

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION BY ROMA AND SLOVAK CHILDREN

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Received August 1, 2021; Revised August 18, 2021; Accepted September 22, 2021

Abstract. The study analyzes the context and relationships of the progress in first language acquisition by monolingual children (First language: Slovak) and Roma-Slovak bilingual children (First language: Romani), as determined by the type of Roma community in which individual children live. We conducted the research in two phases, the first at the beginning of the school year (test) and the second at the end of the school year (post-test). The OOS image-vocabulary test as a psychological tool was used for examining children's vocabulary and a certain dimension of their readiness for school. The standardized O-S-S tool is structured to include 30 colorful images illustrating objects, animals, and activities, which are presented to children on an individual basis (Kondáš, 2010). For the purposes of the study, the test was modified and culturally adapted for Roma children with a pairing of Romani and Slovak languages. The research set in total consists of ($n = 135$) children in their first year of schooling and is separated into Roma children with L1: Romani ($n = 68$) and Slovak children with L1: Slovak ($n = 67$). Subsequently, the research set of Roma children ($n = 68$) belong to 3 types of communities. These 3 types of communities are the following: type 1: municipal and urban concentrations ($n = 22$); type 2: settlements located on the outskirts of a city or municipality ($n = 23$); and type 3: settlements spatially remote or separated by a natural or artificial barrier ($n = 23$). To analyze the data statistically, we used the SPSS 20.0 statistical program. The results shown statistically significant differences in L1 comprehension between Roma-Slovak bilingual children from type 1, type 2, and type 3 Roma communities and, additionally, between monolingual children at the beginning and at the end of the school year. According to the first measurement at the beginning of the school year (test) and the second measurement at the end of the school year (post-test) in L1 in the case of verbs and nouns, the highest

success rate was achieved by monolingual Slovak children, followed by Romani-Slovak bilingual children from type 1 communities, followed by children from type 2 communities, and the lowest success rate was achieved by children from type 3 communities. The main research problem arising from the findings is that the progress in first language acquisition by Roma-Slovak bilingual children is determined by the type of Roma community in which the child lives.

Keywords: *Roma, acquisition progress, mother language, native language, first language, Romani, Slovak.*

Самко Мілан, Черешник Міхал, Черешникова Мирослава. Оволодіння першої мови ромськими та словацькими дітьми.

Анотація. У дослідженні аналізується контекст і взаємозв'язки прогресу в опануванні першою мовою дітьми-монолінгвами (рідна мова: словацька) та ромсько-словацькими дітьми-білінгвами (рідна мова: ромська), що визначаються типом ромської спільноти, в якій проживають окремі діти. Дослідження проведено у два етапи, перший на початку навчального року (тест) і другий наприкінці навчального року (після тесту). Образно-словниковий тест OOS як психологічний інструмент використовувався для перевірки словникового запасу дітей та виміру їхньої готовності до школи. Стандартизований інструмент O-S-S структурований так, щоб включати 30 кольорових зображень, що ілюструють об'єкти, тварини і види діяльності, які представлені дітям на індивідуальній основі (Kondáš, 2010). Для цілей дослідження тест був модифікований та адаптований для ромських дітей із поєднанням ромської та словацької мов. У дослідженні взяли участь загалом 135 дітей першого року навчання в школі, поділені на ромських дітей-монолінгвів з ромською рідною (n = 68) та словацьких дітей зі словацькою рідною (n = 67). Вибірка ромських дітей (n = 68) далі мала поділ на 3 типи спільнот, які склалися з а) муніципальних та міських спільнот (n = 22); б) населених пунктів на околицях міста або муніципалітету (n = 23) і в) віддалених населених пунктів або розділених природним або штучним бар'єром (n = 23). Для статистичного аналізу даних використано програму SPSS 20.0. Результати показали статистично значущі відмінності в розумінні рідної мови між ромсько-словацькими двомовними дітьми з ромських громад 1, 2 та 3 типу, а також між одномовними дітьми на початку та в кінці навчального року. Згідно з першим вимірюванням іменників та дієслів рідної мови на початку навчального року (тест) та другим вимірюванням наприкінці навчального року (після тесту), найвищого показника успішності досягли одномовні словацькі діти, за ними йдуть ромсько-словацькі двомовні діти з громад типу 1, за ними йдуть діти з громад типу 2, а найнижчого показника успішності досягли діти з громад типу 3. Основна проблема дослідження, яка впливає з отриманих результатів, полягає в тому, що прогрес у оволодінні рідної мови ромсько-словацькими двомовними дітьми визначається типом ромської спільноти, в якій проживає дитина.

