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Methodological Approaches to Online Serbian Heritage Language Instruction

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Abstract: In this paper, we propose adequate methodological approaches for Serbian as a heritage language based on the critical analysis of the existing Serbian Ministry of Education's Curriculum for Serbian as a foreign language. This curriculum is recommended for use in Serbian heritage language education; however, it has been shown to be insufficiently effective in the classroom. The methods in question should benefit heritage speakers the most, such as communication-based methods and form-focused instruction, which enhance metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, we suggest an integrative model of teaching as we believe that cross-cultural approaches positively impact both types of students.

Keywords: heritage language; foreign language; teaching methods; Serbian language; Serbian as a heritage language; Serbian as a foreign language

1. Introduction

In recent years, second language instruction for heritage speakers (HSs) has gained increased attention, as it has become evident that they should not be defined simply as foreign language learners; rather, they represent a distinct and heterogeneous category (Kagan and Dillon 2001). Regarding Serbian HSs, the general conclusion is that there are no educational curricula specifically designed for this group of learners. Instead, the standard Serbian national program for L1 speakers is applied, executed by language teachers primarily trained in the philological tradition, whose teaching methods are based on text analysis rather than on enhancing students' communication skills.

Over the last decade, a significant number of heritage language (HL) learners have expressed an interest in learning Serbian online, which offers methodological advantages such as individualized and specialized classes, flexible schedules, and remote study options.

In this paper, we examine the differences in approaches to teaching grammar to HL learners compared to native speakers in Serbia. We propose facilitating the acquisition and education of Serbian HL learners by suggesting a fairly standardized school program for the Serbian diaspora, along with the appropriate classroom methods. We recommend that the language of instruction in the proposed textbooks be in the dominant language of the society. Additionally, instruction should be organized by levels in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Given that different methodological approaches can be applied to HL speakers and L2 learners, we utilize the following criteria: HL learners typically begin with better communication skills, as well as stronger listening and comprehension abilities, because they acquire Serbian in a naturalistic context. However, many exhibit low literacy skills and poor metalinguistic knowledge, as the majority have not received formal language instruction. Conversely, L2 learners of Serbian often outperform HL learners in grammatical and writing tasks but tend to have lower communication and pronunciation skills (in line with Montrul 2010).

We also advocate for a more individualized approach to lectures for HL speakers, as the intensity of their motivation to learn Serbian as a heritage language varies among individuals; typically, they face pressure from their parents, unlike L2 learners, who generally initiate their studies independently.

In accordance with Cvikić et al. (2010), it is often necessary to implement content that appeals to the student while also covering all the key points designated for the particular teaching unit. Another example is introducing culturally themed materials to HL speakers or focusing on perfecting both alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic equally), whereas with L2 learners, the emphasis is often placed on the Latin alphabet.

2. Background

In this section, we first give a short overview of the main properties of heritage speakers in general. Afterwards, we explain their position as heritage language learners, with a brief history of Serbian heritage schools.

2.1. Heritage Language Speakers' Characteristics

While heritage speakers (HSs) have existed alongside other bilinguals, it is only in the last 30 years that researchers have shown a greater interest in them as a distinct group of bilingual speakers and learners. Valdés (2000, p. 376) defined HSs as "individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language". Kisselev et al. (2020, pp. 1–2) provided a more inclusive definition regarding the HSs' possible dominant language, stating that "they all grew up speaking language(s) other than the dominant language of the society at home and became dominant in the language of their new society, which could be either their other first language for simultaneous bilinguals or their second language for sequential bilinguals or early L2 learners".

Specifically, regarding their ability to speak the language, HSs can be seen as individuals who began acquiring the language, though the acquisition may be incomplete (Montrul 2008). In a broader sense, they may never have fully acquired the language but possess a motivation to learn due to their cultural heritage (Cvikić et al. 2010).

