LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE OF ROMA CHILDREN IN A LANGUAGE THAT IS NOT NATIVE

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Abstract

Generative-transformation theory (Chomsky, 1965) distinguishes between linguistic competence and the linguistic performance. Linguistic competence is unlimited opportunity to create new sentences and performance is a summary of the actual language expressions of the speaker. The paper is focused on the linguistic performance of Roma children from the socially disadvantaged, marginalized Roma community in Slovak language. Slovak language is official language in the Slovakia and it is not the mother tongue of Roma children.

The Roma are the minority in Slovakia. They came to Europe from India as a strongly different cultural group (different socialization standards, clothing, language, music, temperament, faith, tradition and customs). The Roma have lived in the area of Slovakia for several centuries (the first known reference is from 1322); in some historical periods they were violently assimilated, could not develop their culture and language, carry on with their values and norms, and reciprocally influence the majority society. They were still able to preserve elements of their own ethnical identity (for example language) in such conditions. On the other hand, social exclusion influenced the growth of concentrated settlements, cross-generation reproduction of poverty and affiliated bad living conditions, and low level of education.

In Slovakia, the statute of being a minority together with all its rights was acknowledged to Roma community only in the year 1991. Nevertheless, the vitality of this community, as described by Giles and Johnson (1987) in ethnolinguistic theory, has remained very low.

The State Educational Programme in Slovakia defines socially disadvantaged environment (poverty or disadvantage culture) as environment, which given the social and linguistic conditions insufficient to stimulate the development of mental, emotional and self-control qualities of the individual, does not support the effective socialization and does not provide adequate incentives for the development of personality. Children who live in adequately stimulating environment and whose social environment can be evaluated as filling the cultural and socialisation norms of major society, gradually verifies the ontogenetic tasks.

But the totally different life situation is the situation of the child living in social exclusion in marginalised Roma community. Roma child cannot speak Slovak which is a school language. Even the native language causes problems because the Romani word bank is insufficient for the needs of communication at school. Language code is evaluated as limited (Bernstein, 1960), caused by lack of stimuli in environment; semantic network is weakly structured; and terms are not differentiated and insufficiently defined.

The authors found the difference in vocabulary of the Roma and Slovak children entering school. The Slovak children from adequately stimulating environment acquired higher scores. Re-test was conducted after the first year at school. The results showed continued disparity in the vocabulary of Roma children in the Slovak language. Progress in the development of vocabulary is significantly higher among Roma children from socially disadvantaged background.

Keywords: Roma Child, Language Competence, Social Exclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Slovakia, the most different minority from the majority society is the Roma minority. If we looked at the Roma culture through the optics of the Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (1980), then it is significantly collectivistic, which corresponds also with the theory about the origin of the Roma. On the contrary, the majority Slovak society is more influenced by individualism. The Roma have lived in the territory of Slovakia for several centuries (the first preserved mention is from 1322); in some historical
periods they were forcefully assimilated, and could not develop their culture, pursue their values and norms, and reciprocally influence the majority society. In such conditions they were able to maintain elements of their own ethnic identity (e.g.: language), but social exclusion influenced formation of concentrated settlements, intergenerational reproduction of poverty and related poor living conditions, and production of socio-pathological behaviour. The developed life strategies of people living in such communities deepened their exclusion and rejection by the majority society. The Roma are, according to the studies (Vašček, 2001; Rosinsky, 2011), perceived by the members of the majority as different in the area of social and cultural norms and patterns, especially the Roma living in segregated residential communities.

In Slovakia, the status of a minority with all its rights was approved to the Roma minority only in 1991, but the vitality of this minority, as described by Giles and Johnson (1987), remained very low. The Roma minority, thus, has a guaranteed right to its own ethnic identity, including the development of the Romani language. This language, however, is not a language of instruction in public primary schools in Slovakia. Roma children in primary schools are educated in an official language which is Slovak. The mother tongue of many Roma children, however, is Romani. From this point of view, Roma children can be evaluated as bilingual.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981, p. 90) describes a bilingual person as someone “who is able to function in two (or more) languages, either in monolingual or bilingual communities, in accordance with the sociocultural demands made of the individual’s communicative and cognitive competence by these communities or by the individual herself, at the same level as native speakers, and who is able positively to identify with both (or all) language groups (and their cultures), or parts of them”. Bilingualism in the members of the Roma minority in Slovakia, whose mother tongue is Romani, can be labelled by a term diglossia. It is, according to Baker (2006), a social bilingualism when two languages are used in whole geographic areas or social groups.

