

Going to the Doctor Was the Wake-Up Call I Needed

This is embarrassing . . .



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I have a bit of a confession to make: Since moving to Croatia, I've been really nervous about attending important appointments alone, because I'm always worried about a potential language barrier. It's always so much easier to go with my husband, & he can help translate questions & answers if needed. Lately, though, traffic at his work has really picked up (I'm so proud of him), so he doesn't have time to attend these appointments.

So when I had to go to the doctor this week, by myself—it went about how anyone would expect.

I'm currently in the process of renewing my driver's license, & in Croatia, we have to prove that we are "fit" to drive with a physical exam, eye exam, & psych evaluation (honestly, USA, it's not the worst idea). But the day I went, the place was so packed, it took over five hours to complete all three parts of the appointment. To make matters worse, in exam after exam, I ran into the same problem: I'd ask if they spoke English, they'd do their best to speak to me in what would be fractured, often very hard-to-understand sentences, & I did my best to answer their questions.

*Before I continue: I do not hold this against them at all. They were wonderful, & most importantly: they were doing their jobs in their language in their home country. **I'm the one failing to keep up.***

At the end of the day when my husband asked me how the appointment went, I couldn't do anything but laugh, because while nothing detrimental had happened, all of the evaluations were done, & I now only have one very easy step left to renew my license, I still recalled the morning with a ton of stress & anxiety. Not knowing what to expect from an appointment is stressful enough; trying to communicate about it when you don't have the language makes it oh so much worse.

Shoulda. Coulda. Woulda.

I can throw out a lot of excuses about why I'm so behind in learning Croatian, & they are valid excuses.

Language learning has never been my strongest subject; I recall in high school that I had to study French for hours longer than any other subject, despite my fascination with it. I work at home, alone, every day, & I think in English, my clients are Americans expecting English products, & I write (this newsletter, Lit Shark, my poetry, my novels) in

English. I rarely go outside for more than a solitary walk, or if I *do* go out, I go to the grocery store, speak to no one until the checkout line, & at that time, I can exchange the most basic of pleasantries (but that's it).

Then when my family gets home, we've tried speaking Croatian at home, but they're so used to speaking to Mom/Kenzie in English, they naturally switch from Croatian to English. I won't hold against them what is comfortable and familiar to them—& I actually *like* being a resource in their lives for keeping their bilingualism super sharp.

So my exposure to Croatian, despite living in Croatia, is very limited.

That all being said... I throw all of those excuses out & blame myself, because in November, my family & I will have lived here for four years. We moved here during the pandemic at the end of November 2020. It's about to be November 2024.



I'm way past due to at least being able to have basic conversations with my Croatian family. I should be able to ask my mother about her week. I should be able to listen to my sister talk about her dissertation. I should be able to answer basic questions when they visit my home, like where the extra towels are & where my niece can find that toy she loves.

Heck, when I go to the store & can't find something, I should be able to ask an employee which aisle to find it in. I should be able to ask them how much something costs when it's unmarked. *I should've been able to ask how to check in when no one was at the check-in desk when I arrived for my appointments this week instead of waiting 45 minutes **just** to check-in.*

If you can't tell, I'm frustrated. I'm endlessly frustrated. I'm anxious about it. I'm blaming myself. & I carry all of that negative thinking with me every time I leave the house, certain that I'm going to run into a situation where Croatian is vital & I'm going to be the idiot who can't DO anything about it. **Something has to change.**



So, What Am I Going to Do About It?

To really make a change, I need to break this up into three steps: Stop, Get Real, & Zone.

Stop.

First of all, I'm going to stop whining. These are all valid concerns, but let's be honest, stop whining, McKenzie, it's annoying.

I'm terrible about spiraling with worry, what-ifs, & long, rambling lists of all the worst things that could happen—and that's launched to a whole new level now that communication is included. But it's time to calm down & stop thinking that way.

Get Real.

Second, I need to be honest about what I've really done so far to learn Croatian. I need to understand how much time I've actually invested in my studies, & I need to be honest about why I think these steps haven't worked.

- **How many hours per week do I study?**

When I really sit down & think about what I've done, I can say that I've put in hours of study time, but knowing that language learning comes harder to me, I should've been treating this like a college course with a huge final at the end of the semester that makes up 2/3rds of my grade... instead of treating it like a hobby that gets put on the back burner a lot.

Talking in terms of hours, I aim to study for one hour per day, but that's in total, that's sometimes with distractions, & that's not consistent.

- **How often do I study vocabulary?**

Like I said above, I study for maybe one hour per day, & most of that time is spent on vocabulary. You can't form sentences if you

have no words to fill them with!