Heritage speakers are a heterogeneous group that shares similarities with both monolinguals and second language learners. To understand the potential pedagogical implications, it is important to examine their linguistic characteristics. Montrul (2010, p. 12) compared heritage speakers (HSs) to monolinguals (MLs) and second language learners (L2Ls), pointing out the following similarities and differences from both types of speakers:

-   MLs and HSs similarities: early language exposure; naturalistic acquisition of oral language input; control over grammar (phonology, vocabulary, certain grammar structures);
-   L2Ls and HSs similarities: language errors throughout acquisition and transfer; variable language competence (usually incomplete); fossilization; motivation plays a significant role;
-   MLs and HSs differences: in monolingual acquisition, the result is successful and complete; there is no fossilization; motivation plays no role; complex structures and vocabulary are acquired right after the age of 5, when metalinguistic competence also starts developing;
-   L2Ls and HSs differences: in second language acquisition, there is a delayed exposure to the target language; variable language input in naturalistic and instructed setting; possible permanent incomplete grammar; more experience with literacy and formal instructions.

In more recent research, heritage speakers have not only been compared to monolinguals and second language learners but also to other types of speakers, such as first-generation immigrants. This comparison typically involves the heritage speakers' dominant language and the non-dominant language of the first generation (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013). First-generation immigrants are considered providers of the baseline language for heritage

speakers (Polinsky 2018). Some studies suggest that these two groups are more linguistically similar than previously thought (e.g., Stover Stevens 2019).

Conversely, some research has focused on the baseline language of unbalanced adult heritage speakers in comparison to other bilinguals, such as balanced adult bilinguals and child bilinguals (Polinsky 2017). In the case of relative clauses, Polinsky (2017) found that child bilinguals exhibit native-like performance, whereas adult heritage speakers show an exaggerated subject preference when interpreting gaps. The author concludes that an adult heritage speaker may reanalyze structures that child heritage speakers have not fully learned, bringing adult speakers closer to the baseline language (Polinsky 2017).

It is worth mentioning that the question of the exact definition of a heritage language speaker, and therefore a heritage language learner, remains open. Zyzik (2016) identified two core issues in this regard—speakers' proficiency and the role of implicit versus explicit knowledge. Motivation to learn, as well as the nature of linguistic input, also play significant roles. While Zyzik (2016) proposed a model for a prototypical heritage language learner—proficient and exposed to both implicit and explicit knowledge—she also acknowledged the frequent cases of learners who have diverged from the prototype. In this category, she includes overhearers (Au et al. 2002), who have been only passively receptive to the language, as well as those with minimal or no implicit knowledge.

2.2. Heritage Language Speakers in the Classroom

Usually, the heritage language is acquired at home from an early age. However, once speakers begin their formal education (pre-school and school), they become predominantly exposed to the language of society, and the use of the heritage language is reduced to the home environment. Some eventually "wish to learn, re-learn, or improve their current level of linguistic proficiency in their family language" (Montrul 2010, p. 3). Kisselev et al. (2020, p. 2) considered heritage language learners (HLLs) to be a subgroup of heritage speakers, defining HLLs as those who attempt formal study of their heritage language.

It is important to note that heritage language pedagogy is a developing field. As Valdés (2005) highlights, "While the number of HLLs in the mainstream L2 classrooms has been increasing, the field of language pedagogy has been slow to rise to the challenge of meeting the educational needs of these learners". Specifically, attention needs to be brought to the actual language experiences of these speakers and their motivations to learn or improve the target language in order to better specialize the pedagogical approaches (Kisselev et al. 2020). On the other hand, Montrul (2010, p. 17) acknowledged the importance of pedagogical practices in SLA, noting that "[. . .] in this respect, L2 classroom research has much to offer to the heritage language classroom, whether it involves classes developed exclusively for heritage language learners or mixed classes that cater to both types of learners".

