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Russian Roma children and their language development

Abstract: The paper presents the results of research conducted among Russian Roma children. Two groups of children, 6–8 years and 8–10 years old, were tested with a Romani Language Assessment Test. The study was conducted in a Roma settlement of a small town not far from Moscow. The children were tested on different grammatical categories in Romani as their home language. The grammatical knowledge of the children about their home language is not considered to be used by the Russian teachers in classroom. The frame of Cummins (2015) “*teaching through an intercultural lens*” is taken as the starting point of the research. The research results showed that the Roma children at the age between 6–8 years know the most complex grammatical categories of Romani as their mother tongue, however children’s knowledge is not used by the teachers at school environment teaching Russian. There are no lessons in Romani as the mother tongue strengthening the children’s linguistic and cognitive abilities.

Keywords: Roma children, Romani, Russia, Romani Language Assessment Test

Introduction

According to the European Roma Grassroot Organization’s (ERGO) Report (2000): “Roma children are not provided, from a very early age, with the same learning opportunities, as the vicious circles of poverty and discrimination act as powerful barriers in accessing education and training. Subsequently, they have lower attendance and completion rates, which in turn lead to poor labour market integration and social participation. Additionally, segregated education where Roma are over-represented is not only against EU values and principles, but also fuels inequalities and discrimination.” (p. 22)

The segregation of Roma children through education still exists in many European and non-European countries, among them Turkey and Russia. The children are very often subjected to psychological testing in their second language (L2, the official language of the country) and if they cannot correctly

answer the questions they are considered to be “mentally retarded” and/or suffering from “language deficits.” O. Garcia (2020) has researched the situation of bilingual Latinx children in the US, where issues are analogous to those of many Roma children, and using scientific methods has sought to answer the question: “Is it true that the bilingual Latinx children’s language deficit in their L2 influences the language knowledge of the children’s L1.” Frequently, the bilingualism of bilingual children, including Roma children, is not perceived as an asset but rather as a deficit – and the bilingual children are stigmatised for the rest of their life by means of all kinds of negative stigmas, which strengthen and reproduce the existing stereotypes in their societies. Only very rarely do the teachers and psychologists working with Roma bilingual children try to find out the real reasons for these children’s lower educational achievement at school, instead of blaming the parents, the community, and the children themselves. As the neurolinguist A. Costa (2017, p. 30) has noted: “The study of how the brain sustains higher-level cognitive abilities, or what we will refer to as cortical representations of cognitive functions (language is one of them), is extremely complex. The brain and the cognitive bases of language, memory, attention, emotion and so on, are difficult to study.” Although there is a lack of such studies, the teachers and the society in general continue to blame the children for their disadvantaged situation and their problems not only with L2, but also with their home language (L1) and culture and with developing solid literacy in both L1 and L2. This attitude is well expressed in a publication by a Czech psychologist: “Several studies in Central Europe have shown that Gypsies tend to score lower in IQ tests. This has frequently been explained as a results of a) environmental conditions in which the Gypsy families live, and b) language difficulties, because a number of Gypsies speak their own language and not that of the majority population. It is probable the environment in which the Gypsies live does not foster the development of intellectual abilities and social mobilities” (Bakalar, 2004, p. 291). As an effect, Bakalar suggests that the problem of Roma children is their mother tongue and the fact that they use their home language in everyday life. Like many other authors, this psychologist knows nothing about the structure of the Romani, and some linguists even maintain there is no such thing as the “Romani language”. Romani is the only Indo-European language spoken widely across Europe. It belongs to the new-Indian languages (related to Sanskrit, Hindi and Punjabi) and it developed through migration from northern India westward with influences of Armenian, Greek, Romanian and Slavic languages (Matras, 2002; Kyuchukov, 2003;

Oslo, 2018). Romani is a complex inflectional language. The noun system is divided into masculine and feminine, animate and inanimate, singular and plural forms, there are eight cases, a complex tense and aspectual system of the verb, and a syntax with different positioning of the verb in the sentence.

In a study of Bulgarian Roma students, V. Lambrev (2020) reported that, very often not only in the society but also in school, the Romani language is not valued as something positive. The teachers have also negative prejudicial attitudes towards the Romani. The speakers of Romani are more likely to be discriminated against than non-speakers of the language. Similar observations and findings have been discussed by Y. Matras, G. Howley and C. Jones (2020). The Roma children from Romania in the UK schools encounter the same attitudes because the teachers cannot make any distinction between the Romani and Romanian languages. For most of the teachers it is not clear what role as L1 Romani plays in the life and mental development – and general literacy development – of the children.

