

Early Home Literacy of Roma Children in Bulgaria (1)

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The Roma population in Bulgaria counts almost a million people and most of them live in ghetto-type settlements outside the towns and villages. Very often in the same settlements there is a government school, but the schools are segregated and the pupils who attend them are those with Roma origins only.

During the democratic changes many parents became jobless; they are mainly young people who cannot find jobs for different reasons (lack of education, discrimination, etc.) Many of them have children who cannot attend kindergarten because of the high taxes which the parents have to pay. Roma children who do not attend kindergarten do not know Bulgarian, which is the official language of the country, and when they enter primary school they have difficulties with the literacy process in Bulgarian.

With this situation in mind and the fact that there are parents who would like to prepare their children for primary school, a pilot study was designed in two towns of Bulgaria: in Vidin (North West Bulgaria) and in Kyustendil (South West Bulgaria). In each town, ten families were selected. The criteria for selection were the parents' level of education and the children's age. Only parents with gymnasium-level education (11 years of schooling) who have children between 3 and 5 years old and who do not attend kindergarten were included in the study. It included mainly mothers, but there were some fathers who also attended the preparatory courses.

The aim of the study was to facilitate the parents' role of teacher at home. Training courses were organized, during which they were taught how to work with their children. The bilingual method was used: everything which was said in Romani was translated into Bulgarian afterwards. The experimental textbook *I learn Bulgarian* was used (Kyuchukov 1996). The textbook contains two parts: part I aims to develop the oral skills of the children and part II to develop their knowledge of Bulgarian sentences using sentences from their mother tongue. The first part of the book contains illustrations of various fairytales. The parents tell the fairytale in Romani then in Bulgarian looking at the illustrations together with the child. After that, the same fairy tale is told in Bulgarian. The child must repeat the fairytale in Romani and in Bulgarian. The second part of the textbook introduces the children to the structure of the languages. Under the illustrations are models of sentences and in columns words are given in Bulgarian and Romani. The parents explain that the words form the sentences and with the given words the children must create sentences, first in Romani and then translate the same sentences into Bulgarian. In this way the children learn and develop both languages in parallel and it helps them to develop their cognitive skills. Of course, the textbook contains many elements which make the educational process an interesting one: drawings which the children have to paint, tasks to find different objects in the illustrations, etc.

In fact, the method used for the preparation of literacy in this way gave the parents some pedagogical knowledge as well. Some of the parents started to show their children video films of the fairytales in Bulgarian included in the textbook at home. It helped the children to understand and to better acquire the content of the fairytales and helped them to learn Bulgarian better. This fact showed that the parents took the task of preparing the children for primary school very seriously, and their "pedagogical" responsibilities increased during this stage of the project.

The research questions this study sought to answer are the following:

1. Does home literacy and the home language, which the child develops, affect language and literacy development in school?
2. Does home literacy have statistically significant effects on the development of literacy in school?

The Bulgarian Roma communities

Identifying and selecting Roma communities for an “ethnographic study” like ours is not an easy task. The origin of the ethnographic study allows observations of the subjects and discovering how they communicate among themselves as members of a particular community, how the different generations communicate, how the parents “teach” their children to communicate naturally in their home environment. However, entering such “closed” communities as the Romani one presents difficulties. Very often the “foreigners” cannot get the needed information, or are not allowed to come too close to the community to be able to observe it. Being aware of these difficulties I decided to contact two Roma communities (in Vidin and in Kyustendil) where I had good contacts with some of the members of the communities who are teachers in the primary schools based within the community.

In Vidin

The total number of Roma living in the so-called "Romani Mahala" (Roma settlement) in Vidin is approximately 15,000. There are two groups of Roma living in the settlement: “Muslim Roma” and “Christian Roma”. The Muslim Roma use to be also a Turkish-speaking community, however the younger generation nowadays speak only Romani and Bulgarian. The older generation still knows Turkish. The Christian Roma are Romani and Bulgarian speakers. In the community there are different Romani groups speaking different Romani dialects and often the groups are closed to inter-group marriages and communication. Although they live in the same settlement they do not have much contact with each other. The division of the groups is also based on the professions that different groups practiced in the past: blacksmiths, basket-weavers, flower-sellers, horse dealers. Nowadays the young generations do not practice these anymore.

