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**STUDY OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN PUPILS IN FIRST
YEAR OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE WITH ACCENT ON MOTHER
TONGUE**

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Abstract

Communication is an inevitable element in social interaction between people. The developed mother tongue is an advantage of a child when starting school. The mother tongue is the language a child learns as the first one in the process of socialization (Lemhöfer, Schriefers, & Hanique, 2010), the language a child has learnt in his/her life, and which influences a child's future. Basil Bernstein (1971) considers a language the main means of person's socialization, and emphasizes a direct relationship between a social group and a language. In our paper, we discuss language competence in pupils in the first year of school attendance. The paper objective is to bring findings about language maturity in pupils whose mother tongue is Romani in comparison with pupils whose mother tongue is Slovak. The sample included pupils with the Romani mother tongue (n1=69) and pupils with the Slovak mother tongue (n2=76) in the first year of primary schools. The field diagnosis had two phases: the initial phase – at the beginning of a school year, and the final phase – at the end of the school year. In our study, we used the Heidelberg Speech Development Test (H-S-E-T) (Grimmová, Schöller, Mikulajová, 1997), where the authors differentiate between language competence, language performance, and language levels. The test provides a rather complex picture about an achieved level of language development in children. Our testing within the Heidelberg test focused on Sentence building (SB). The findings that we state are interesting also in the moment where the diagnosed children whose mother tongue is Romani had significantly lower scores than the children whose mother tongue is Slovak. We associate this status with the possibility that children whose mother tongue is Romani come from socially disadvantaged environment that is accompanied by poverty and social exclusion. The environment children grow up in significantly influences their communication abilities. To some extent, our findings correspond with Pierre Bourdieu (1990) who, based on his theory, states that children from socially more stimulating environment – families gain better habitus and cultural capital as they are more prepared for school, are

more linguistically capable, and understand the notions significantly better, and vice versa. We draw attention to the fact that children from Roma families with the Romani mother tongue have average performance, and we evaluate the differences in the scores as statistically significant.

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Keywords: Mother tongue. Language competence. Socially disadvantaged environment. Child with Romani mother tongue. Child with Slovak mother tongue.

1. Introduction

After birth, children grow up in a certain environment, in accordance with conditions in which they develop. Children acquire not only basic hygiene habits, walking, language, but also thinking, values, ideals, attitudes, habits, skills, and knowledge about nature and people in a society. During their primary socialization, children acquire these values, attitudes, norms, and language through their parents, siblings, relatives, and later through peers in their natural environment. The mother tongue is an inevitable element in social interaction between people. The developed mother tongue is an advantage for a child when starting school. The mother tongue is the language a child learns as the first one in the process of socialization (Lemhöfer, Schriefer, & Hanique 2010), the language a child has learnt in his/her life, and which influences a child's future. Basil Bernstein (1971) considers a language the main means of person's socialization, and emphasizes a direct relationship between a social group and a language.

We agree with the statements by many authors such as Říčan (1991), Plaňava, (1994), Říčan, G., K. (2003), Walsh, F. (1982), and Průcha, Mareš, Walterová (2003) who focused their studies on families with children, and developed an essence of social status of the family in the society; the family has several important functions – biological, economic, social, and psychological. In our society, the family is considered a mediator of recognized values, the first control organ of meeting the norms, and a mediator of the cultural archetype. It is also considered a basic social unit and is defined by the Act No 36/20015 Coll. on Family. A correctly set structure – system in the family is one of the most important determinants of child's personality development, in which they grow up, where they acquire role models of behaviour and action, the first models of communication with others, and learn to act in accordance with the set norms of the society and be responsible for their action. Children growing up in Roma families, as some authors e.g. Légiose (1995), Horváthová (2002), and Portik (2003) state, have always been considered the basis of a family, which they prove by their study findings that a biologically-reproductive function is characteristic for Roma families. These findings are confirmed also by Šikrová (2004) who states that a half of seven or eight millions of Roma are school-age children. According to Pape (2007), Roma children are the objects of permanent attention in family environment; in the context of the family they learn through observation and imitation, which means children learn social interaction, and learn to speak the Romani mother tongue. The Romani language, as Cina, and Cinová (2010) state, is one of the basic elements of the Roma ethnic group; Roma can use it for communication anywhere in the world, even though they communicate in different dialects.

Our sample includes children from Roma families whose mother tongue is Romani in comparison with the sample including children with the Slovak mother tongue.