Bilingualism in Roma children in our study can be considered as secondary, from the aspect of the theories on bilingualism (Edwards, 2006), i.e. bilingualism learnt in the institutional environment of school. The truth is that children get to Slovak in contacts with the majority; however, the poorer and more segregated is the setting where children live, the more limited such contacts are.

The situation of Roma children in the area of learning a language is complicated particularly in case if children live in segregated settlements. A social aspect is described in his theory by Bernstein (1960). By several studies (e.g.: Bernstein, 2003), he verified an assumption that family social status influences the process of learning a language and its use. Bernstein identified two different versions of language in various social settings. The restricted code is typical for informal communication and the use of simple grammatical structures, a low number of compound sentences, and limited vocabulary. The second type is the elaborated code that is a language of formal settings (e.g.: school), and has richer vocabulary, complex structures, adequate grammar, and a large number of personal pronouns (particularly the pronoun “I”). The empirical studies following the Bernstein’s theory (Průcha, 2011; Knausová, 2006) prove there is a relationship between academic performance and an adopted limited language code which is typical for children from the lower social class. On the contrary, children from the middle social class come to school already with an adopted developed code and that’s why they are more successful at school. In socially stimulating and culturally developed settings, children are influenced by a wider scale of language stimuli than in socially disadvantaged settings (Bernstein, 2003), a communication interaction with adults is encouraged, and children learn to use the language for multiple communication purposes. Children coming from developed sociocultural settings have a more abstract language style, rich vocabulary, and produce grammatically correct sentences (Hart & Risley, 1995).

In the study, in accordance with the generative-transformational theory (Chomsky, 1965), we wanted to capture one element of linguistic performance which is child’s active vocabulary in Slovak. We focused on assessment of vocabulary in Roma children, whose mother tongue is not Slovak, at the beginning of school attendance and after the first year of school attendance. The generative-transformational theory (Chomsky, 1965) differentiates between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. The differentiation between competence and performance functions as a basic methodological tool for linguistic research. Linguistic competence is the speaker’s unlimited possibility to produce new sentences in the language, and performance is a summary of speaker’s real specific linguistic uses. It significantly depends on competence; however, it is strongly influenced by various non-linguistic factors (e.g.: a limited memory capacity, absent-mindedness) that prevent it to be a true copy of competence.
2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study objectives

The partial objective of the study on Linguistic Competence in Roma Children in the First Year of School Attendance was to compare the extent of vocabulary in the language of instruction (Slovak) in Slovak and Roma children at the beginning of school attendance and after the first year of school attendance. We assumed the existence of a statistically significant difference in the extent of vocabulary in the language of instruction in the groups of Slovak and Roma children in both assessments. Furthermore, we assumed a more significant change in the extent of vocabulary in Slovak after the first year of school attendance in the group of Roma children.

2.2 Research Sample

Based on the data available, we expertly estimate the representation of Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment in the first year of common primary schools at 15 – 18 % of the total number of children starting school. Since the number of first graders in Slovakia in the recent years has been about 52,000, then we estimate the number of Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment to be 7,800 – 9,360.

The sample included 68 Roma children and 67 Slovak children at the beginning of school attendance. All the Roma children that participated in the study had the Romani mother tongue. We assessed their linguistic performance in the language required by school, i.e. Slovak.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Research Sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Method

The Picture-Dictionary Test (hereinafter PDT) by Kondáš (2010) was used for basic determination of the extent of active vocabulary. Methodology was designed with the aim to use screening to determine vocabulary in children before starting school. It consists of 30 colourful pictures which are stimuli for naming the objects and activities. The norms set a level of speech development from the level 1 to the level 5; the scores below 11 are considered a deficit level and linguistic competence is evaluated as inadequate for school education. Administration of methodology was implemented through interactive tablets. The children could scroll the pictures at their own pace. Such an administration was attractive and motivating for the children.