Ключові слова: *роми, прогрес в оволодінні мови, материнська мова, рідна мова, перша мова, ромська, словацька.*

Introduction

The language rights of Roma¹ and national minorities in the Slovak Republic are laid down in legislative language norms which, under certain conditions, allow the implementation of Romani language into the educational environment.

¹ In the 2011 population and housing census in the Slovak Republic, 105,738 inhabitants officially declared their Roma nationality (Stat. Office., Tab. 115). However, unofficial estimates of the number of Roma in Slovakia are significantly higher; for example, based on sociographic mapping and a qualified estimate, the 2013 Atlas of Roma Communities states that there are 402,840 Roma living in Slovakia (Mušinka et al., 2014). 122,518 inhabitants officially declared the Romani language as their native language (Stat. Office., Tab. 156). This means that 19,780 more inhabitants declared Romani as their native language compared to the inhabitants who declared to be of Roma nationality. There is a total of 803 settlements in cities and municipalities in Slovakia, including 324 settlements on the outskirts of municipalities, 246 settlements inside municipalities, and 233 segregated settlements. 95,020 Roma live in settlements on the outskirts of municipalities, 73,920 in segregated settlements, and 46,496 in settlements inside municipalities. 187,305 Roma live dispersed among the majority population (Mušinka et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, this language legislation is not put into practice and the Roma people have no real opportunity to learn in their native language (Samko, 2019; 2020). Evaluating the progress in first language acquisition by bilingual Roma children and monolingual Slovak children as the majority population can significantly contribute to solving Roma language problems, to the processes of implementing Romani into the educational environment, and, at the same time, to harmonizing language legislation in practice. This study aims to contribute to the recognition of processes related to first language acquisition by monolingual children (L1: Slovak) and Roma-Slovak bilingual children (L1: Romani) in their first year of schooling, differentiated by three types of Roma communities and two points of reference at the beginning and the end of the school year. At the same time, the aim is to contribute to the recognition of the context and relationships of the progress in first language acquisition by Roma-Slovak bilingual children based on the type of Roma community in which the children live. From the spatial point of view, this study is therefore based on three types of Roma communities as language communities, with the strategic goal of examining their linguistic characteristics. These communities include: type 1. communities concentrated in a municipality (Roma inhabitants living within a municipality but only concentrated in part thereof), type 2. communities concentrated on the outskirts of a municipality (Roma inhabitants concentrated in the outskirts of a municipality), and type 3. communities concentrated outside a municipality (Roma inhabitants living in a settlement remote or separated from a municipality by some kind of a barrier). A number of studies are known in the field of research concerned with language acquisition by monolingual and bilingual children, while studies researching the language pair with Romani are rather rare.