We agree with the statement by Rosinský (2009) "...when starting school at the age of six years, suddenly they are in an unknown, foreign, sometimes even unfriendly environment which they must face on their own, without help of their parents who they depended on until then. At school, almost everything is unknown for them – there are no Roma teachers (with exception of those schools where they gradually, but so far in a small extent, started to use teacher's assistants – Roma), aids and textbooks' contents and designs are adapted to understanding and style of Slovak children, etc. Traditional Roma family education does not give children such a basis that teachers expect from an average pupil in the first year."

In this context it is necessary to say that many sociologic authors state that school and education system are supporters – if not directly tools of social inequalities. The most significant and world-renowned are Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu.

Bernstein (1971) in his book "Class, Codes and Control" developed his theory about reproduction of social inequalities through education system based on analysis of the relationship between a school system and a way of communication in France. His theory is based on the existence of two types of language codes (restricted and elaborated) that are obtained by an individual during socialization particularly in a family, and which influence their abilities, behaviour and responses to education at school. He sees the role of school in reproduction in the fact that school assumes an elaborated type of the language code in all children and thus hinders access to education in children with the restricted language code, which results in a cultural gap.

In the book "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture", Bourdieu (1990) introduces a new term "habitus" that he describes as a set of person's characteristics developed in the process of socialisation. Children from socially more stimulating environment – higher classes gain better habitus and cultural capital as they are more prepared for school, are more linguistically capable, and understand the notions significantly better. School as an institution assumes the habitus of higher classes and a greater cultural capital, and thus, children from such families are more successful in their studies and have better results than children from lower social classes. They describe school as the one that does not eliminate inequalities but the one that increases them.

As an example, we state the studies by Katriňák (2004), Veselý, Matejů (2010), and Straková et al. (2006) in which the common denominator are inequalities, where children from different social classes have different economic and cultural capital, which results in different attitudes to and opinions about education.

2. Methods

For the needs of the study "Language Competence in Roma Pupils in First Year of School Attendance", we used several research methods and research tools. The research tools, their functionality and appropriateness were verified in pre-research; then, we modified them for adaptability in the field. Field research was conducted in two phases at the beginning of the school year and at the end of the school year so that progress/regress was found. In the study, we used the test – H-S-E-T – Sentence

building (SB) in Slovak and Romani. Other research methods included: analysis, synthesis, comparison, mathematical and statistical methods, and interpretation method.

2.1. Objective

The objective of the scientific project Language Competence in Roma Pupils in First Year of School Attendance is to find out language maturity in pupils with the Romani mother tongue in comparison with pupils with the Slovak mother tongue.

Our *assumption* is there is a statistically significant difference between vocabulary in children with the Romani mother tongue and children with the Slovak mother tongue.

2.2. Sample

The scientific study was conducted at primary schools in the Slovak Republic. The sample included 69 pupils of the first year in the school year 2015/2016 with the Romani mother tongue – all these children came from socially disadvantaged environment; and 76 pupils of the first year in the school year 2015/2016 with the Slovak mother tongue.

Table 01. Sample

Sample	n	%
Children with Romani mother tongue	69	47.59
Children with Slovak mother tongue	76	52.41
Total	145	100.00

2.3. Data collection

The first phase of field research, i.e. the first testing, was conducted at the beginning of the first year of primary schools in September of the school year 2015/2016. Research was conducted at the primary schools in the territory of the Slovak Republic.

The ethics of the scientific study was in accordance with the Act No 122/2013 Coll. on Protection of Personal Data.

3. Results

Our objective was to find out the extent and level of active vocabulary in children with the Romani mother tongue and in children with the Slovak mother tongue at the beginning of school attendance in the first year of primary school in the school year 2015/2016 (the first testing). In our study, we used the Heidelberg Speech Development Test H-S-E-T (SB) – the pupils made meaningful sentences based on given two or three words.

Table 02. Pupils' outcomes – the test instructions were given in their mother tongues

Target group of children	Average values in Test 2 H-S-E-T (SB)
Children with Romani mother tongue	6.42
Children with Slovak mother tongue	9.66

The Table shows that children with the Romani mother tongue achieve a significantly lower score than children with the Slovak mother tongue.

Table 03. Roma children's outcomes – the test instructions were given in Slovak and Romani

	Roma pupils in Test 2 with instructions in Slovak	Roma pupils in Test 2 with instructions in Romani
Mean value	2.55	6.42
Group variance	12.87	15.25
Number of children	69	69
Variance	14.06	
Hypothetical difference	0	
Difference	136	
T Stat	-6.06	
P(T<=t) (1)	0	
T crit (1)	1.66	
P(T<=t) (2)	0	
T crit (2)	1.98	

The results in the Table clearly show the fact that there are statistically very significant differences between the results in the Test 2 with the instructions given in Slovak and in their mother tongue – Romani.