3 RESULTS

The study objective was to find out the level of the extent of active vocabulary in children starting school. The PDT determines if children have adequate vocabulary necessary for school education, sum scores 30-17. The scores 12-16 are considered as decreased levels of linguistic competence. If the scores are below 11 points, vocabulary is evaluated as inadequate for education, and problems in academic performance are predicted. Results of PDT and the value of Wilcoxon test for PDT in Slovak is in Tab. 2.
Table 2. Comparison of The PDT score of Roma and Slovak children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Roma children</th>
<th>Slovak Children</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>September</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>8.88</td>
<td>24.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.516</td>
<td>2.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM</td>
<td>0.790</td>
<td>0.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>11.46</td>
<td>25.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.146</td>
<td>2.580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>0.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-5.982</td>
<td>-3.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: N = count; M = average mean; SD = standard deviation; SEM = standard error of mean; Z = value of Wilcoxon test; p = significance.

Figure 1.

We confirmed a significant difference in the extent of vocabulary in Slovak between the Roma and Slovak children. The Slovak children had an average score of 24.59, i.e. they have sufficient vocabulary necessary for education. The Roma children had an average score of 8.83 points out of the total of 30 points and their vocabulary can be evaluated as insufficient for education and predicting problems in academic performance. The extent of vocabulary increased in both studied groups after the first year of school attendance. The more significant progress was found in the Roma children (the difference of 2.63 points).

3.1 Discussion

Based on the knowledge of ontogenetic psychology about children’s communication in their mother tongue we state they should know it perfectly by the age of five years. The extent of passive vocabulary in this age is about 2,000 facts. Knowledge develops through development of vocabulary. The ability to produce semantic networks relates to the ability to categorise and sort out the concepts. Categorisation closely relates to the processes of perception and thinking of children. According to Kjučukov (2012), however, there is also a relationship between a level of vocabulary in the language we use and perceptions of the world around us. Vocabulary influences (and limits) how we perceive the world. Therefore, in work with bilingual children, in our case Roma children, it is important to know
what their extent of knowledge of Slovak is. Development of cognitive skills and literacy in children at school depend on this fact.

When starting school, most Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment do not know other languages except Romani, and education in Slovak is twice as demanding for them in many cases because they not only face completely new demands but also communication is in a language that differs from their mother tongue. Furthermore, children often have no experience with communication with other people except the members of their own family and community, and they lack necessary communication skills because communication possibilities of Romani are significantly limited in an environment with few stimuli (Hübschmanová, 1993).

Performance in the PDT in the studied sample of the Roma children at the beginning of school attendance was very low (8.83). It suggests the fact that children’s communication competence was developed solely in their mother tongue. Slovak is a secondary language for them (Edwards, 2006) and they start to learn it only in school environment. In testing after a year of school attendance, the Roma children still have the significantly lower results than the Slovak children (the Slovak children 25.97; the Roma children 11.46), but the progress we found is higher than in the Slovak children. Children learn the second language fast if it is used around them and they need to use it in their communication. Harding-Esch and Riley (2008) state that children younger than 8 years of age do not need formal education and language courses when acquiring the second language. The rich language environment and social contacts with peers speaking the second language are needed only. After the first year of school attendance, the extent of vocabulary in the Roma children got to the level which allows relatively successful education, although linguistic competence is still evaluated as decreased in comparison with the required level. In the studied sample of the Roma children, we also found a trend which corresponds with the studies by Bernstein (2003). We identified the lowest extent of vocabulary in Slovak, which decreased an average score of the whole sample, in the Roma children coming from segregated settlements with the highest extent of social exclusion.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The stated partial results of the study on linguistic competence in Roma children when starting school and after the first year of school attendance suggest that Roma children are secondarily bilingual, and before the beginning of education there is a need of support for development of the secondary, in our case the Slovak language which is the language of instruction. Furthermore, the results show that the extent of vocabulary is significantly influenced by the extent of spatial exclusion; therefore, children who do not live scattered among the majority need intensive support for development of their linguistic competence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES


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