Findings from studies on Roma children's acquisition of languages suggest that, in addition to standard factors such as the socioeconomic status of the Roma, many other factors need to be evaluated to explain the acquisition processes, such as the type of Roma community in which the children live (Kyuchukov et al., 2017). In a study by Kyuchukov (2014), the research results are presented on the basis of newly developed psycholinguistic tests taken by bilingual Roma children from a Roma community not far from the city of Burgas. The tests are mainly focused on understanding and measuring children's language skills in the area of passive verbs, sentence repetition, verb tenses, and rapid mapping of nouns and adjectives. The tests aim to identify the level of Roma children's knowledge of grammatical categories and the effect of this aspect on their communication competence in their second language. The results of this study show average scores achieved in these tests by Roma children from the Roma community in question (Kyuchukov, 2014). Hoff-Ginsberg examined the differences in the language of child-oriented mothers based on the socioeconomic standing of their families. He found that children with high socioeconomic status show more advanced lexical development than children with moderate socioeconomic status (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). At the same time, Spencer et al. suggest a link between the socioeconomic background and the language skills of speakers from two different socioeconomic classes (Spencer et al., 2012). Furthermore, Scheele et al. evaluated the relationship between learning activities in

L1 and vocabulary in monolingual and bilingual immigrants, concluding that monolingual children scored higher in the L1 vocabulary test than bilingual children (Scheele et al., 2010). Subsequently, Hoff's findings suggest that different language environments provide different communication experiences and motivation to learn a language, along with a language model as a mechanism of acquisition, thus creating group and individual differences in language development (Hoff, 2006).

Methods

The research tests the following research question (RQ): How significant is the progress in first language acquisition by monolingual children (L1: Slovak) and Roma-Slovak bilingual children (L1: Romani) in their first year of schooling, when differentiated by three types of Roma communities (type 1, type 2, and type 3) and two points of reference at the beginning of the school year (test) and the end of the school year (post-test).

Research Set

The research set in total consists of ($n = 135$) children in their first year of schooling and is separated into Roma children with L1: Romani ($n = 68$) and Slovak children with L1: Slovak ($n = 67$). Subsequently, the research set of Roma children ($n = 68$) belong to the 3 types of communities mentioned in the introduction. These 3 types of communities are the following: type 1: municipal and urban concentrations ($n = 22$); type 2: settlements located on the outskirts of a city or municipality ($n = 23$); and type 3: settlements spatially remote or separated by a natural or artificial barrier ($n = 23$).

Research Tool

In the research, we made use of a standardized research tool, the OOS Test, an image-vocabulary test (Kondáš, 2010). The OOS image-vocabulary test is one of the psychological tools for examining children's vocabulary and a certain dimension of their readiness for school. The standardized O-S-S tool is structured to include 30 colorful images illustrating objects, animals, and activities, which are presented to children on an individual basis (Kondáš, 2010). For our purposes, the test was modified and culturally adapted for Roma children with a pairing of Romani and Slovak languages.

Test Completion and Scoring

The standardized O-S-S tool is structured to include 30 colorful images illustrating common or less common objects, animals, and activities, which are presented to children individually. Each child is shown an image and asked a related

question: “What is it?” In images 16-21, which illustrate activities, each child is also given an instruction: “Now, tell me what the boy is doing.” Each correct answer is scored with one point. Half-point values (0.5) can only be assigned in six cases. The maximum score is 30 points. We carried out the testing in the school premises in the presence of a teacher's assistant and recorded it with the informed consent of parents.

Statistical Data Analysis

To analyze the data statistically, we made use of the SPSS 20.0 statistical program. Due to non-standard distribution of the data, we also made use of the Wilcoxon test, a nonparametric version of the t-test for two dependent selections, the Mann-Whitney test, and the Kruskal-Wallis test. We arrived at a standard significance level of $\alpha \leq .05$.

Research Implementation Schedule

The first phase of research: Test

We carried out the first phase of the research in September, at the beginning of the school year. Roma pupils were tested first by taking 68 tests in L1 (Romani), followed by Slovak pupils taking 67 tests in L1 (Slovak). In the first phase of the research, we carried out a total of 135 tests.

The second phase of research: Post-test

We carried out the second phase of the research in June, at the end of the school year. Roma pupils were tested first by taking 68 tests in L1 (Romani), followed by non-Roma pupils taking 67 tests in L1 (Slovak). In the second phase of the research, we carried out 135 tests. In both phases of the research, we carried out a total of 270 tests.

