

## Chapter # 35

# THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING TASKS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHILDREN FROM MARGINALISED ROMA COMMUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Slovakia is a country of permanent or temporary residence for many nations and ethnic groups, which oftentimes do not have the possibility to receive education in their own language. One of the most controversial linguistic minorities on this front are children from the Roma community, which are commonly marginalised due to different living conditions as well as socio-economic standards. Both these factors highly contribute to segregation of Roma children from the Slovak majority and negatively affect their cultural experience. When entering the formal education system, Roma children do not possess the same linguistic competence of Slovak language as pupils from the major population. In this paper, the authors analysed the textbooks in Slovak: commonly used in the first two grades of elementary schools and attempted to identify the most frequent words, phrases and sentences that children from the Roma community usually encounter in written form, while being educated. By doing so, the authors would like to increase their potential comprehensibility for pupils from marginalised Roma communities. The findings of this research provide a basis for the development of an effective language programme for the second language acquisition of Slovak and urges the Slovak school system to develop a comprehensive national strategy, which would provide adequate language support for children from linguistic minorities.

*Keywords:* second language acquisition, elementary school education, cultural reproduction theory, inclusive education, learning tasks.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Slovakia is one of the smaller countries in the Central European region in terms of population, land area as well as economic performance. The population of Slovakia (circa 5.5 million inhabitants) lives on approximately 49 thousand km<sup>2</sup> of land area. Due to its position within the Central European region and its historical border changes, Slovakia has experienced an extensive migration throughout history, which brought in a lot of inhabitants of various national as well as ethnic groups and made it a multicultural country. According to the latest Slovak Population and Housing Census, the current population of Slovakia is made up of 29 different nationalities as well as 26 language groups, which primarily differentiate in the usage of their mother tongue. The dominant language of the local school system is Slovak (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021). In the school year 2023/24, 93 % of primary school students were educated in the Slovak language (CVTI, 2024). Children within Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, and Ruthenian minorities should have the opportunity to receive education in their mother tongues. The greatest controversy seems to be the unresolved issue of Roma children's education, who still do not have the opportunity to be educated in their native Romani language.

Based on the current field research almost 50% of Roma communities in Slovakia use Romani language on daily basis, while Slovak is being used only in 35% of them (Ravász, Kovács, & Markovič, 2020). As the majority of pupils from the Roma community do not encounter or comprehend enough Slovak before they enter the elementary school, their cognitive development is oftentimes insufficient. This furthermore makes their adaptation to Slovak public schools significantly inhibited. The reasons for this are discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section of this chapter.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Equality of Educational Opportunities from the Perspective of Roma Children**

There are qualified estimates of 417,000 Roma living in Slovakia at the time of writing, representing 7.6% of the total population. They are not a homogeneous group, even in terms of their social situation. The fact is that half of them experience some type of spatial segregation - 14% live in isolation outside villages, in so-called settlements. Another 36% live in gated communities on the periphery of villages (Ravász et al., 2020). Spatial segregation leads to school segregation at all levels of the education system. Several studies point to the problem of the existence of segregated ethnically homogeneous schools or classes within ethnically mixed schools (Friedman, Surdu, Gallová-Kriglerová, Kubánová & Slosiarik, 2009; Hapalová, 2019; Hapalová & Hvozdovič, 2013; Gallová-Kriglerová, 2015; Lajčáková, Gallová-Kriglerová, Kadlečíková, Balážová & Chudžíková, 2017; Rafael, 2011; and others). Segregation also seems to be a consequence of some public policies aimed at improving the educational opportunities of Roma pupils. Assigning children to homogenous classes based on ethnicity – Roma classes to close the gap in their school readiness or improve their academic performance ultimately results in their long-term isolation from other peers. Being educated in an ethnically homogeneous environment offers them almost no advantage, even in terms of the language of instruction. In these so-called Roma classes, the language of instruction is still Slovak. According to some studies, the use of Romani is seen as undesirable even during breaks (Kusá, 2016).