The religion of the Roma in the town is divided mainly between Muslims and Orthodox Christians. However, nowadays one can find also Pentecostal movements among the Roma. Some Muslims and Christians turn to Pentecostism and their masses are in Bulgarian or in Romani.

The Romani settlement is a small "town" in the town. Although it is based on the periphery of the town, life here is relatively comfortable. During the communist regime, the government built a school and a hospital to meet

community needs. There is a regular bus to the center of town. There is an open mini-market where the people sell vegetables, fruit, fish and meat.

The "cultural" life usually goes on in the street. During the summer, people are sitting in the street telling stories to each other, youngsters are playing music or dancing. Wedding celebrations usually are in the open air in the street and the whole community participates.

Usually the Roma families send their children to school and most of the members of the community are educated; at least they know how to read and write. There are also intellectuals who are teachers or nurses. Most of the families have access to radio, television, magazines and newspapers.

An important fact in the life of the community is the establishment and development of Non-Governmental Roma Organizations (NGOs). The Roma women's movement has become active in recent years and the women have organized themselves in women's organizations.

In Kyustendil

The total number of Roma living in the settlement of the town is approximately 7,000. As in Vidin, it is also based on the periphery of the town. It has its own school, hospital and open market as well. There are bus connections to the center of town.

The Roma of Kyustendil are mainly Orthodox Christians nowadays, but fifty years ago they used to be Muslims. Among them, there are also followers of the Pentecostal movement. And here also there are different groups of Roma divided on profession lines: in the past, they were basket-weavers, smithies and musicians. However, they still practice these crafts nowadays with some small changes: the blacksmiths of the past today make ovens.

As in Vidin, the members of the Roma community here are also educated. During the communist regime, education was obligatory for the Roma. Here also there is a Romani intelligentsia: teachers, nurses and engineers who are organized in various Romani NGOs.

In general, the two communities are not different and keep the Roma traditions and Romani life style, although the younger generation is not so interested in it anymore. There are a few things which are very typical for both communities which do not depend on their religion and inside groups division. The first important thing is family ties. Many Roma families live together, because of their traditions. For Roma communities, family life plays a very important role. Living closely together, the families help each other and support each other in many ways. Another important thing for the Roma are the Romani holidays. The two very important ones which

every Roma family and community celebrates are the Romani New Year (January 14) and the beginning of the Spring, St. George's day (May 6).

Theoretical backgrounds of the Literacy Process.

It is known that the literacy process is made of four elements: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The literacy process can start at home in the child's natural environment. The parents can read books or tell stories through which the children receive their first preparation for the literacy process. This process continues at school, with more reading and writing.

Several studies reported relationships between literacy experiences, either measured by questionnaires or by naturalistic observations, and the development of vocabulary, conceptual knowledge and language comprehension skills at different preschool ages. A number of studies investigated the relationships between home literacy and the development of literacy skills and home literacy measures have been related to school literacy achievement.

To understand the development of literacy, one must study the environments in which young children develop, and the ways in which these settings provide opportunities for children to become involved with books, papers, and writing tools. The environment includes not only the physical surrounding but also human relationships, which determine who, how often and in which situations children are introduced to tools, materials, and the meanings of literacy. The availability of tools and materials for reading and writing certainly fosters early literacy development, and a lack of such materials, particularly books, is sometimes associated with a lack of literacy. But the equation is not a simple one. Asian refugee children in the U.S.A. observed by Bambi Schieffelin (1990) were able to make use of school instructions without having many books or writing materials in their homes, and some inner-city black families observed by J. McLane engaged in intensive reading and writing activities with a relatively restricted range of materials. What probably matters more is how printed materials and writing tools are used by the adults, how they are made available to children and what messages about their use and importance are communicated to young children.

M. Senechal *et al.* (1998) reported on a study done with families of low Socio-Economic Status (SES). They examined whether storybook exposure and the amount of teaching in reading and writing skills are related to the oral language skills (receptive vocabulary, listening comprehension, and phoneme awareness) and the written language skills (concepts about book reading, alphabet knowledge, reading words and invented spelling) of children in kindergarten and grade one. The authors

found that storybook exposure explained statistically significant unique variance in children's oral-language skills but not in their written language skills. In contrast, parent teaching explained statistically significant unique variance in children's written language skills but not in their oral language skills.