I also used to spend more time using language learning apps, like Mondly, Memrise, & Drops, but in the last two to three weeks, I've really been slacking & just forgetting to open those apps.

- **How often do I watch or listen to Croatian media?**

HARDLY EVER, truth be told. I typically don't turn on the TV when my family isn't home, because I like the quiet, & when I want noise, I prefer music. Because of preferring music, I could definitely turn on more Croatian music, so I don't exclusively hear it when I'm driving the car.

- **How often do I leave the house & hear the Croatian language?**

...Did we skip the part where I said I hardly ever leave the house, because I get anxious about needing to talk?

...Yeah. I used to LOVE to visit small coffee shops & supporting their business while I read poetry or worked on my novel. I'd say I used to do that once a week or twice a month in the States. I haven't done that once in Croatia. Not once. Maybe that should be a goal?

- **When was the last time I tried to speak Croatian in conversation?**

I have kind of a trick answer for this one, but I'm going to answer with the trick answer & the real one. The trick answer is yesterday, because of exchanging pleasantries with the cashier while buying more lettuce. But I haven't tried in a WHILE to have a brief conversation with someone. I'll listen to them talk, no problem, but as far as actually trying to speak myself? I constantly feel like it's a waste of time, for them & for me, to even try.

Zone.

Now that I've been honest about that, I need to, third, lock in action steps that I'm going to start doing today. & I'm going to break them up

into “zones” of study, meaning what the study entails, what types of resources it involves, & where the studying will be done.

Study More Vocabulary

- Goal: Study for one hour per day.
- Read one entry from the dictionary at a time; checkmark when complete.
- Create “zone pages” in my study notebook: i.e., “oven” would go in the “kitchen” zone.
- Create a sentence using the new word, i.e., “The kitchen is that way.”
- Start using flash cards again! That always worked for me!

Language Learning Apps

- Goal: Use once per day.
- Don’t look at these as isolated lessons (my previous mistake). i.e., when I learn a new word in the app, I should add it to my study notebook in its “zone,” create a sentence for it, study its conjugations, & create a flash card for it.

Listen to More Music

- Goal: Listen 3 times per week.
- I listen to Croatian music in the car, but I could integrate more into my home while cooking, cleaning, & generally relaxing.
- I could add a page to my study notebook of songs & artists I like to easily refer back.
- When I find a song I really like, I should look up the lyrics, translate it, & memorize it.

Find a TV Show

- Goal: Watch 1-2 times per week.
- I don't feel like I have time to watch TV, & I'm not a huge TV show watcher, but I think this would be a helpful additional avenue to the language that I haven't really tried yet.

Read Some Books

- Goal: Read & Translate 2 kids books per week.
- My kids have a LOT of books in their playroom, so I can borrow their Croatian books for an easy way into reading the language.
- Add new words to my study notebook & create a sentence from them that is different than the one in the book.

Casual Conversation

- I've been having a hard time socializing since the pandemic. But I can text!
- Goal: Text 3 friends each week. Check the dictionary for any words I don't know, instead of letting Google Translate do all the work.

Go Outside & Grab Some Coffee

- I'm not going to set a particular number to this one, but I do like the idea of getting back to taking myself out for a coffee to write once in a while. & who knows! Maybe I'll have a conversation with the barista, or I'll bump into a friend.



The Moral of the Story: Hold Yourself Accountable

This week's newsletter was all about me, but I think this is an important exercise for all of us when we want something but we just can't seem to get it no matter how hard we try.

We have to be honest about what it is we want (i.e., learning Croatian) & why we want it (i.e., to be fully immersed in Croatian culture, to make friends, & to be respectful of my new home country). Then we have to be honest about what we've actually done to get it (i.e. studied, but like a hobby interest) & why we think it may not be working (i.e. not spending enough time studying & not incorporating enough forms of exposure to the language). THEN once we have all of that in front of us, we can decide what our action steps are going to be & which action step we'll put into practice TODAY (i.e. whatever that is).

I encourage you to think about what your "learn Croatian" goal might be & why you haven't been able to achieve it yet. Maybe you're like me and it's kinda your fault, or maybe you have more genuine obstacles. But I'm

sure either way that there are some action steps you can put into place that put that attainable goal more into your control, empowering you to reach it.

You've got this. Until next week—Vjerujem u tebe (I believe in you).
Have a great week!

P.S. I still don't have a recipe update for that dessert I love, because I still can't find the ingredients.

But when I go on my shopping trip this weekend, I'm going to go ***prepared to ask*** an employee where I can find that item in the store, as well as where they think I could find it if they are out of stock.

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