fill in the gaps with a word of their choice. These are only some of the possible changes that took a lot of time to change and prepare, but of which students cannot be aware of. The results in table 17 also show that students' and teachers' responses have an almost identical mean value for the second item in the table. It is surprising that the score of teachers for this item is so high. Teachers should have known better which components make out a student's language competence. This only proves that the state school-leaving exam has been accepted as it is, is not discussed in public and it has not undergone any changes since its very first implementation.

Next, the results for the set of items examining the relationship between the speaking skill and other macro skills in the EFL classroom will be discussed. As it was expected, results for all activities are significantly different.

*Table 18: Independent t-test for the questionnaire items to the set of items about practice during classes (teachers vs. students)*

|   | <b>t</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|---|----------|-----------|------------|
| During regular classes we practice <i>speaking</i>                | 9.976    | 57.602    | .000       |
| During regular classes we practice <i>grammar</i>                 | 7.152    | 23.853    | .000       |
| During regular classes we practice <i>reading comprehension</i>   | 16.876   | 59.261    | .000       |
| During regular classes we practice <i>listening comprehension</i> | 16.410   | 44.864    | .000       |
| During regular classes we practice <i>writing</i>                 | 8.489    | 24.160    | .000       |

As the results in table 18 show, there is a statistically significant difference between teachers and students in all variables. This means that teachers and students once more perceive things differently. Teachers' mean values are significantly higher than students' mean values for these particular variable (see tables 7 and 13). It would be easier to start with the things they agree upon with each other. That is that both groups ranked writing as least practiced during regular EFL classes and practicing speaking very high (teachers- second place; students- first place). As for writing, it is surprising that it was ranked as the least practiced skill by both teachers and

learners, because the essay is a major part of the state school-leaving exam. But it has to be taken into consideration that writing an essay takes up a lot of time, and therefore cannot be practiced as often as the other skills. However, there is still an indication that seniors practice it more than juniors, although no significant difference was found. As for speaking, there has been found a significant difference when comparing results of teachers and students (table 18), but more important also when comparing results between juniors and seniors (table 14). This finding in particular is very important for this paper and it proves the hypothesis right. At first it may seem that the hypothesis was not proven right, because students as well as teachers ranked speaking very high, and the hypothesis says that speaking will be neglected during regular classes. But this finding just indicates the obvious fact that speaking is an inevitable part of EFL classes. It is a follow up activity for almost all the other activities. While doing reading or listening comprehension activities in order to check them teachers and students have to interact. While presenting a new grammatical phenomenon, teachers always end or should end their classes with the production stage, in which “students use the new items more freely, with less or little control by the teacher“(Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 506). This can once again be realized through speaking. Because of that we have to look deeper into the situation. This is why we have to take into consideration the fact that seniors practice significantly less speaking during regular classes than juniors. This is what the whole idea was while exploring the relationship between speaking activities and the state-school leaving exam. The backwash effect of the state school-leaving exam has been so far proven on more than one occasion and by adding this information it can only be concluded that due to the backwash effect speaking activities are indeed neglected. The less time there is left to the exam the more preparation takes place, i.e. the fewer speaking activities there are.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to prove backwash effect of the centralized test in the Croatian context, particularly its effect on speaking activities. The results confirmed that speaking activities indeed are neglected during regular EFL classes.

Although speaking was ranked very high by both groups of participants, this finding does not exclusively prove the hypothesis wrong. It was hypothesized that speaking activities would be neglected, but it was naive to believe they would rank the lowest, taking into consideration how important speaking in general is. By looking closer at the matter, it was found that seniors practice significantly less speaking during regular EFL classes than juniors. In addition to that, teachers and students both agreed, but to a significantly different extent, with the fact that teachers prepare them for state school-leaving exam. They also believe that the state school-leaving exam gives objective results of students' knowledge. These findings have proven the existence of backwash effect on more than one occasion and therefore support the hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the results indicate that classes are orientated towards learners' speaking competence, but that the backwash effect has negatively influenced speaking in seniors.

It also needs to be pointed out that the research has some limitations, such as the small number of teachers that participated and the fact that all participants were from Osijek, which therefore cannot be considered as a representative sample of Croatia. Therefore recommendations for future research are to include more participants throughout Croatia and to include observational data, which would reduce the subjectivity of the results.