P. Leseman and P. de Jong (1998) claimed that several aspects of home literacy might influence language and literacy development. However, most studies of home literacy have been limited to one aspect at a time, in general either exposure or quality. The second issue, which the authors address, is the “contextuality of home literacy”. Home literacy can not be separated from the immediate social and cultural surroundings, constituted by parents’ education, work, cultural and ethnic communities. According to T. Smith (1997), traditional Romani education is a community education. Children learn to understand and “read” the verbal and non-verbal signals of adults in their community at a much earlier age than their non-Roma counterparts. They participate in daily activities and learn by watching, listening and observing, the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society.

Leseman and de Jong (1998) define home literacy as a “microsocial system of constructive and co-constructive processes in language and literacy learning”. It is made of four elements:

- literacy opportunity: an opportunity for interaction with literacy of whatever kind and in whatever form;
- instruction quality: understanding what is told or read;
- cooperation: cooperation and consensus between the participants about what has to be accomplished in the situation, for instance when reading a book;
- social-emotional quality: the bond between the participants and the affective experiences they create together.

B. Öney and A. Durgunoglu (1997) investigated the process of early literacy acquisition among first-grade Turkish children. At the beginning of the school year, the children were assessed using tests of phonological awareness, letter recognition, word and pseudo-word recognition, spelling, syntactic awareness, and listening comprehension. The impact of these factors on the development of word recognition, spelling, and reading comprehension was examined. The results suggest that the early development of word recognition and phonological awareness contribute to word recognition in the early stages of reading acquisition.

The study

The home literacy project was organized in the two towns when the children in the project were 3-5 years old. At the end of the project the knowledge of the children in the Bulgarian language was tested. The package of tests includes 3 sub-tests containing 5 batteries. The goal was to ascertain the children's knowledge in three linguistic areas: nouns, verbs and prepositions. From the theory of second language acquisition it is known that nouns are acquired first and most easily. Verbs are the second group of words acquired by second language learners. The most difficult group of words in the process of learning a second language are the prepositions. We therefore designed the tests in a way which can give information about the level of acquisition of the three groups of words.

A factorial design was used in order to test our hypothesis: *Roma children who have literacy activities at home easily become literate in their second language in grade 1 of primary school*

At the end of the project the parents received instructions to continue the work which they started with their children. I did not follow how many of them continued to work with their children. But after two years, when part of the children became pupils in grade 1, they were tested anew. The parents and teachers of the classes were interviewed as well.

The children

Ten children from Vidin and ten children from Kyustendil were involved in the project. Together with these two groups of children (the experimental group) there were two other groups of Roma children (10 in each group); these were the control group. All four groups of children were tested on their knowledge of Bulgarian upon entering grade 1. The tests included questions in the following areas:

- I. Development of oral skills
- II. Knowledge of letters
- III. Level of reading

The tests with the children

Task 1: Development of oral skills (2)

Task 1 is divided into three parts: the first contains questions about understanding what the experimenter says to the child; the second part is naming objects in the room and objects in a picture. The third part is connected to the abilities of the children to retell two stories after listening to them. When analyzing the results, the second and third part of the task are united. A factorial design was applied for testing the hypothesis that the factors *group* and *town* significantly influence the children's oral skills.

In the first part of the task and when the factor *group* is analyzed, the results show that the experimental and the control groups do not differ significantly.

The results of the second part of the test (naming of objects in the room and objects in a picture) and the third part (story retelling) are united for the analyses. Here, the differences between the experimental and the control groups are significant.

The second factor *town* does not influence the oral skills of the children. There is no significant difference between the groups from the two towns.

Task 1 was performed by the experimental groups as follows: 92% of the children in Vidin understood what the adult said to him *vs.* 71% of the children in Kyustendil. The second part of the task (telling and retelling a tale) shows that 85% of the children in Vidin answered correctly *vs.* 70% of the children in Kyustendil. The same task was performed by the control groups as follows: 92% of the children in Vidin understood what the adults said to them *vs.* 55% of the children in Kyustendil. The second part of the task was performed by the control groups as follows: 15% of the children in Vidin can tell the stories *vs.* 22% of the children in Kyustendil.

Task 2: Knowledge of letters

The second task focused on the level of knowledge of different letters. The children were given 7 different instructions. Again the *group* and *town* factors were tested. There were significant differences between the experimental and control groups and the results of the children from both towns differed significantly.

In the experimental groups, 87% of the children in Vidin knew the letters *vs.* 50% of the children in Kyustendil. The children from both control groups showed that they do not know the letters in the Bulgarian alphabet when entering primary school (100%).