In the Test 2, after using the instructions in Romani – their mother tongue, Roma pupils achieved statistically very significant better score than after using the instructions in Slovak.

4. Discussion

Every human being is unique. A child who is born and grows up in socially disadvantaged environment, this fact in a certain way influences her/his future. The developed mother tongue is an advantage of a child when starting school along with children of the majority with the Slovak mother tongue.

Our findings are based on the fact that children with the Romani mother tongue achieve a significantly lower score than children with the Slovak mother tongue.

However, we must say that children with the Romani mother tongue came from socially disadvantaged environment that is accompanied by poverty and social exclusion. The environment children grow up in significantly influences their communication skills. To some extent, our findings

correspond with Bourdieu (1990) who, based on his theory, states that children from socially more stimulating environment – families gain better linguistic capital, are more prepared for school, are more linguistically capable, and understand the notions significantly better, and vice versa, which is stated also by Vanková, (2006).

The Slovak legislation defines a pupil from socially disadvantaged environment, e.g. by the Act No 245/2008 Coll. on Education: “a pupil living in an environment which, related to the social, family, economic and cultural conditions, inadequately stimulates development of mental, volitional and emotional characteristics of a child or a pupil, does not encourage his/her socialization, and does not provide enough adequate stimuli for development of his/her personality” (translated by the authors).

An interesting finding are the results in the Table 3 where the results clearly show the fact that there are statistically very significant differences between the results in the Test 2 with the instructions in Slovak and in their mother tongue – Romani.

In the Test 2, after using the instructions in Romani – their mother tongue, Roma pupils achieved statistically very significant better score than after using the instructions in Slovak.

Furthermore, we found out that if the children with the Romani mother tongue were instructed in the Test 2 in their mother tongue, they understood the tasks. Our statement reads: If children with the Romani mother tongue attended school with the Romani school language, they would not fail in the educational process. Also Bernstein (1971) considers a language the main means of person’s socialization, and emphasizes a direct relationship between a social group and a language.

However, we must say that all children with the Romani mother tongue attend primary schools with the Slovak school language. Cina and Cinová (2010) say about the Romani language that “the Romani language was, by the act on using the languages of national minorities that was adopted in the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 1999, declared to be an official national language. Its position was enhanced also by signing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which is the most complex framework agreement regulating the issues of protection and use of the languages of national minorities in education, jurisdiction, state and public administration, media, culture, economic and social life, and cross-border cooperation, and was ratified by the Parliament of the Slovak Republic in July 2001. According to these documents, Roma can exercise their right to educate their children in their mother tongue, use Romani in official communication, or ask for bilingual signs in the municipalities with more than 20% representation of this ethnic group (according to the last Census in 2001 there were 52 such municipalities in Slovakia). Roma themselves, however, do not require to exercise this act. The cause can be their unawareness, as well as their fear to exercise their right and to get into conflicts with the majority. The truth is that the representatives of the majority are not prepared for official communication in Romani, and there are no textbooks and books in schools” (translated by the authors).

In the present, in Slovakia all children with the Romani mother tongue attend schools with the Slovak, Hungarian, or Ruthenian school language. The truth is that children must learn to communicate in the language of the school they attend. Children learn in a foreign language, which results in a slowdown of language and mental development.

Based on the findings, we recommend the parents of children whose mother tongue is Romani to enrol their children in kindergartens, preparatory years with the Slovak communication language, and try to minimize communication in Romani at home settings.

5. Conclusion

The Slovak Republic is a multicultural state. Many national minorities such as the Hungarians, Roma, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Polish, Bulgarians, Russians, Croatians, Germans, Jews, Moravians, Chinese, and Vietnamese live in our territory. There are the same rights and responsibilities for all nations and nationalities. The Constitution of the Slovak Republic – the highest legal document grants the right of each individual to free education at state primary schools. Primary school in accordance with the principles and objectives of education promotes development of pupil's personality on the basis of the principles of humanism, equal treatment, tolerance, democracy and patriotism, given to intellectual, moral, ethical, esthetical, occupational and physical aspects. It provides elementary knowledge, skills and abilities in the language, natural science, social science, art, sport, health, and traffic areas, and other knowledge and skills necessary for their orientation in life and society and their further education with the aim to increase their real chance for better future.

By our article, we point out that our society must promote all activities leading to prevention of failure in children with Romani mother tongue in school environment with the Slovak school language which is perceived as a foreign language by children whose mother tongue is Romani.

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