This topic is very important for the theory of second language acquisition because it touches upon an important issue of the backwash effect, which can reduce the quality of teaching. Therefore the implication of this research is to introduce testing of all four macro skills in the state school-leaving exam in English.

## References

1. Andrews, S. (1994). The washback effect of examinations: Its impact upon curriculum innovation in English language teaching. *Curriculum Forum*, (1), 44-58.
2. Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Bailey, K. M. (1996). Working for washback: A review of the washback concept in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 257-279.
4. Buck, G. (1988). Testing listening comprehension in Japanese university entrance examinations. *JALT Journal*, (10), 12-42.
5. Chaney, A.L., T.L. Burk. (1998). *Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8*. Boston: Allyn&Bacon.
6. Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language and Education*, 11(1), 8-54.
7. Golkova, Dita, Sarka Hubackova (2014). Productive skills in second language learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 143, 477 – 481.
8. Harmer, Jeremy (2003). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. (revised) Longman.
9. Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Hughes, A. (1993). *Backwash and TOEFL 2000*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Reading.
11. Johnson, D. (23<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2009). High stakes testing. Available at: <http://www.education.com/reference/article/high-stakes-testing1> (visited on 5th Aug 2015).
12. Kayi, Hayriye (2006). Teaching Speaking. *TESL Journal*, vol XII, No.11.
13. Lackman, Ken and associates (2010). Teaching speaking sub-skills. Available at: [http://www.kenlackman.com/files/speakingsubskillshandout13poland\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.kenlackman.com/files/speakingsubskillshandout13poland_2_.pdf) (visited on: 3rd Aug 2015).
14. Lam, H. P. (1994). Methodology washback – an insider’s view. In D. Nunan, R. Berry, & V. Berry, eds. *Bringing about change in language education: Proceedings of the International Language in Education Conference 1994*, (pp. 83-102). Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.
15. Maleš, Anđela (2013). The Washback effect of the Matura exam in English in the Croatian context. Unpublished diploma paper Graduation Thesis. Zagreb.
16. Martinez-Flor, Alicia, Esther Uso-Juan, Eva Alcon Soler (2006). Towards acquiring communicative competence through speaking. Martinez-Flor, Alicia, Esther Uso-Juan, Eva

- Alcon Soler, eds. *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 139-159.
17. M.D. (31st Mar 2015). "Pripreme za maturu nisu učinkovite bez truda učenika." *Narodni list*. Available at: <http://www.narodni-list.hr/posts/101015001>. (visited on 20th Aug 2015).
  18. Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13, 241-256.
  19. Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia. Available at: <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx?art=8750&sec=2504> (visited on 17th Aug 2015).
  20. Navarro, Theo (14th Feb 2014). Basics of Speaking Activities in the ESL Classroom. Available at: <https://ambitiouselt.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/basics-of-speaking-activities-in-the-esl-classroom/> (visited on 30th July 2015).
  21. Norris, Carolyn Brimley (1991). Evaluating English oral skills through the technique of writing as if speaking. *System*, Vol 19, Issue 3, 203-216.
  22. Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English Language Teaching*. NY: McGraw-Hill.
  23. Powers, Donald E. (2010). The Case for Comprehensive, Four-Skills Assessment of English Language Proficiency. *ETS*, No. 14, 1-12.
  24. Riazi, A. Mehdi, Kiomars Razavipour (2011). (In) Agency of EFL teachers under the negative backwash effect of centralized tests. *International Journal of Language Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 263-282.
  25. Richards, Jack C., Richard Schmidt (2002). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. (3rd edition). Malaysia: Pearson Education Limited.
  26. Shohamy, E. (1992). Beyond proficiency testing: A diagnostic feedback testing model for assessing foreign language learning. *Modern Language Learning*, 76(4), 513-521.
  27. Spratt, M (2005). Washback and the classroom: The implications for teaching and learning of studies of washback for exams. *Language Teaching Research*, 9 (1), 5-29.
  28. Thornbury, Scott (2005). *How to teach speaking*. England: Longman.
  29. Truck-Biljan, Ninočka (2015). Povratni učinak standardiziranoga jezičnoga ispitivanja na pisani izričaj u stranome jeziku. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Zagreb: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Appendix 1  
UPITNIK

**SPOL (zaokruži):** M Ž

**DOB:** \_\_\_\_\_

**RAZRED:** \_\_\_\_\_

Ovim upitnikom želimo saznati tvoja iskustva iz nastave engleskoga jezika. Ovim te putem molimo da pristupiš našem istraživanju i ispuniš upitnik. Vrijeme potrebno za rješavanje upitnika je oko 10 minuta.