Task 3: Level of reading

The third task was to read CVC and CVCV words. Both experimental and control groups had the same words to read. However, again the children from the experimental groups showed much better results than the children from the control groups. The *town* factor did not show any significant difference. The influence of the interaction between the factors *group* and *town* on reading skills did not show any significant differences either. 57% of the children in Vidin can read words *vs.* 26% of the children in Kyustendil. The experimental groups again failed at the task at 100%.

Interviews with the teachers and parents

The parents of the children in the experimental group from the town of Vidin and the teachers of the classes where the children study were interviewed. The parents were asked the following questions:

1. At the end of the project in 1996 did you continue to work with your child at home?
2. Did you tell him/her fairytales and in which language?
3. Did you asked the child to retell the story and in which language?
4. Did you sing him/her songs and in which language?
5. Did the child learn to sing songs?
6. Did you read him/her books?
7. Did you make drawings together?

The teachers of the classes were asked the following questions:

1. What are your general impressions about the children who were included in the project "Early home literacy"?
2. Do they cope with the given tasks during the lessons?
3. Are they better prepared than the other children who were not included in the project and who did not attend kindergarten?
4. How do they adaptat to the rules in school in comparison with the other children?

The results of the interviews with the parents

The parents interviewed were between 24 and 38 years old (average age 27,5 years). All of them did continue to work with their children at home after the end of the project; 57% of the parents did tell stories in Romani and in Bulgarian, 28% only in Bulgarian and 15% only in Romani. 72% asked the child to retell the story in Bulgarian and Romani and 28% in Bulgarian only. The next question about singing songs received a more diverse answer: 43% of the parents did sing in both languages, 43% sang only in Bulgarian, and 14% did not sing at all. As a natural consequence of the previous question, "Did the child learn to sing songs?" received 43% "yes" and 57% "a little bit". All the parents (100%) answered positively about reading books and drawing together.

From the answers, it is clear that the parents did continue to work with their children on the project. It seems they were motivated enough to do so. The general results from the interviews show that they have a positive attitude about the process of preparing their children to enter school.

The results of the interviews with the teachers

The general impression of the teachers who were interviewed was that the children are prepared for the literacy process at school. Only the teacher of one child who is studying in a school outside the community thinks that

the child is not well enough prepared, because she compares the child with the native Bulgarian children. The rest of the children attend the school in the Romani settlement and when compared with other Roma children their level of preparation is higher.

The children who were included in the project cope much better with the given tasks during the lessons than the children who did not attend kindergarten or were not included in the project. Again, one child who is in a class with Bulgarian children has problem with the tasks during the lessons.

However, all the children who were included in the project have problems with adapting to the rules in the school, even though they have knowledge in Bulgarian and can cope with the tasks during the lessons.

The results of the interviews with the children

The children were asked the following questions:

1. Name
2. How do you like the school?
3. Is it difficult at school?
4. Which subjects do you like?
5. Do you have friends in the class?

All the children (100%) like school. However, 43% have some difficulties at school. The 4th question received the following answers: 28% of the children like maths; 28% like writing and 44% like art. All the children (100%) have friends in the class.

Conclusion

This research shows that early home literacy influences the children's preparation for the literacy process in the classroom in their second language. Their achievement is much higher than of the children who did not participate in the project.

The bilingual method used for the introduction of early literacy showed positive results. The children who were part of the project were much more prepared for the literacy process in the conditions of a classroom than the other children who were not part of the home literacy project. What is more, the motivation of the parents involved in the project increased as well, and when the project finished they continued to work at home with their children.

An important role was played by the community teachers who were coordinators of the project in both places. In the town of Vidin the relationship between the teacher and the parents was closer and more intensive than the relationship between the teacher and the parents in

Kyustendil. And of course the results of the children in Vidin are higher than the results of the children from Kyustendil. The teachers were those who encouraged the parents when there were problems with the children.

Successful home literacy programs depend on three important factors: good bilingual literacy teaching materials, preparing the parents to act as home teachers and a good relationship between the families and the community teachers.

Footnotes

(1) This study was financially supported partly by the Dutch NGO CEBEMO as a part of the project "Literacy of Roma children" and partly by "Save the Children Fund"-Bulgaria. I would like to express my gratitude to both organizations.

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(2) The experimental results were analyzed by two-way ANOVA.

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