

# English, Please!

By Peyton D'Anthony

If you're anything like me, then you know the feeling of instant relief stepping off of a plane and seeing signs pointing you to your next gate in English. As someone extremely passionate about language, it always interests me to examine the different alphabets and hear the different sounds. Most people really don't care about grammar, though, and like myself cannot take the time to learn every single language out there. It's also super nerve-wracking speaking a language you're just beginning to learn with native speakers! Any language barriers like these are not a problem in Croatia, though, making it a popular tourist destination (along with its stunning beaches and rich history, of course).



In Croatia, it is not just common for people to know both English and Croatian- it is a necessity. Their economy is dependent on tourism, so virtually everybody knows English; it is taught from elementary school all throughout and practiced daily. It was obvious that English was a huge part of their lives- but I was curious as to why Croatian was being pushed to the side to make way for English. Could these languages coexist?

As I started talking to people, it quickly became clear to me that Croatian wasn't forgotten, just hidden. Most people spoke Croatian in their homes, and to other Croatian citizens, but it was often just out of earshot. Of course walking down the street you would see children carrying a soccer ball and shouting in Croatian, or people having coffee and smoking a cigarette, chatting. I also noticed that our tour guides exclusively counted in Croatian, and the one person to whom I tried to spell my name to didn't know the English alphabet, yet spoke it fluently. It didn't become clear to me how important the Croatian language was to them until we ventured from Dubrovnik to Split.



At the end of our tour in the old fort in Split, we came across a giant statue of a man with a book in his hands. Our tour guide Natasha, in her nearly perfect English, told us that before this man, Grgur Ninski, services in the Roman Catholic church were given exclusively in Latin, which most Croatians did not understand. In the 10th century, he was able to bring what at that time was the native Solovik language



into the church, making the services accessible to all. This pride in the Croatian language is still seen today, and touching the big toe of the statue brings good luck!

With this new tidbit of history in mind, I reflected on visiting the RIT Croatia campus a few days prior. What really stuck out to me there was that they were only allowed to speak English in the building so that everyone could understand. Although I appreciate the sentiment of inclusivity, I pondered how this preference of English would continue to affect the use of Croatian and the impact on their identity. There were even signs placed around the campus reminding them to use English! When chatting with the students, I found that they really didn't mind; all of the students spoke perfect English and were used to it, even viewing it as an outlet for easy access to the world. After Split, I realized that my research question had been answered. Croatian and English were able to coexist in this young and

dynamic country. Tourism had created a necessity for everybody to know English, but the citizens viewed this as a strength, not a weakness. You could hear English spoken on every corner, but if you listened close enough, Croatian was there, too. Instead of the use of English causing the endangerment of Croatian, it was creating the means for the economy of Croatia to survive, and the culture to be passed on. The people valued both languages for different reasons, creating a dynamic, globalized culture and identity unique to Croatia and its historical circumstances.



Throughout the trip, it didn't sit right with me that I was exclusively using English. It really did not seem to bother the Croatians, and some were eager to practice their English with me. I will never forget, though, the way people's faces would light up when we said "Bok" or "Fala", hello or thank you, in Croatian. To me, it felt like I was being an entitled "stupid American"; that I hadn't taken the time to fully understand the language and therefore the culture. Language is the lens through which people view the world, and I believe that you can't truly grasp the culture and environment of a place without a basic understanding of the language. I thought I was taking advantage of their hospitality, and being just another tourist. When I conduct research in grad school, I plan on going somewhere I can speak the native language in order to make essential connections.





Saying that this trip was life changing would be an understatement. Between the relationships I formed, the lessons learned from an imperfect yet revolutionary trip, and the experiences that opened my eyes, I will never forget Dubrovnik, Croatia. Getting back on the plane and hearing English was disappointing after that adventure, and I had never thought that hearing my native language would bring anything but the relief I felt landing in Croatia. It is undeniable that I have grown not just as a researcher but as a person as well, and I am very grateful to have gained insight into the Croatian identity in a way that will not only mold how I see the world, but also how I view my academics and my future career goals.

