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MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

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IMPORTANCE OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR ROMA BILINGUAL CHILDREN FROM SOCIALY DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENT IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

Social environment into which children are born determines their future success in education. In Slovakia, 80% of the children from socially disadvantaged environment are Roma children. At the same time, more than 78% of children who fail during their primary education live in socially disadvantaged environment. Development of literacy is closely connected with proficiency in communicative competence in early and pre-school children. Thus, the aim of the research was to identify pragmatic speaking skills using storytelling and storyretelling (MAIN test, Gagarina et al., 2012). The method used was comparative analysis of average sample of Slovak children and Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment during the first few months into entering compulsory primary education. The results clearly indicate that Roma children retold the stories using much less vocabulary, fewer sentences and fewer episodes of stories. It seems that language handicap is one of the most frequently mentioned reasons why Roma children fail at the beginning of schooling and then end up in special primary schools or repeat the year. Weak or no knowledge of the Slovak language becomes as insurmountable a barrier to education as generational poverty. The researchers were committed to value, respect and listen to children and used protection systems and procedures ensuring the children's safety and wellbeing at all times.

Keywords: Pragmatical Competencies, Language Production, Children from Socially Disadvantaged Environment, Roma Children.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE SITUATION

Experts as well as the wider public have long pointed to problems concerning the education and development of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SEN), especially pupils whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction of the educational institution. According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, as of 31 December 2019, 81.64% of the population in Slovakia was of Slovak nationality, 8.25% Hungarian, 2.06% Roma, 0.74% Czech and 7.30% of other nationalities (Ukrainian, Russian, German, Polish, Vietnamese) [1] and 121,264 foreigners with a residence permit, which represents 2.22% of the

population [2]. According to the latest data from the Statistical Office, 2,221 foreign residents immigrated to Slovakia in the first half of 2021 alone. Due to population fluctuation and the blending of cultures, experts are increasingly faced with the issue of education of children of foreigners, immigrants or bilingual children who arrive at schools and school facilities without prior language training and without mastery of the school's language of instruction. As this topic has not been the focus of scientific, research and pedagogical interest in Slovakia in previous periods, previous activities have been limited to methodological guidelines for a basic and extension language course for children of foreigners of 48 to 64 hours [3], or methodological recommendations for a two-month language course [4]. The implementation of such courses, as well as methodological recommendations, are necessary and desirable, but they are insufficient with regard to the long-term process of language acquisition, which is also noted by Gažovičová and colleagues [5].

4.1. Theoretical background

Although children from marginalised linguistic backgrounds may differ greatly in socio-economic status, education, cultural practices and learning opportunities, if children are not linguistically prepared, entering school can be traumatic for them. Educational inequality is not only evident in everyday life, but also in the PISA and PIRLS analysis of literacy in reading, mathematics and science. The recent years marked by the pandemic have only accentuated the disparities between ordinary pupils from good socio-economic and educational backgrounds and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This gap is even more accentuated when pupils do not master the language of instruction, a fact that is not yet integrated into the educational curriculum.

Several factors influence children's academic success. One of the factors is the social environment. Based on the results of research in Slovakia, we know that 80% of socially disadvantaged children are Roma children [6]. Poor academic performance is evidenced by the fact that 72.19% of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (SDB) out of the total number of pupils were involved in repeating grades, while in the first grade it is 78.71% of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds out of all children. The highest number of children - mainly children from SDB repeated the first grade in the east of the country from 52.66% to (24.10%). At the same time, children from SDB have on average the highest number of unexcused absences from school. The highest number (90.59% in 2015) of absent lessons was in the zero (preliminary) year, which is attended predominantly by children from the SDB [7].

Both domestic and foreign research shows that the development of children's literacy is closely related to the development of communicative competences in early and preschool age [8]. Consequently, reading literacy is also derived from this competence. Measures of reading literacy (PISA and PIRLS) point to significant deficiencies in reading literacy among pupils, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds [9].

Children from SDB are able to communicate in ordinary situations but coping with the school environment in Slovak language requires them to use a different language code than the one they normally use (if they communicated at home in Slovak before entering school). In order to be successful in school, a child needs to have well-developed linguistic competence in the language of education (for more on Bernstein's theory of the social conditioning of language codes in children, see, e.g., [10]; [11]). The reasons for ineffective education of Roma children can be seen not only in their social and cultural differences, but

also in the language barrier and in the use of only a limited language code [11], especially in children from settlements and closed Roma communities [12]; [13]; [14]; [15]. Roma children need to be considered not only in terms of culture of poverty, but also in terms of bilingualism. It is precisely the language handicap that is one of the most frequently cited reasons why Roma children fail at the very beginning of their schooling and subsequently end up in special primary schools or repeating a grade. Poor or no knowledge of the state language becomes an insurmountable obstacle in education [16] and predisposes them to failure.

In Slovakia, over the last 15 years, approximately 18 incentive programmes for pre-primary education and several projects have been implemented and issued to help the education of Roma pupils. However, there are very few children of Roma origin in pre-primary education (in 2020, 379 Roma children attended pre-primary schools). In addition, 11 982 children whose mother tongue was other than Slovak or whose nationality was different were placed in the pre-primary education in 2020 [17]. One of the reasons may be that only the state (Slovak) language is used in Slovak kindergartens and primary schools. In the case of linguistically mixed environments, schools with Hungarian, or Russian, Ukrainian, German, English or Bulgarian as the language of instruction are available, but not Roma. Monolingual instruction (i.e., instruction only in the majority language), according to Cummins [18], is counterproductive in the sense of the interdependence of languages hypothesis and does not support the child's language development. Therefore, Cummins [18] proposes the use of both language codes in bilingual or immersion education as a bilingual instruction strategy to promote reciprocal transfer in language learning. Garcia [19] adds that children who use a minority language in the home environment are excluded from the educational process if only the language of instruction is used. Foreign research points to the fact that code-switching is common in schools, and teachers often provide information to children in two languages, often with part of the information in one language and part of the information in the other language [20]; [21]; [22].