Results

Table 1

Progress in Language Acquisition by Monolingual Children in L1: Slovak

	<i>L1-Slovak</i>					
	N	M	SD	SEM	Z	p
<i>Test_L1_Nouns</i>	67	18.85	2.66	.33	-3,635	<.001
<i>Post-test_L1_Nouns</i>	67	19.99	2.41	.30		
<i>Test_L1_Verbs</i>	67	5.81	.44	.05	-1,833	.067
<i>Post-test_L1_Verbs</i>	67	5.89	.30	.04		

When comparing the language skills of Slovak children in the September test and the June post-test, we found a statistically significant increase in correctly marked nouns ($Z = -3.635$; $p < .001$). The increase represented 1.14 points.

Table 2

Progress in Language Acquisition by Bilingual Children in L1: Romani Language

	<i>L1-Romani</i>					
	N	M	SD	SEM	Z	p
<i>Test_L1_Nouns</i>	68	13.23	3.51	.43	-3.799	<.001
<i>Post-test_L1_Nouns</i>	68	14.15	3.62	.44		
<i>Test_L1_Verbs</i>	68	3.88	1.55	.19	-4.650	<.001
<i>Post-test_L1_Verbs</i>	68	4.71	1.47	.18		

When comparing the language skills of Roma children in the September test and the June post-test, we found a statistically significant increase in correctly marked nouns and verbs in both Slovak and Romani languages. The Wilcoxon test values ranged from -3.799 to -4.650. The significance of differences was at the level of $\alpha \leq .001$. In the case of verbs, the difference represented .83, i.e., 1.03 points. In the case of nouns, the difference represented .92, i.e., 1.56 points.

Table 3

Progress in Native Language Acquisition by Roma and Slovak Children

	<i>L1</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Test_Nouns</i>	Romani	68	13.23	3.51	.43	508.5	<.001
	Slovak	67	18.85	2.66	.33		
<i>Post-test_Nouns</i>	Romani	68	14.15	3.62	.44	447.5	<.001
	Slovak	67	19.99	2.41	.29		
<i>Test_Verbs</i>	Romani	68	3.88	1.55	.19	540.5	<.001
	Slovak	67	5.81	0.44	.05		
<i>Post-test_Verbs</i>	Romani	68	4.71	1.47	.18	1045.0	<.001
	Slovak	67	5.89	0.30	.04		

When comparing the children's skills in determining nouns and verbs in their native language, we found statistically significant differences in all measurements. The Mann-Whitney test values ranged from 447.5 to 1045. The significance of differences was at the level of $\alpha \leq .001$. In the case of nouns, the difference represented 5.62, i.e., 5.84 points. In the case of verbs, the difference represented 1.93, i.e., 1.18 points. The differences are shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1
Progress in Native Language Acquisition by Roma and Slovak Children