Further research on the topic of heritage speakers in the classroom has given a more detailed description of effective teaching methods (e.g., Janjić 2018; Otwinowska et al. 2023; Pavličević-Franić 2012; Polinsky 2014; etc.). Janjić (2018) acknowledged the importance of what she calls an "integrative model", which is based on combining different cultural content in Serbian heritage classrooms. Polinsky (2014), for example, noticed that some of the testing methods did not apply positively to heritage language learners, such as grammaticality judgement tasks.

2.3. Serbian Heritage Language Schools

There have been different waves of Serbian immigration to various countries. For example, those who immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century typically have descendants who are the third generation of Serbian immigrants, usually with little or no knowledge of the Serbian language. More recently, the wave of the 1990s saw many people immigrating to Canada and New Zealand, whose children form the second generation and inherit the language. In the Netherlands, first language schools were founded in 1972 (during the Yugoslavian period) and taught Serbo-Croatian until

1991/1992. After that, schools began teaching in the languages of the newly formed countries (Palmen 2016).

To this day, education of Serbian as a heritage language in the diaspora is mostly conducted as supplementary, meaning that, in addition to regular schools (which teach in the dominant language of society), children attend extra classes that are usually taught on Saturdays at local churches. The teachers are rarely formally trained to teach Serbian as a heritage language. The program they receive from the Ministry of Education (or the appropriate competent ministry) has been shown to be inadequate for the heterogeneous groups of students they teach.

As for young adults, some university students may enroll in Slavic studies and attend courses in BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian). For others, however, such courses are usually unavailable (Pavličević-Franić 2012).

More recently, both adults and children (encouraged by their parents) have started enrolling in online courses of Serbian as a foreign or heritage language, offered by individuals or accredited schools in their homeland.

3. Materials and Methods

For this research, we analyzed the Plan and Program for Serbian as a Foreign Language, issued by the Institute for the Improvement of Education, as well as the Handbook for Teachers of Serbian as a Foreign Language, modeled after the Plan and Program. There is no official plan or program specifically for Serbian as a heritage language. However, it is important to note that there are centers for Serbian as a Foreign Language at universities in major cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš), as well as a few accredited schools offering Serbian as a foreign language (e.g., Azbukum in Novi Sad, Academic Serbian Association in Niš). Based on our analysis, we have proposed methods that would most benefit heritage speakers learning Serbian.

4. The Plan and Program

In this section, we outline the content of the Serbian Ministry of Education's Curriculum (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019) for learning Serbian as a foreign language, focusing on its pedagogical suggestions and potential challenges in applying them to the reality of Serbian heritage schools.

Firstly, the Plan is defined by educational standards set across three levels of proficiency—basic, intermediate, and advanced. The introduction raises the following important question: how can learning and knowing Serbian as a foreign language be applicable to children in their everyday lives? The standards describe the competencies a child should achieve, both globally and more specifically. There should be guidance for the evaluation of students, but personalized evaluation must also consider all language competencies. The global standards consist of the following three levels:

Basic level—basic information, introducing oneself, and basic grammar;
Intermediate level—the student can use phrases and hold conversations and recognizes notable figures from their culture;
Advanced level—the student actively uses the most frequent words and recognizes differences between their own culture and the culture of the language they are acquiring (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, pp. 3–4).

Specific standards are divided into functional pragmatic (speaking, reading, writing, comprehension), linguistic (grammar and orthography), and intercultural (knowledge and comparison of cultures). These standards are explained in detail for each competency across the three proficiency levels (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 5).

Moving on to the Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 7), a problem arises because it does not take into account the heterogeneity of students learning Serbian. The curriculum is not organized by the grade level of the student but by the number of years the student has previously spent learning the language. The main

guidelines that teachers should follow are only briefly described, noting the individual differences among students and suggesting that the program and methods may be adapted to meet their needs but without specific clarification. The Program is categorized from Year 1 to Year 12 of learning Serbian. In each year, there are specified outcomes, themes, and content that should be covered. The topics are generally consistent throughout the years, but they gradually become more nuanced. The norm is around 150 new words each year as the complexity of grammar increases.