Yet, Cummins (2019) stresses: “[i]n a large number of contexts, schools also systematically and intentionally undermine the potential of immigrant-background and minoritized students to develop multilingual abilities. This undermining of multilingualism operates either by explicitly prohibiting students from using their home languages (L1) within the school or through ignoring the languages that students bring to school (benign neglect).” (p. 1). In contrast as an intercultural and more effective pedagogical approach, Cummins (2015) promotes the idea of “*teaching through a multilingual lens*” in the classroom “when the specific instructional focus is on developing students’ awareness of the language and affirming their linguistic identities. However, the same orientation can be referred to as *teaching through an intercultural lens* when the instructional focus is broadened to include students’ cultural knowledge in addition to linguistic knowledge. There is nothing radical about this approach – it simply takes seriously generally accepted pedagogical notions such as *teaching the whole child* and *connecting curriculum to students background knowledge*.” (p. 460).

I wish to take the points made by Cummins (2015, 2019) as integral to the applied theoretical framework, and I will try to show that the *awareness of the language* and *the linguistic identities* of the children are very important for the development of the *whole child*. The present study is based on testing the language knowledge of Roma children with the idea that this knowledge could be used at school for the purposes of effective intercultural education, as Cummins suggests. Building on this, teachers should also develop

a more ethnographic intercultural approach and “ethnographic imagination” (pp. 121, 138–39) in their classrooms and their own understanding of the background of their students, as suggested in Roberts et al. (2001).

Very often the poverty of Roma children and low socio-economic status of the families are associated with the lack of intelligence and knowledge of different grammatical categories. The teachers working with Roma children cannot accept that despite the economic situation and poverty the language acquired from early age in the family environment is the tool for development of cognitive skills of Roma children. Coming to school the children have rich language experiences and knowledge, have life experiences due the Roma culture, the experience which the majority children do not have. However, all these are underestimated or even undervalued by the teachers, majority society and institutions.

The study

In recent years, academic interest in the education of Roma children has intensified. Nonetheless, publications dealing with the language issues faced by Roma children at school and properly testing the knowledge of Roma children *in their home language* are limited. The present study was conducted in a small town near Moscow at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the lockdown in 2020, I had to spend a week in a Roma community of Russian Kalderash and to live with a Roma family. The Roma families foresaw the danger from the coronavirus and two weeks prior to the state lockdown, in March 2020, they stopped children from attending the local school. Living with the family and using an *ethnographic approach* (Schieffelin, 1979) gave me the possibility to observe what the children do and how they communicate between themselves, with adults, and what kind of language games they use in the extended Roma families, as well as an ecology of social and cultural interaction where a few generations often live together.

My goal was to observe how much the children use the Romani language as the mother tongue and home language, and how much they know about the grammatical categories of Romani. Very often, in order to gain their trust, I became involved in different kinds of language games with the children, asking what objects are called in their Romani dialect.

The research questions which I want to answer this study are:

- How do the cultural events and the family life in traditional Romani environment of the Roma children facilitate the acquisition of Romani?

- Which Romani grammatical categories are most difficult for the children to acquire after the age of 6 years?

In order to check their knowledge of Romani grammatical categories, I used the ROMLAT Test in Romani (Kyuchukov & de Villiers, 2014). The test is a demanding assessment that looks at knowledge in both comprehension and production, and contains subtests on the following Romani grammatical categories:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| – Wh – questions | comprehension |
| – Wh – complements | comprehension |
| – Passive verbs | comprehension |
| – Sentence repetition | production |
| – Possessives | production |
| – Tense | production |
| – Aspect | comprehension |
| – Fast-mapping nouns | comprehension |
| – Fast-mapping adjectives | comprehension |

Two groups of children were tested with the picture tests in their home environment:

- 6–8 years old – N=9 children
- 8–10 years old – N=10 children

Results

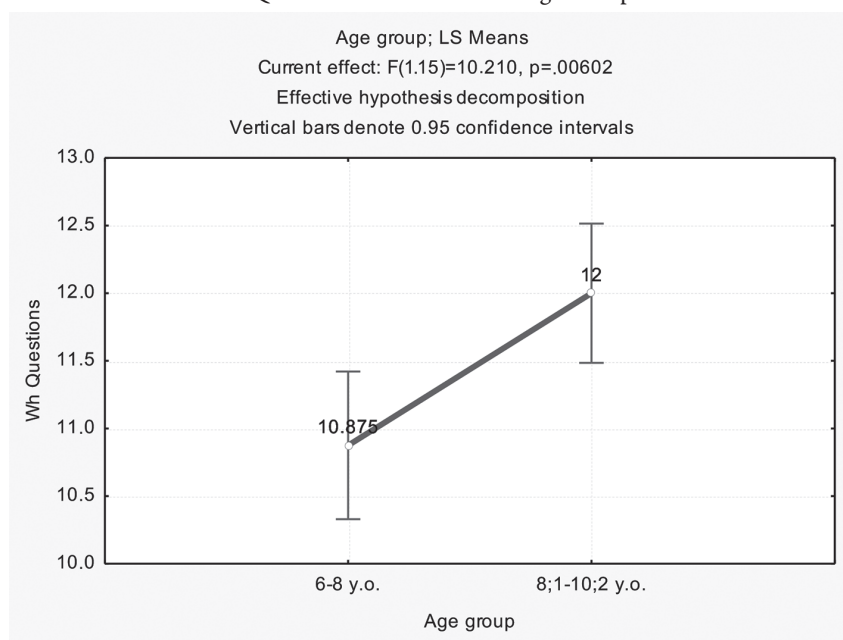
In their everyday life, the children use Romani as L1 intensively for communication with parents, relatives and neighbours. However, the children also very often switch to their L2 Russian, although there are no native Russian speakers around and in close contact with them. It is quite normal for the close family relatives to gather in the evening to cook together, to eat and drink, to sing and dance, and to tell stories. The Roma children grow up in a community where this kind of rich oral history exists and is passed on.

However, I also tested the knowledge of the children with the Romani Language Assessment Test in order to find out how much the children cognitively understand and orally produce the grammatical categories.

Here are the findings from the testing. Figure 1 presents the results from the Wh-test. There were two types of wh-tests: multiple wh-questions and wh-complements. These tests measure the ability of the children to answer questions with two or three *wh*-words at the beginning of the sentence. For example: *Who, what eats?* (*Kon, so xal?*) or *Who, from whom, what stolen?*

(*Kon, kastar, so čhordas*). The second test was with a long distance wh-word (the wh-complements test). For example: *The mother asks the child to bring a bowl, but instead the child brought a glass. What did the mother say for the child to bring? (I dej vakerdas e šavske te anel baro čharo, aj ov antas baro poxari. So vakerdas I dej e šaveske so te anel?)*. These kinds of sentences do not sound grammatically correct in many languages, including English, but in Romani they sound quite normal, and it is normal to have exactly this structure.

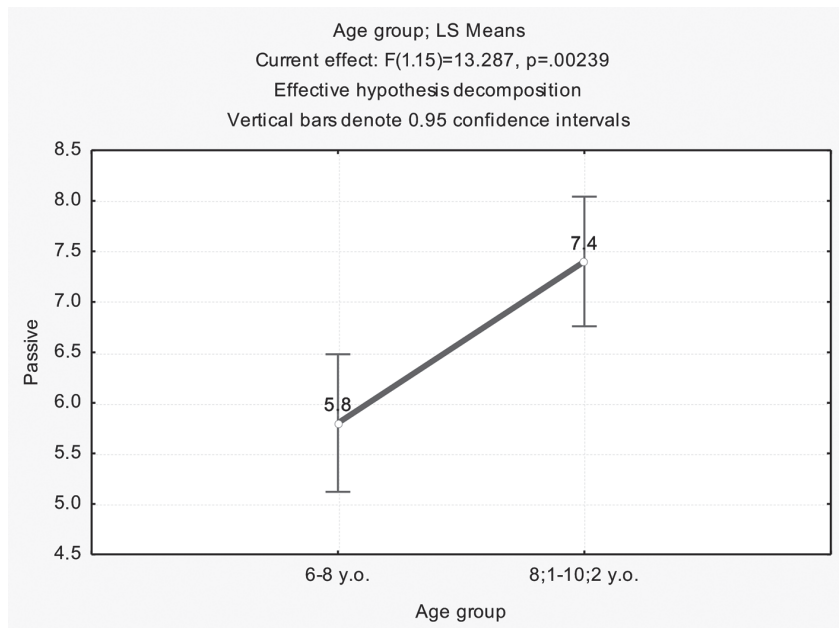
Figure 1. Test Scores on Wh-Questions as a Function of Age Group



It is clear from Figure 1 that the older children answer these types of questions more correctly than the younger children. The statistical differences between the groups are significant $F(1,15) = 10.210$; $p = .00602$. In the performance of the wh-complement questions, all children from both groups had the same results. All of them answered correctly the questions. This shows that the children know correctly which *what* question to answer in the sentences where there are two question words (*What...what...*). Figure 2 shows the results from the passive verbs test. The children were shown pictures with multiple choice and asked to respond by pointing to an image: *The*

dog was kicked by the horse. Show me the right picture. (*O grast čhalavdas e džukles. Sikav mange kaj si akava*). The results of the groups are given in Figure 2.