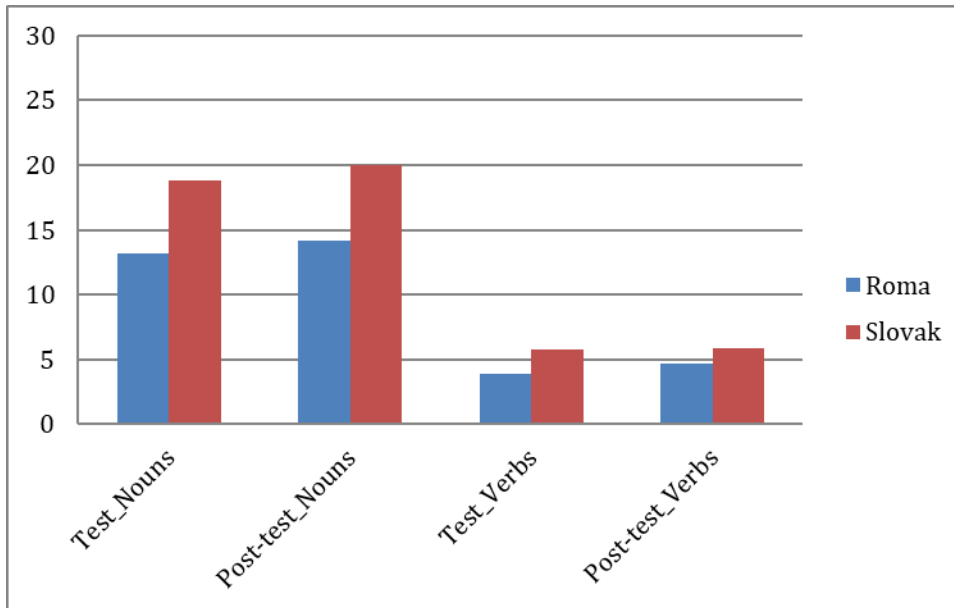


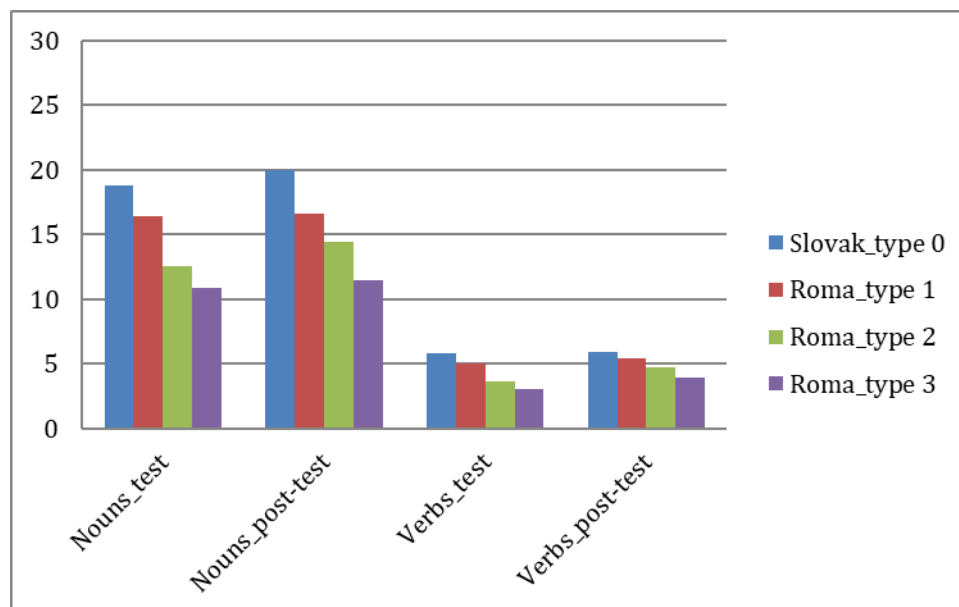
Table 4
Progress in Native Language Acquisition by Slovak and Roma Children in Types 1, 2, and 3 Communities

		<i>Mother tongue</i>			
		Test-Nouns	Post-test-Nouns	Test-Verbs	Post-test-Verbs
<i>L1_Slovak</i>	N	67	67	67	67
	M	18.85	19.99	5.81	5.89
	SD	2.66	2.41	.44	.30
	SEM	.33	.29	.05	.04
<i>L1_Romani_type 1</i>	N	22	22	22	22
	M	16.41	16.64	5.05	5.45
	SD	2.89	2.99	.90	.74
	SEM	.62	0.64	.19	.16
<i>L1_Romani_type 2</i>	N	23	23	23	23
	M	12.52	14.41	3.61	4.74
	SD	3.24	3.62	1.70	1.45
	SEM	0.68	0.76	.35	.30
<i>L1_Romani_type 3</i>	N	23	23	23	23
	M	10.89	11.50	3.04	3.96
	SD	1.69	2.18	1.22	1.67
	SEM	.35	.45	.26	.35
	H	78.744	77.395	82.514	51.356
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001

When comparing the children's skills in determining nouns and verbs in their native language in relation to the type of settlement in which they live, we found statistically significant differences in all measurements. The Kruskal-Wallis test values ranged from 51.356 to 82.514. The significance of differences was at the level of $\alpha \leq .001$. In the case of nouns, the difference between the most successful and the least successful group was at the level of 7.96, i.e., 8.49 points. In the case of verbs, the difference between the most successful and the least successful group was at the level of 2.77, i.e., 1.93 points. The differences are shown in Fig. 2. Slovak children were always the most successful (unspecified type of settlement, marked as type 0 in Fig. 2). Roma children from the type 3 community always represented the least successful group.