Methodological and didactic instructions for applying the program can be found in a separate chapter, which provides brief guidelines on using the standard framework, including global and operational plans and an example of a prepared lesson (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 10).

The Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 10) made a valid point about the main difference between teaching Serbian as a foreign language and teaching it as a first language. When teaching Serbian as a foreign language, the primary focus is on communication and the actual use of language. On the other hand, teaching Serbian as a first language puts more emphasis on metalinguistic knowledge, such as the grammatical terms, principles, and rules about the language.

The Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 11) suggests focusing on communication skills rather than emphasizing grammatical accuracy. Instead, it encourages creating actual conversational situations and learning about the socio-cultural context. Grammar is addressed through functional grammar and the communicative method, which guides students to apply grammar rules intuitively. Learning grammar is presented as a developing spiral.

The postulates outlined serve as guidelines for various learning situations, depending on the topics or units (notably, a distinction is made between the evaluation of foreign language (FL) students and L1 students). Guidelines for developing and improving the following four language skills are also presented:

Listening and comprehension—Fairly concrete examples of exercises and tasks are provided, though they are not overly specified; for instance, suggestions to use audio materials without indicating which ones are appropriate for particular units;

Reading—The program mentions the pre-elementary stage of learning to read (for the youngest students). The focus is on adapting texts according to the level, age, interests, or goals of the students;

Writing—Dictation is highlighted as a main example, followed by suggestions for writing greeting cards for specific occasions;

Speaking—A communication method is implemented, emphasizing communication skills over correcting mistakes (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, pp. 13–17).

The views on teaching grammar suggest that students do not need to know grammar definitions that they cannot apply. Grammar is learned both explicitly and implicitly. However, very few examples of these tasks are provided in the guidelines (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 18).

Regarding creative classroom activities, games and exercises are listed, but they are not detailed or specified for particular units. As for evaluation, it is emphasized that assessment occurs before enrolment (following the standards of the Program), as well as during the learning process and at its conclusion. Again, evaluation methods are not particularly exemplified (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 20).

We largely agree with the main principles of the Program and the guidelines for developing language skills. However, the Program lacks detail in differentiating among various groups of learners of Serbian, particularly heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language learners (L2Ls), indicating that they require a specific assessment.

5. Pedagogical Implications for Improvement

Since the Program allows students to enroll in a certain grade based on the number of years they have been studying Serbian, this approach seems more applicable in a monolingual setting and less so for heritage language speakers and learners. In this context, students of different ages may possess the same level of language competence, which is typically not the case for monolingual learners. This, along with other factors, creates discrepancies that make a group of students enrolled in the same grade often very heterogeneous, rendering it difficult to uphold a single pedagogical approach.

Therefore, we recommend creating specialized programs for the following three age groups, each consisting of three proficiency levels (basic, intermediate, advanced): children aged 7 to 12; young adults aged 12 to 18; and adults aged 18 and older. Textbooks should be developed accordingly.

We also propose a comparative and contrastive method that would involve comparing the target heritage language with the dominant language of society in grammar instruction and not just in cultural and conversational topics.

Lastly, we will provide examples of the methods that Serbian heritage learners can benefit from. Note that these approaches can be applied in both online and in-person settings, as well as in individual and group classes. The nature of individual lessons, for example, allows for a more detailed assessment of each student's competencies and needs, as well as their personal interests. Online lessons also facilitate the use of digital teaching tools. We propose that the following three models be applied in all the aforementioned forms of Serbian heritage language learning:

- communicative model;
- form-focused instruction;
- integrative model.

To clarify the importance of the communicative model in heritage language (HL) education, we refer back to "the Proficiency movement, based on communicative approaches (also known as macro-approaches), [that] downplays explicit grammar-based instruction and advocates for the creation of an immersive environment in the classroom, where communicative tasks are carried out exclusively in the target language and any pedagogical instruction is preferably conducted in the target language" (Kisselev et al. 2020, p. 3), from which communicative models are derived. Kisselev et al. (ibidem) further explained that these models are most effective for heritage language learners (HLLs) because they build on the learners' existing global linguistic competencies; ideally, they also enhance cultural awareness and bilingual identity while fostering involvement with the heritage community.