Tvoje mišljenje nam je važno. Stoga te molimo da na sva pitanja odgovaraš iskreno. Ne postoje točni i netočni odgovori, važno je da odgovor najbolje odrazi tvoje mišljenje. Upitnik je u potpunosti anonimn, a svi odgovori analizirat će se samo grupno i u istraživačke svrhe.

Pred tobom se nalazi 38 pitanja. Kraj svakog pitanja nalazi se skala od 5 brojeva. Tvoj zadatak je zaokružiti onaj broj na skali koji najbolje odražava tvoje mišljenje, na sljedeći način:

**1- nikada; 2- rijetko; 3- ponekad; 4- često ; 5- vrlo često**

|    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Na nastavi se pripremamo za državnu maturu iz predmeta engleskoga jezika.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | Na nastavi se tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremamo za dio ispita <i>Pisanje</i> državne mature.                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | Na nastavi se tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremamo za dio ispita <i>Čitanje</i> državne mature.                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | Na nastavi se tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremamo za dio ispita <i>Slušanje</i> državne mature.                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | Pri izradi testova u svrhu provjere znanja učenika profesorica se služi zadacima/tekstovima iz državne mature te nam kaže koji su to. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | Nastavnica nas ispituje usmeno za ocjenu  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Okreni stranicu

Procijeni ne ponuđenoj skali u kojoj mjeri se slažeš s tvrdnjama

**Skala: 1-uopće se ne slažem 2-djelomično se slažem 3-niti se slažem niti ne slažem 4-uglavnom se slažem 5-u potpunosti se slažem**

|    |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7. | Mislim da će državna matura dati realne rezultate moga znanja iz engleskog jezika.               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. | Mislim da državna matura ispituje sve potrebne komponente za procjenu moje jezične kompetencije. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. | Mislim da je nastava u školi prilagođena potrebama državne mature.                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Procijeni ne ponuđenoj skali u kojoj mjeri voliš sljedeće aktivnosti na nastavi

**Skala: 1- uopće ne volim 3- niti volim niti ne volim 5- izuzetno volim**

|     |                           |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10. | Čitanje s razumijevanjem  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. | Govorenje                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. | Gramatičke vježbe         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. | Slušanje s razumijevanjem | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Ocijeni na ponuđenoj skali u kojoj mjeri smatraš da je važno ovladati pojedinom vještinom u engleskom jeziku.

**Skala: 1- uopće nije važno 3- niti je važno, niti nevažno 5- izuzetno važno**

|     |                           |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14. | Čitanje s razumijevanjem  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. | Govorenje                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. | Gramatičke vježbe         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. | Slušanje s razumijevanjem | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

18. Koje od navedenih aktivnosti najčešće vježbate? **Poredajte** navedene aktivnosti od 1 (najrjeđe) do 5 (najčešće). Svaki se broj može upotrijebiti **samo jedanput**. Ako smatrate da su neke dvije aktivnosti jednako zastupljene u nastavi, odlučite se ipak za jednu!

pisanje eseja \_\_\_\_\_

govor \_\_\_\_\_

slušanje \_\_\_\_\_

gramatika \_\_\_\_\_

čitanje \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 2  
**UPITNIK**

OPĆI PODACI

Spol: Ž - M

Dob: \_\_\_\_

Godine rada u nastavi: \_\_\_\_

Razredi u kojima ste poučavali posljednjih 5 godina: \_\_\_\_\_

Ovim upitnikom želimo saznati Vaša iskustva iz nastave engleskoga jezika. Molimo Vas da pažljivo pročitate svako pitanje i da zaokružite jedan odgovor na ponuđenoj ljestvici. Ne postoje točni ni netočni odgovori.