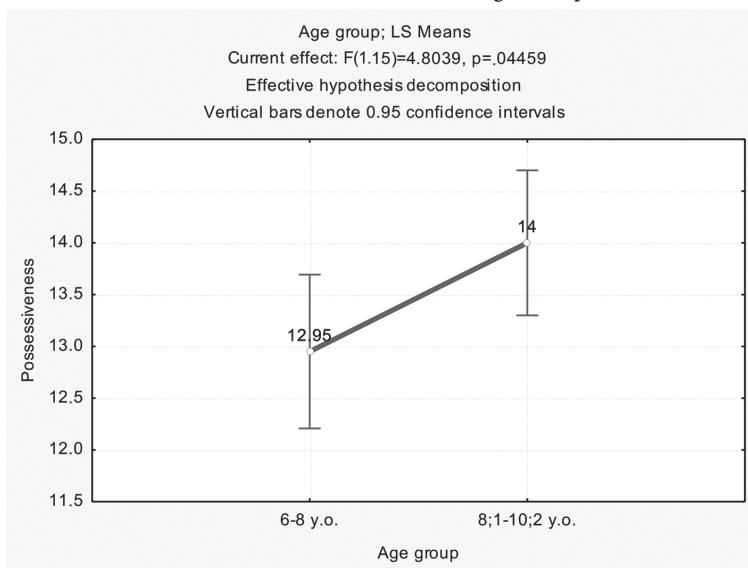
Figure 2. Test Scores on the Passive Test as a Function of Age Group



Again the older group of children had better results. The differences between the groups are statistically significant $F(1,15) = 13.287$, $p = .00239$. The children understand the active verbs in a sentence such as *The horse kicks the dog* much better. Then it is clear who kicks whom. But the use of the passive verb *was kicked* in the sentence is not as clear who did the action and who was affected as the target of the action. The older children understand these actions better.

Figure 3 presents the production of the forms for possessives in Romani. The possessive is expressed by a suffix or case ending, and in Romani this is a genitive and it depends on the gender of the subject, for example: *The balloon of the horse* (both subject and object are masculine) (*E grastesko balono*), *The flower of the cow* (both subject and object are feminine) (*E guruvnjaki lulugi*). The children's results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Test Scores on Possessive Test as a Function of Age Group

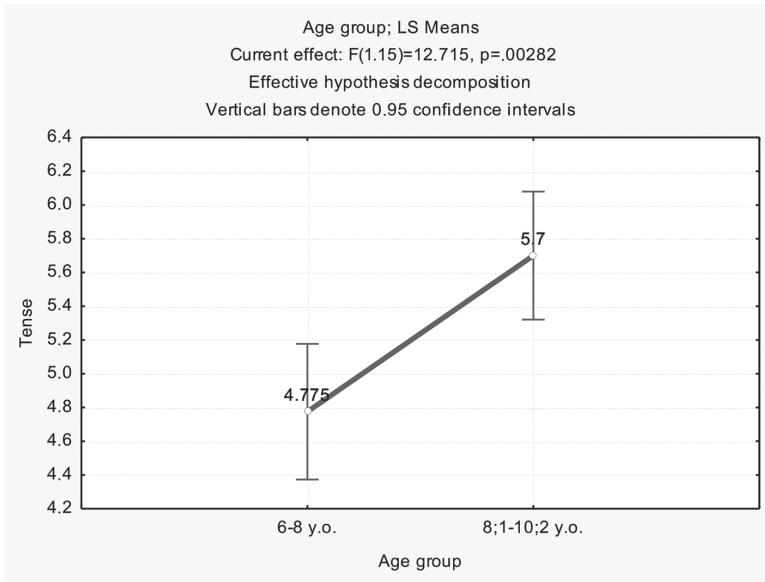


Once again the older children perform this test better than the younger children. The statistical differences are significant $F(1.15) = 4.8039$, $p = .04459$. This is one of the children's favourite tests because in this test, I have introduced novel, made-up subjects and objects which do not exist in reality but are made-up, such as *Boko*, *Kiki*, *cita*, *tromo*, etc., and which test the ability of the children to transfer grammatical knowledge from known familiar subjects and objects to unknown ones.