Wu and Chang (2010, p. 26) provide an overview highlighting the advantages of macro-approaches for HLLs, who often cannot rely on their metalinguistic knowledge (unlike second language learners, L2Ls) to understand complex grammatical definitions and explanations. They also present an adapted version of Kagan and Dillon's (2001) distinctions between micro and macro-approaches (see Table 1).

Following those instructions, we propose that the communicative model consists of practices such as the following:

- role-play;
- creating conversational situations;
- open-ended questions;
- research tasks;
- listening and comprehension as a start-up for conversation;
- prompt pictures that invoke conversation, as presented in Figure 1.

The second model, form-focused instruction, complements the communicative model. Therefore, it should be integrated as an important method, as it draws learners' attention to form in the context of communication (Long 1991). Furthermore, Kisselev et al. (2020, p. 5) explained that this type of instruction reinforces: "(1) attention to grammatical form (noticing) and the ability to recognize and analyze form-meaning mappings, (2) conceptual

understanding of grammar, and (3) metalinguistic awareness", which can be achieved through the explicit teaching of language structure.

Figure 1. Prompting pictures for starting up conversation.

Table 1. Micro and macro-approaches.

Teaching Domains	Micro-Approaches	Macro-Approaches
Vocabulary	Full range	Age-appropriate/literary/academic/formal
Reading	Small texts, gradually and slowly increasing in volume and complexity	Fairly large and complex texts almost from the beginning
Writing	Sentence level, gradually advancing to paragraph level	Emphasis on the content and gradually improve spelling, grammar, and stylistics
Speaking	Initially restricted to dialogue, gradually progressing to monologue and discussion	Emphasis on monologue and discussion
Listening	Short simple texts, gradually increasing in volume and complexity	Full range of native language input (i.e., movies, documentaries, lectures)
Culture	Initially isolated and decontexualized cultural items of which learners have very limited experience	Full range of language input (e.g., audio, visual, and print) that contain pertinent cultural information

Applying this model in a Serbian heritage language classroom could be demonstrated, for example, by helping students notice and understand grammatical concepts such as the distinction between the accusative and locative cases when combined with verbs of (non)-movement. It can also involve prompting metalinguistic awareness in heritage language learners by comparing or contrasting the heritage language with the dominant language and other languages the learners are familiar with.

Here, we provide the following examples of focusing on form-meaning in the use of the unstressed dative form of personal pronouns in Serbian:

- Dative of possession in Serbian vs. English possessive:

(1) Lepa   ti   je   haljina.   (Serbian)
     nice   2ndSg.DAT   is   dress.
     Your dress is nice. (English)

- Dative used in expressing emotions or states:

(2) Hladno   mi   je.   (Serbian)
     Cold   1stSg.DAT   is.
     I am cold. (English)

In addition to possessive pronouns (moj 'my', tvoj 'your', etc.), Serbian allows the use of unstressed dative forms of personal pronouns to express possession (1). However,

the same language units are also used in constructions such as (2), where the standard beneficiary is interpreted as bearing the patient or experiencer theta-role, denoting their emotions or states. Unlike in (1), this second use is possible with both clitics and the stressed forms of the personal pronouns.

On the other hand, we provide the following example of instruction explicitly focused on forms:

- Serbian past tense vs. Russian past tense:

(3)	Ja	(sam)	išao	(Serbian)
	Ya	Ø	poshël.	(Russian)
	I	AUX	went	
	"I went".			

Serbian past tense (*perfekat*) is constructed with an auxiliary (present tense of the verb *jesam* 'to be') and the past participle of the full verb, as shown in (3). In Russian, however, the auxiliary completely vanished from this construction (altogether with the same verb previously used as copula in nominal predicates), resulting in the simple form of past tense. Nevertheless, Serbian also displays the same, truncated construction (labeled as 'truncated perfect' (*krnji perfekat*), but it is stylistically marked and far more frequent in the colloquial and literature registers.