The issue of education of Roma children from socially excluded backgrounds is very complex. It cannot be satisfactorily analysed within the scope of this paper. However, to gain a deeper understanding of this study, it is necessary to point out several facts:

1. The educational level of the Roma population is generally low. The highest incidence of people with incomplete education or only primary education is in the regions of Slovakia where the Roma population lives (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2024).
2. Generations of Roma children from marginalised communities (hereafter referred to as MRC) have not been adequately included in preschool education programmes. Although the overall enrolment rate for children aged 3-5 years was 75% in the 2018/19 school year, it was only 32% in the MRC setting (Hellebrandt et al., 2020). Several barriers contribute to the low attendance of these children (Vančíková, 2019a), which have not been fully eliminated even after the adoption of the law on compulsory pre-primary education for all 5-year-olds in 2021.
3. A large group of Roma children from the MRC do not meet the school readiness criteria at the schooling threshold and as a result, they repeat a grade in the first years of schooling (Vančíková, 2019b).

4. School failure accompanies them in the following years of schooling. A significant group of these pupils do not continue their studies in secondary school. The proportion of pupils who complete compulsory schooling and do not continue their education is significantly higher in socially disadvantaged groups than in the rest of the population (Hellebrandt et al., 2020).
5. It's not common for people from these communities to achieve higher education. According to data in 2015 only 0.14% of all Roma living in rural areas have achieved higher than secondary education (Mušinka & Matlovičová, 2015).

## **2.2. Education of Roma Children from the Perspective of Respecting their Linguistic Rights**

Although the Education Act No.245/2008 Coll. (§12) states that different nationalities have the right to education and education in their language, a large group of children in Slovakia are educated in a language other than their mother tongue or are in the situation of acquiring another language and learning in it at the same time. In terms of the application of linguistic human rights, sub dimensional, so-called 'sink or swim' programmes are applied to children of several minorities in Slovakia (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Pupils entering the school from a foreign language background are forced to acquire Slovak as the language of the school, representing the language of the majority society. Children in the MRC mostly encounter this form of language only when watching television or in games run by older, school attending children (Kubáňik, 2015). For them, entering school is not only an encounter with a new linguistic reality but also with a new approach to language learning. In their home environment, language acquisition occurred in natural communicative situations that they experienced or were part of. At pre-school age, they acquired Romani, the local dialect of Slovak and other languages spoken in their primary environment. Thus, they naturally became bilingual or plurilingual, without formally being taught vocabulary, corrected, etc. The school approaches language learning in a completely different way. The basis is targeted language education through the learning of individual concepts and grammatical rules, which contradict natural and unguided acquisition (Hajská, 2015). Thus, these learners must acquire not only a new language, but also a new form of learning. The school expects every pupil entering its grounds to know the rules of behaviour and communication or to understand the language they are being taught. It does not respect the diversity that is natural, as each pupil comes from a different background. It demands uniformity and thus creates barriers that pupils from poor backgrounds find difficult to overcome.

Their families' economic situation affects its living conditions, far below majority standards. Their homes often have no access to electricity or drinking water, are inadequate in terms of space, and have a high number of household members (FRA, 2016). A child born in such an environment has compromised living conditions from the outset. 'More than a third of Roma do not receive adequate health care from birth, and this has an impact on their overall health' (Chovan et al, 2022). Poor childhood health has a significant impact on the willingness to meet the demands of schools, which overlook differences in socioeconomic background of their pupils. Family history also has a significant impact on early literacy development and a wide range of social, linguistic, cognitive, and noncognitive experiences associated with reading that contribute to reading comprehension and are important for future reading success (Zápotočná & Urban, 2020). These factors shift the imaginary starting line of MRC pupils in the wrong direction. The excessive burden that accompanies them from the moment they enter primary school is paid no attention to in the assessment or adaptation of the school curriculum. The school demands

the same performance from them as from children from families with a much better socioeconomic background. Thus, from an early age, without a helping hand, children of the MRC face frustration and failure.