Figure 2

Progress in Native Language Acquisition by Slovak and Roma Children in Types 1, 2, and 3 Communities



Discussion and Conclusion

This study was based on three types of Roma communities in Slovakia, as language communities and is strategically aimed to contribute to the recognition of processes related to first language acquisition by monolingual children (L1: Slovak) and Roma-Slovak bilingual children (L1: Romani) in their first year of schooling. The intention was also to serve as a step toward recognizing the context and relationships present in the progress of first language acquisition by Roma-Slovak bilingual children based on in which communities they live. As one of the findings, this study shows statistically significant differences in L1 between Roma-Slovak bilingual children from type 1, type 2, and type 3 Roma communities as well as between monolingual children at the beginning and at the end of the school year. The research has also shown statistically significant differences in the acquisition progress

in L1 between children from type 1: municipal and urban concentrations; type 2: settlements located on the outskirts of a city or municipality; and type 3: settlements spatially remote or separated by a natural or artificial barrier at time of testing. According to the first measurement at the beginning of the school year (test) and the second measurement at the end of the school year (post-test) in L1 in the case of verbs and nouns, the highest success rate was achieved by monolingual children, followed by Romani-Slovak bilingual children from type 1 communities, followed by children from type 2 communities, and the lowest success rate was achieved by children from type 3 communities. The primary conclusion taken from these findings is that first language acquisition in Roma-Slovak bilingual children is determined by the type of Roma community in which they live.

Our findings correspond to the research which studies the vitality and endangerment of the Romani language in the Slovak Republic. Ráčová and Samko state that, taking into account the factors endangering the language, it clearly follows that the Romani language in Slovakia is indeed endangered and is not being passed down between the generations throughout the Roma population (Ráčová & Samko, 2017). Roma children do not learn to read and write in the Romani language and most Roma people have no experience with texts written in Romani whatsoever. Rusnáková (2013, p. 227) further states that the school applies a “civic” approach to Roma pupils, while their ethnicity (and everything connected with it, including language) is of little or no interest to the teacher. Lewis et al. examined the relationship between literacy and language skills of bilingual children. Their findings suggest that language and literacy experiences at home have different effects on language skills in both languages (Lewis et al., 2016). Winsler et al. found that children who attended bilingual preschool facilities compared to those who stayed at home showed significant and parallel gains in Spanish language development, as well as a significant and greater increase in English language skills over time (Winsler, 1999).

The Romani language is not an official language in any country, and as such nowhere is it protected nor promoted as a state language. This fact puts the Romani language at a disadvantage compared to languages that are both official and minority languages in other countries. This study is mainly limited by the lack of a standardized research tool to evaluate Roma-Slovak bilingualism and by the fact that the research set is only limited to Roma community types within a single region of Eastern Slovakia. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be considered to apply throughout the entire Roma language community, nor to sets of particular types of Roma communities. This research primarily raises questions about the direction of further language research based on types of Roma communities.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an output of the research project “Language and Communication Problems in Slovakia and their Management” funded by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-17-0254 (2018 –).

It is the continuation of the research project “Language competence of the Romani pupils in the first grade of primary school” funded by the same agency under the contract No. VEGA 1/0845/15 (2015–2017).

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- Tab. 156 Obyvateľstvo podľa pohlavia a materinského jazyka [Population by gender and mother tongue] (20.12.2020). <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>