Skala: 1- nikada 2- rijetko 3-povremeno 4- često 5- vrlo često

|     |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.  | Svoje učenike pripremam za ispit iz engleskoga jezika na državnoj maturi.                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2.  | Svoje učenike tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremam za dio ispita <i>Pisanje</i> državne mature.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3.  | Svoje učenike tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremam za dio ispita <i>Čitanje</i> državne mature.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4.  | Svoje učenike tijekom školske godine ciljano pripremam za dio ispita <i>Slušanje</i> državne mature. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5.  | Moji učenici na nastavi vježbaju pisanje eseja.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6.  | Moji učenici na nastavi vježbaju govor.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7.  | Moji učenici na nastavi često vježbaju slušanje s razumijevanjem.                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8.  | Moji učenici na nastavi često vježbaju gramatiku.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9.  | Moji učenici na nastavi često vježbaju čitanje s razumijevanjem.                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. | Pri izradi testova u svrhu provjere znanja učenika služim se zadacima/tekstovima iz državne mature.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. | Svoje učenike ispitujem usmeno za ocjenu.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |



Skala: 1-uopće se ne slažem 2-djelomično se slažem 3-niti se slažem niti ne slažem 4-uglavnom se slažem 5-u potpunosti se slažem

|     |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12. | Državna matura daje realne rezultate učenikova znanja.                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. | Državna matura ispituje sve potrebne komponente za procjenu učenikove jezične kompetencije . | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. | Prilagodio/la sam svoju nastavu potrebama državne mature.                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Jesu li na Vaš rad u nastavi utjecale povratne informacije o uspješnosti učenika na državnoj maturi? DA - NE

Ako da, na koji način? \_\_\_\_\_

Procijenite na ponuđenoj skali u kojoj mjeri Vaši učenici vole sljedeće aktivnosti na nastavi

Skala: 1- uopće ne vole 3- niti vole niti ne vole 5- izuzetno vole

|     |                           |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15. | Čitanje s razumijevanjem  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. | Govorenje                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. | Gramatičke vježbe         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. | Slušanje s razumijevanjem | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Ocijenite na ponuđenoj skali u kojoj mjeri smatrate pojedinu vještinu bitnom da ju učenik savlada

Skala: 1- uopće nije važno 3- niti je važno, niti nevažno 5- izuzetno važno

|     |                           |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19. | Čitanje s razumijevanjem  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. | Govorenje                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. | Gramatičke vježbe         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. | Slušanje s razumijevanjem | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Hvala na sudjelovanju!

## **Abstract**

The main idea of this paper is to show that by introducing the high-stake exam in Croatia the speaking skill in EFL classrooms is being neglected. This can be explained by the backwash effect. The backwash effect has been widely researched in many countries, whereas in Croatia the research is still in its early phase. In order to test this hypothesis a survey has been conducted, which aimed to explore the relationship between speaking activities in the EFL classroom and Croatian state school-leaving exam. The results showed that speaking is indeed neglected.

**Key words:** language competence, speaking skill, backwash effect, state school-leaving exam

## **Sažetak**

Cilj istraživanja je dokazati da je uvođenje standardiziranog ispita iz engleskog jezika u Hrvatskoj ostavilo negativne posljedice na redovnu nastavu engleskog kao stranog jezika. Pri tomu se misli na govornu vještinu učenika, za koju se pretpostavlja da će biti zanemarena na redovnoj nastavi, jer se ne ispituje direktno na državnoj maturi. Ta hipoteza teorijski je utemeljena na takozvanom povratnom učinku (engl. backwash effect). Povrati učinak uvelike je istraživani u svijetu, no u Hrvatskoj su istraživanja tek u početnoj fazi. Kako bi se hipoteza ispitala, provedeno je istraživanje s ciljem utvrđivanja odnosa govornih aktivnosti u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika i državne mature. Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da je govor na nastavi itekako zanemaren i to u posljednjoj školskoj godini, kada se učenici najviše pripremaju za završni ispit, što je sukladno očekivanjima.

**Ključne riječi:** jezična kompetencija, govorna vještina, državna matura, povratni učinak