The next test involved the level of knowledge of tenses in Romani. The results are given in Figure 4.

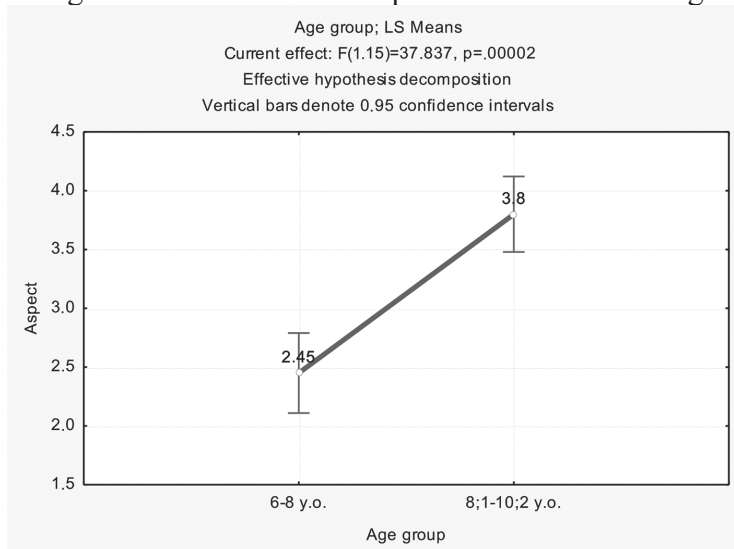
The differences in performance in the tense test between the age groups are statistically different $F(1.15) = 12,1715$, $p = .00282$. The children's knowledge about three tenses in Romani was tested: the present, past and future tense (marked by infinitive). The children were given made-up verbs which do not exist in Romani and the children had to use these novel verbs in the three tenses, applying their existing knowledge of tense and its conjugation. For example, the children were given the verb *bodinel*, which does not exist in Romani. The researcher says: *Akaja šej džanel te bodinel. Akana oj bodnel. Raki so kerdas i šej...(bodingas/bodingjas)* (This girl knows how to <NOVEL VERB>. Now she is <NOVEL VERB>. Last night she was The test requires the testee child to use the <NOVEL VERB> in the correct tense).

Figure 4. Test Scores on Tense as a Function of Age Group



Together with tenses the children also acquire the aspectuality of the Romanian verb. The results from the aspect test are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Test Scores on Aspect as a Function of Age Group

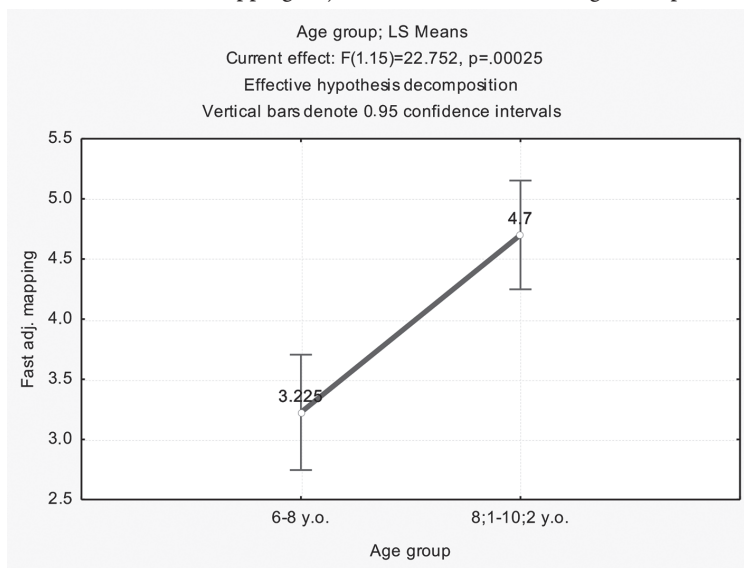


The results show that the older children are much better in the acquisition of the aspectuality of Romani verbs. The differences between the two groups of children are statistically significant $F(1,15) = 37,837, p = .00002$. The children were given novel verbs which do not exist in Romani and once they were given the ongoing novel action, the child had to predict the completed novel action. The ongoing and completed actions switched places with the next novel verb. For example, the children were given the verb *bodinel* which does not exist in Romani. The researcher says: *Sar o dad vakerelas po telefono o šhavo KAKUNDAS <NOVEL VERB> po krano*. While the dad was speaking on the phone the boy KAKUNDAS <NOVEL VERB> on the crane (completed). *Sar o dad vakerelas po telefono o šhavoKAKUNELAS* (expected to be said by the child). While the dad was speaking on the phone the boyKAKUNELAS (expected to be said by the child) on the crane (uncompleted). So the older children perform this task much better than younger children and it is a task which is complicated for them.