According to Tabors and Snow [23], children who are exposed to a new language environment go through several phases in school in relation to the acquisition of the language of instruction. The first phase, the dilatory discourse phase [24], is a period when children try to use their mother tongue in communicating with others, and since this form of communication does not yield results, they stop talking and move into the next phase, the silent phase, during which they withdraw into themselves and do not communicate with other children. This non-verbal phase can negatively affect the healthy development of these children's self-esteem in kindergarten, while in primary school they may also develop feelings of inferiority and frustration at failing at school. In addition, children who are not proficient in the language of instruction have to make much more effort to learn than their classmates who are proficient in that language. By rejecting the minority language in school, there is also a confusion of identity for the learner, who thus feels rejected and inferior himself [19]. Wei and Garcia also state [24], if the "subiendo" - the use of only the majority language in school - is changed and the cooperation of the "bajando" - the pupils' mother tongue - in school education is admitted, all pupils will be able to achieve adequately in school.

4.2. Research findings in Slovakia

Ability to communicate in the state/teaching language - research by Čerešníková, [12]; Kyuchukov, [13]; Čerešníková, Rosinský, Samko & Vanková, [14], Kyuchukov et al., [25] and others, document the lack of Slovak language skills among children from Roma communities,

while the more culturally and socially distant the community lived from the majority community, the lower the ability to use the Slovak language among children. Of course, there is also the problem of measuring the vocabulary of pupils from marginalised Roma communities.

The poor level of narrative competence measured by the MAIN test in Roma children was confirmed by a case study analysis of a Roma child's Slovak and Roma language [25]. Roma children rarely attend pre-school, often do not communicate in Slovak at all in the home, and their parents are not interested and/or able to help them with learning the curriculum [26]; [27]. According to Kyuchukov's [27] research, the level of Roma verbal production and communicative competence in the Roma language is at a low level.

In our research on the narrative competence of 7-year-old first graders using the internationally recognized methodology for bilingual children (MAIN test, [28]), which monitors not only story production (narration and retelling at the level of micro- and macro-analysis of the story) but also comprehension, we found that children in terms of macro-analysis were able to independently narrate approximately 19% of the stories [29]. Roma children retold the stories approximately half as well as the observed results of Slovak monolingual children [30]. The children expressed themselves more often using gesticulation and had difficulty following the temporal sequence of the story. Similar results were obtained when analysing the stories of Romani-speaking children in the zero and first grades of primary school.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research aim and methods

The aim of the research was to observe and compare the pragmatic aspect of the speech of Roma children from different social backgrounds as well as Slovak (mainly bilingual) children in the first year (when they start school). For this purpose, the children were tested using the MAIN test [28], using the first and second story form for the Roma children. The first story, Little Birds, aimed to determine the level of children's ability to retell stories independently using pictures, and the second story, Cat, monitored children's ability to retell a story they heard using pictures. For each story, the children were provided with 6 pictures constructed as a cardboard book according to the MAIN test materials [28].

The age of the children in the first year may have varied, as some children started school later, attended grade zero or repeated a year of schooling.

2.2. Research sample

In order to compare the differences between Roma and Slovak children in the pragmatic aspect of speech, we worked with Roma children in different communities - from the least developed urban settlements (20 children from the poorest families, 12 girls), to weaker social backgrounds from urban communities (22 children 4 girls) to children from more affluent Roma families in city (7 children, 2 girls). Similarly, for comparison, we included Slovak children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (2 girls) and Slovak children from bilingual backgrounds (9 children, 5 girls), for whom we monitored the level of their Slovene as a first language and the level of their second language (English, German, etc.).

2.3. Research findings

Due to the limited scope of the paper, we have focused only on some of the indicators that can be obtained from the analysis of storytelling and retelling. We were interested in how many words (tokens) children would use to tell and retell stories and how many would be independent words (types).

The results of the storytelling showed (see Table 1) that children who come from mainstream backgrounds use more words than children who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, with the Slovak bilingual children using the most words, mostly in their second language.

Table 2. Table captions should be placed above the tables.

Different groups	age	N (Girls)	Telling Story A		Retelling Story B	
			Token	Types	Token	Types
Roma children	7,57	7 (2)	52,71	30	50,86	38,57
Roma children SDE (urban)	8,1	20 (12)	33	20,8	50	30
Roma children SDE (city)	7,5	22 (4)	69,86		69,95	
Slovak children (SDE)	7,35	2 (2)	34,5	21,5	70	40
Slovak bilingual children (F1)	9,3	9 (5)	89	63,6	96,8	74,9
Slovak bilingual children (F2)	9,3	9 (5)	97,2	70,3	109	65,6

3. CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is one of the most debated topics, with both supporters and opponents. Inclusion implies a paradigm shift in thinking and approach to pre-school education [31]. Promoting social inclusion requires teachers to be more sensitive, understanding of behaviours, cultural differences, and to do so without prejudices and stereotypes that are implicitly embedded in a large number of teachers ([32]; [33]; [34] but also in children themselves [35]. Teachers in Slovakia also lack training and methodological tools for teaching Slovak as a foreign language. Given the expected increase in linguistic and cultural diversity in Slovak schools, at least a basic methodology for its teaching should be included both in continuing education programmes and in the curricula of selected disciplines of faculties of education [36], [37]. The development of literacy skills of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction, depends on them attending pre-school education. Thus children's ability to understand the teacher's or teacher's interpretation and assignments, will also depend on the degree of children's acceptance into the social, linguistic, and cultural environment of the school.

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