### **2.3. Linguistic Competence Capital of Children from Excluded Localities**

The main thesis of the Theory of Cultural Reproduction by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is that the school, as a social institution, should contribute to the levelling of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the Slovak schools do the opposite, widening the gap and applying the Matthew effect: 'For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them (Matthew 25:29).' They privilege those who have acquired skills, tastes, or ways of spending time - the cultural capital of the middle and upper social classes. It presents the values of these parts of society as universally perfect and demands them from everyone wanting to participate in education (Feinstein, 2003; Prokop, 2005; Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede; 2007). Acquisition of the cultural capital of the majority is impossible for children from segregated Roma settlements because their contact with the majority happens rarely, if at all. Thus, they continue to live in generational poverty, with low educational levels and ingrained patterns of behaviour that are undesirable and judged as insufficient in the school environment.

This thesis is supported by Andersen and Jaeger (2015, p. 185): 'Children who enter school with the necessary cultural capital are more successful in achieving educational outcomes. They are perceived by teachers as more talented than they are (leading to better subjective ratings from teachers and better grades) and have a more welcoming learning environment (as the teachers pay more attention to them).' The so-called Golem effect, often associated with teachers' low expectations of pupils from low socioeconomic backgrounds, has an impact on pupils' motivation to learn, which is reflected in their school adjustment and educational outcomes. Without a deeper understanding of the sociocultural background of MRC pupils, it is difficult for the majority teachers to empathise with the reality from which they come and to understand the obstacles they must overcome in the school environment. Linguistic capital is an important part of cultural capital. In both spoken and written form, the school speaks to all pupils in the same language, which may not be comprehensible to them. The British sociologist Basil Bernstein in his sociolinguistic theory demonstrated that the social conditions of life create at least two forms of language use: a limited language code typical of lower social classes and a developed language code characteristic of middle and upper social classes (Prokop, 2005). The language of the school speaks to children with a developed linguistic code. Children bring with them different cultural and linguistic capital from their home environment. The latter also influences parents' contact with teachers. Parents in lower social classes do not feel competent enough to communicate with teachers. They are uncomfortable communicating with teachers and believe that school is separate from home. In their perception, education is the responsibility of teachers, so they avoid contact with the school (Dumais, 2006). Their limited cultural experience and language code affect their competence capital, which reflects their competence in social communication and orientation to socially relevant topics (Vančíková, 2011). Therefore, schools should consider the cultural and linguistic background of each child and adjust their approach to education accordingly.

#### 2.4. Research Problem and Objective of the Study

The previous section highlights that the education system in the Slovak Republic does not cater for all children. Children from poverty-stricken foreign language backgrounds face issues such as poor educational performance and early school abandonment, raising concerns about the school conditions. Therefore, we have decided to investigate the language teaching tasks in textbooks for the first and second years of primary education. Our objective is to identify the most used words and sentences and evaluate their potential clarity for children living in MRC.

### 3. METHODS

The research set consisted of textbooks for the first and second years of primary education which have the so-called clause of the Ministry of Education, meaning they are the state-supported teaching resources used by many primary schools. The subject of the analysis was 6 textbooks and workbooks for the 1st grade, in which 1735 teaching instructions were recorded. For Grade 2, we analysed 7 textbooks and workbooks in which we identified 4231 instructions. The initial transcript created a corpus with a total of 5966 teaching instructions.

The analysis was carried out in cooperation with the Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The analysis consisted of several steps:

1. Morphological analysis:  
Words have been classified into 4 categories: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
2. Frequency analysis:  
In each category, frequency lists have been created to judge the frequency of occurrence of individual words in the learning resources.
3. Comparative analysis 1:  
Identification of vocabulary specifics when comparing grades (comparison of 1st- and 2nd-grade textbooks) and specifics when comparing vocabulary within subjects (Mathematics, Slovak language, Natural Science). The result of the analysis is the unique vocabulary, which is found only in one set (for example, only in mathematics textbooks, etc.)
4. Comparative analysis 2:  
Identification of common vocabulary for monitored categories (e.g. what words can be found in all first-grade textbooks, etc.)
5. Comparative analysis 3:  
Identification of the most frequently used sentences in all subjects (Mathematics, Slovak language, Natural Science).