The aforementioned distinction between the Serbian accusative and locative cases with verbs of (non-)movement could be parallelly compared with the German accusative and dative cases and the nature of the verbs they are combined with, as follows:

(4)	(A)	Ja	se	nalazim	u	bioskopu.	(Serbian)
		I	REFL.	situated	in	movies-LOC.	
		Ich	bin	im	Kino.		(German)
		I	am	in	movies-DAT		
		"I am at the movies".					
	(B)	Ja	idem	u	bioskop.		(Serbian)
		I	go-1Sg	in	movies-ACC.		
		Ich	gehe	ins	Kino.		(German)
		I	go-1Sg	in-ACC	movies.		
		"I go/am going to the movie theater".					

As another example of form-meaning mappings, we show in (4-A), when combined with verbs that denote non-movement such as *nalaziti se* 'to be situated', the complement of the prepositional object takes the locative form. In German, the same construction requires the dative case of the nominal complement. When it comes to verbs of movement such as *ići* 'go' in Serbian, and *gehen* 'go' in German (4-B), the complement bears the same, appropriate accusative case form. The difference between the two languages remains in the way cases are marked, where Serbian utilizes postnominal case suffixes, while German uses prenominal definite and indefinite articles, which could be contracted together with the preposition (cf. *im* in (4-A) vs. *ins* in (4-B)). Interestingly, in Serbian, the dative and locative case forms of all declinable categories are syncretic. Therefore, these similarities with the German language could potentially have a facilitating effect on the acquisition of both languages. Another form of contrasting and comparing could be included in the acquisition of the Serbian alphabet, as presented in the Figure 2.

To emphasize the vital role of form-focused instruction, we note that heritage language (HL) speakers typically outperform second language (L2) speakers in metalinguistic tasks (Kisselev et al. 2020). Due to frequent code-switching and lexical borrowing, they may develop strong metalinguistic awareness in both of their respective languages (Kisselev et al. 2020).

Lastly, the integrative model (Janjić 2018) is based on the principle of (inter)cultural referentiality. It connects different cultural elements from Serbia (tradition, customs, history, music, geography, food, science, sports, religion, art, folklore, etc.) with the culture of the dominant language or the student's other background. This approach is beneficial for both

HL and L2 learners, but it is more extensive in HL contexts. For example, when teaching the alphabet, we emphasize the Cyrillic alphabet, as the written cultural material available to students increases significantly. Additionally, texts adapted for grammar tasks could relate to Serbian historical events. Furthermore, cultural comparisons can be explored through learning idioms and their contextual usage. A student task could involve finding equivalents in their respective languages and discussing the differences. The intention is to immerse students in what they feel is already a part of their heritage.

Abeceda	Izgovor/ Pronunciation	Primeri/ Examples
A a	Vater	avion, navika
B b	Bett	baba, slab
C c	Katze	cipela, ocena
Č č	deutsch	čokolada, učiti
Ć ć	Brötchen	ćerka, ići
D d	dunkel	deda, dan
Dž dž	George	džem, udžbenik

Figure 2. Serbian alphabet for German speakers.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to provide corrective suggestions for the existing plan and program of Serbian as a foreign language to better accommodate the heterogeneous group of heritage speakers. We proposed the application of three models, namely the communicative model, form-focused instruction, and the integrative model. We believe that Serbian heritage learners can benefit from both innovative communicative approaches and more traditional form-instructed models. Because they acquired Serbian naturalistically, they have certain advantages over L2 learners, which generally results in better communicative skills. However, these skills, along with their metalinguistic awareness, should be further enhanced by following the proposed models. Literacy and grammatical accuracy need to be taught more explicitly asnd more frequently through "culturally colored" teaching materials.

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