The next test is a fast-mapping noun test, where the children are shown objects of the same colour, but among them there is one with an unknown shape. The object with the unknown shape is given a name in Romani, which is a made-up novel word, not a term existing in Romani. The children could easily identify the object listening to the unknown name, a word they had never heard before. This task was very easy for the children and both groups performed 100% correctly in this task. However, the younger children had some difficulties in performing the next test, involving fast-mapping adjectives. The results of this test are shown in Figure 6.

As can be seen in performance in this test, again the differences between the groups are statistically significant $G(1,15) = 22,752, p = .00025$. This test was a bit more complicated. It was a multiple choice test and some of the objects were in invented colours and the names of the colors were also made-up. The children were given the name of the color and among three objects, there were two with the same made-up colour. Usually one of the objects is masculine and the other is feminine, and the child has to pay attention to the researcher to note if he is using a masculine or feminine ending. For example, the tester says: *This color is patrevali <NOVEL ADJECTIVE>. Show me where the patravalo (m.)..... or patravali (f.)... is*. The child has to pay attention not only to the new made-up novel word but also to the gender ending *o* or *i* in Romani in order to make the correct choice. The older children performed better in this test.

Figure 6. Test Scores on Fast-Mapping Adjectives as a Function of Age Group



The rich social life in the community and all activities in the everyday family and community life in which the children are involved, from early age help them to learn the Romani grammar. However, not all the grammatical categories are acquired till the age of 5 years as it often is written in the developmental psychology textbooks. In some languages some categories are learned later. In the present study the most difficult categories for the children were passive verbs, tense and aspect of the verbs, and the fast-mapping adjective. They are difficult for the children because of the grammatical structure of the Romani language. The lack of knowledge on the side of teachers and school psychologists on the structure of the Romani language as a system and their inability to explain why the Roma children have some difficulties with some grammatical categories learning their L2, is very often the reason to blame the children for their alleged mental retardation.

Discussion and conclusions

Many years ago, at a psychology conference in Slovakia, I presented the results of a study with 6 years old Roma children from Slovakia and Bulgaria. (Kyuchukov, 2009) The children in both countries were involved in prepa-

ratory classes to learn the official language of the country before entering primary school. The study also comprised Slovak and Bulgarian native children. I was researching the use of six verbs in Present, Past and Future Tense in Romani and in the official languages of the two countries – Bulgarian and Slovak. The Roma children from both countries did not know how to conjugate 3 out of 6 verbs neither in Romani nor in the official languages of the countries. The same 3 verbs were difficult for Roma children from both countries. However, these verbs were not difficult for the Bulgarian and Slovak native children. When I asked the audience about their opinion why the 3 verbs were difficult for Roma children and not difficult for Bulgarian and Slovak children, one of the psychologists answered directly “because the Roma children are mentally retarded”. My answer to that psychologist was “No!”. I tried to explain to her that not all children learn all grammatical categories at the same time and some verbs and their conjugation in some languages are acquired after the age 12 or even after 14.

The study here, although with a limited number of participants, shows that by the age of 6, most Roma children already know most of the grammatical categories and use them correctly in their communication. However, there are grammatical categories which are learned later, after the age of 6. In the study here these categories involve comprehension of passive verbs, production of the tenses in Romani, comprehension of the aspect and comprehension of the novelty adjectives. If the Roma children had the possibility to study their language organized at school systematically, as Vygotsky (1962) claimed that all languages should be learned in an organized way and systematically with good methodology and teaching materials, then this can guarantee normal development of the language after the age of 5–6 years. Unfortunately, contemporary schools, not only in Russia but also in other European countries, do not consider teaching Romani as the mother tongue although there is a Recommendation of the Council of Europe that the member states should teach Romani to children between the age of 3 to 18 years.

Putting the research findings in the frame of Cummins (2015) “*teaching through an intercultural lens*” and including the student’s cultural and linguistic knowledge in the educational process will change the attitudes of the teachers, students and the society, towards Roma children education and their language.

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