The analysis of textbook vocabulary was the starting point for the next step, identifying challenging words and sentences. In the context of our research goal, a challenging word/ sentence is any word/sentence that is potentially outside the scope of the cultural or competence capital of a child living in conditions of social exclusion. The starting point for identifying such words was a set of the most frequent words in four categories: 1) verbs, 2) nouns, 3) adjectives, and 4) adverbs. The condition for including a word in the sample set was its occurrence in textbooks of all subjects (common vocabulary). A set of the most frequently used sentences was used in the recorded teaching instructions to identify challenging sentences.

#### 4. RESULTS

As can be seen in Table 1, we identified several challenging words in each type of words. There were 13 words in the verbs category, 14 words in the nouns category, 6 words in the adjectives category, and 3 words in the adverbs group.

*Table 1.*  
*Frequent Common Vocabulary in Mathematics, Slovak Language, and Natural Science Primary School Books with Identified Challenge Words.*

| Word Categories                                    | Vocabulary   |
|--|--|
| Verbs  | byť (be), doplniť (fill in), mať (have), <b>vyfarbiť (colour), zapísať (write down)</b> , pozorovať (observe), <b>zistiť (find out), vyznačiť (mark), nakresliť (draw)</b> , vytvoriť (create), nájsť (find), vymyslieť (invent), <b>dokresliť (complete the drawing)</b> , pomôcť (help), <b>napísať (write to)</b> , môcť (able), <b>prečítať (read), zdôvodniť (rationale)</b> , povedať (say), <b>pokúsiť (try)</b> , porozprávať (talk), <b>pomenovať (name), dopísať (complete), vypísať (write out)</b> , urobiť (to do)  |
| Nouns  | číslo (number), <b>počet (count), príklad (problem), úloha (task)</b> , bod (point), <b>výsledok (result), pastelka (crayon)</b> , vzor (pattern), <b>tabuľka (chart)</b> , znak (sign), <b>kocka (cube)</b> , farba (color), dvojica (couple), <b>rad (row)</b> , veta (sentence), spolužiak (classmate), <b>rastlina (plant), živočích (animal), informácia (information)</b> , človek (human), <b>plôška (spot)</b> , voda (water), slovo (word), obrázok (picture), <b>písmeno (letter)</b> , príbeh (story), <b>názov (title)</b> , časť (part), meno (name), odpoveď (answer), otázka (question) |
| Adjectives   | veľký (big), rovnaký (same), správny (correct), červený (red), modrý (blue), zelený (green), <b>slovný (verbal)</b> , ďalší (next), <b>ľubovoľný (random)</b> , žltý (yellow), <b>rôzny (various)</b> , pravdivý (true), prázdny (empty), <b>jednotlivý (single)</b> , spoločný (common), nový (new), starý (old), potrebný (necessary), <b>podobný (similar), vhodný (suitable)</b>   |
| Adverbs  | spolu (together), dlho (long time), doma (at home), ešte (yet), najskôr (first), <b>podobne (similarly)</b> , <b>postupne (gradually)</b> , potom (after), <b>pozorne (carefully)</b> , rovnako (same), spoločne (in common), správne (correctly), teraz (now), treba (be necessary), už (already)   |
| Note: Difficult words are highlighted with a bold. |  |

We identified 11 challenging sentences, which can be seen in Table 2. The selection was made from the top 30 most frequent sentences used in the textbooks.

Table 2.  
Frequently used sentences in primary school mathematics, Slovak language, and natural science textbooks with identified challenging phrases.

