How to study a language and have fun along the way

Book Review

Vidan, A. & Niebuhr, R. Beginners Croatian
Hippocrene Beginners (2009)

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In the sea of elementary Croatian handbooks (according to my statistics at least ten have been published around the world in the last five years), in my view Aida Vidan's and Robert Niebuhr's Beginner's Croatian is among the most effective and up to date. I have been teaching Croatian as a foreign and/or second language for years and feel I am in an especially good position to state why this book scores much higher than the others. Only after I obtained this volume did I understand what everyone has been stressing in the study of a foreign language in recent years - the importance of familiarizing oneself not only with the language itself but also with its cultural ramifications. In Beginner's Croatian cultural components are particularly prominent and at the same time smoothly woven into the texture of the book. Potential users will thus master not only excellently presented grammar and lexical topics, but will also acquire a realistic picture of Croatian society (eg. on page 16 a character asks "mzemo li prijeci na ti"? /Please, can we call each other by (our) names (use the informal address)/, or pg. 46 - Ljudi ovdje vise upotrebljavaju javni prijevoz jer benzin nije jeftin. /People here use public transportation more because gas is not cheap/; pg. 60 - Ti si pravi Dalmatinac. Uvijek riba! /You are a real Dalmatian. Always fish!/; pg. 62 - Što znaci Purger? /What does Purger mean?/). The list is way too long to mention all the examples here that will make foreigners feel the culture in a very direct fashion. I suggest you check it out for yourself.

I would also highly recommend this volume because of its clear and superbly explained grammar units. Croatian has a reputation for not being such an easy language because of its complicated nominal/adjectival structures (seven cases!) and its even more complex verbal patterns (including perfective and imperfective aspect). The authors are well aware of these challenges and have presented grammar topics systematically, clearly, and soundly in terms of
methodological choices (congratulations to the authors on their knowledge of glottodidactic postulates).

It is quite handy that there exist facing translations of the main text in English so that the student never has any doubts about whether s/he has understood something correctly. When learning a new lesson, one can thus listen to it (the book includes two CDs with audio materials), follow the Croatian text, and check the translation at the same time. An additional high score goes for the fact that all the lessons are connected in a logical way, notably through a story about the adventures of the love-struck principal character, Marijana, and her wonderful company that runs through all fifteen units and which, I am sure, will be enjoyed by all users.

For all these reasons and many more I recommend Vidan's and Niebuhr's Beginner's Croatian to everyone (not only English native speakers) and I hope we see a sequel for more advanced levels in due time. This handbook will make you enjoy the process of studying the Croatian language and, owing to its high quality, will make you in no time be on super-friendly terms with both the language and the culture. As a word of conclusion, I must admit that

I have been especially taken by an engaging story line and, in particular, Marijana's charming character. Long live Marijana!