| Sentences  |
|--|
| <p>Vypočítaj (Compute). Rozprávaj (Talk). <b>Prečítaj (Read)</b>. Kresli (Draw). Pozoruj (Observe).</p> <p>Rozmýšľaj (Think about). <b>Pomenuj obrázok (Name the picture)</b>. Doplň (Add).</p> <p>Prečítaj vety (Read the sentences). <b>Doplň vety (Complete the sentences)</b>.</p> <p>Pomôž si informáciami zo Zápiskníka cestovateľov (Help yourself with information from the Travellers' Notebook). <b>Porovnaj (Compare)</b>. Prečítaj slová (Read the words). Slová napíš (Write the words). <b>Vyrieš slovnú úlohu (Solve the word problem)</b>. <b>Svoje rozhodnutie zdôvodni (Give reasons for its decision)</b>. Pozoruj obrázok (Observe the picture). Píš (Write). <b>Zapíš počet (Write down the number)</b>. <b>Pomôž si encyklopédiou alebo internetom (Help yourself to an encyclopaedia or the internet)</b>.</p> <p><b>Urob vyhodnotenie (Do the evaluation)</b>. Vetu prečítaj (Read the sentence).</p> <p>Vety napíš (Write the sentences). Slová použi vo vetách (Use the words in sentences).</p> <p>Prečítaj báseň (Read a poem). Počítaj (Count). Pozoruj obrázky (Watch the pictures).</p> <p><b>Doplň číselný rad. (Complete the number series)</b>. Doplň chýbajúce čísla (Fill in the missing numbers). <b>Báďaj (Do research)</b>.</p> |
| Note: Difficult phrases are highlighted with a bolt.   |

Words and sentences were identified based on a study of the social and linguistic background of children with MRC living in the Slovak Republic. The words and sentences in the tables are also given in their original form because the English translation does not capture their essence in the Slovak language.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the content analysis of textbooks from the first and second year of school education, we can establish the assumption that there are teaching instructions with the difficult words and sentences, posing a problem for Roma children who use Romani in the home environment and at the same time live in conditions of poverty and social exclusion. As Kyuchukov, de Villiers, and Tabori (2017, p. 218) mentioned in their study: 'Although children have good knowledge of their mother tongue, this skill is not seen as an asset when it comes to school placement in several European countries.' The Slovak education system is one such example. As evidenced by the findings of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), it is one of the systems that demonstrates the most significant impact of socio-economic background on learning outcomes in international testing (Miklovičová & Galádová, 2023). The linguistic capital of these pupils is comparatively limited in comparison to their classmates from mainstream society (thanks to the language of the school), which constitutes a significant barrier to their success at school. At this point, we can say that simultaneous study of the language of instruction and a different curriculum in a classroom with native speakers can result in stress and loss of self-confidence for pupils with different mother tongues (Piller, 2016). Pupils may have difficulty communicating with people around them, which can result in their exclusion from the community. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Alternatively, students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds who experience academic success at an early age may increasingly regard education in a positive light. They may come to view the accumulation of language and cultural capital via schooling as a means of social mobility, overcoming the impediments to opportunity associated with their class position. The positive effects of academic success and increased cultural capital (including the language) on students' aspirations and orientation have been demonstrated by Edgerton and Roberts (2014).

## 6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The findings from this phase of research will be validated in the subsequent phase of the investigation through the administration of interviews with pupils at the MRC. The objective is to ascertain how they comprehend challenging vocabulary and sentences and to identify any erroneous assumption. The findings of this research will provide a foundation for advocating for the establishment of support mechanisms for children whose linguistic rights are infringed upon and subjected to a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'subordination'. It is argued that the school readiness of these children and the likelihood of their academic failure can be enhanced by the implementation of the effective language acquisition programmes in Slovak. Concurrently, educators must possess the requisite competencies to effectively engage with this cohort of children. This necessitates a nuanced understanding of their life experiences and an appreciation for the intrinsic capabilities they bring to the learning environment.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It turns out that Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and his critique of the school are still valid. Despite deepening social differences, the school continues to use a language that is more likely to be understood by children whose cultural capital is compatible with that of the school. In a country with a large group of socially disadvantaged children, it is, therefore, necessary to present research arguments that can not only initiate dialogue on the subject, but also develop comprehensive methodological support for teachers who work with this group of children.

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## KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

**Marginalized Roma communities** – communities of people of Roma ethnicity who, due to objective circumstances, find themselves in a disadvantaged situation that prevents them from fully accessing cultural resources.

**Linguistic Rights** refer to the human and civil rights that guarantee individuals and groups the freedom to select the language or languages they wish to use for communication, whether in private or public settings. In the context of our study, these rights pertain to the right of Roma children to use their mother tongue in education.

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