

# Teacher–Pupil Interaction in Bulgarian Romani Classrooms

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**ABSTRACT** *The aim of this paper is to present the manner in which teachers and pupils interact in Bulgarian primary schools that are characterised by Roma attendance. For this purpose research was conducted with three groups of Roma children—Romani-speaking, Turkish-speaking and Romanian-speaking children, who live in different parts of Bulgaria. The research results showed that teachers use more or less the same oral instructions, approaches and methods for introducing Bulgarian to Roma children as they do for teaching Bulgarian to children who have Bulgarian as their mother tongue. The teachers fail to take into consideration the limited knowledge that Roma children have of the Bulgarian language and expect the children to understand their instructions. There are no special methods or approaches for introducing Bulgarian to Roma children that take into consideration the fact that they are bilingual, and they cannot be taught in the same manner as monolingual Bulgarian children.*

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary Bulgarian classroom is a diverse one: children with different ethnic backgrounds are being educated in the Bulgarian language. Many of these children, however, are arriving at school without any preparation for schooling. They do not know a single Bulgarian word, yet they are educated in the same manner as native Bulgarian speakers, because the educational system in Bulgaria still does not take into consideration the fact that many children are not native speakers.

After the democratic changes in the 1990s there have been some minor innovations in the educational policy that exists for minority children, but there is still a lot that needs to be done. In this paper I would like to inform the reader about the contemporary situation in Bulgarian classrooms and also about the strategies that Bulgarian teachers are presently using to teach Bulgarian to an important group of non-native speakers of Bulgarian—the Roma children. For this purpose, I shall first provide some background information on the minority groups in Bulgaria, and in particular on the Romani community (in Section 2). Subsequently, I will present and analyse some of the major publications of the last 20 years (in Section 3). In Section 4, I will present some theoretical background information pertaining to teacher–pupil discourses in the classroom. Section 5 deals with observations in classrooms with Roma children. Section 6 analyses the collected data and in Section 7 I draw some conclusions.

## **2. The Contemporary Situation of Minority Groups in Bulgaria**

Officially, four minority groups have been recognised by the Bulgarian Government: Turks, Roma, Armenians and Jews. However, several other small groups exist, such as the Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) and the Vlaxhs (speakers of Romanian dialect), who have not been given minority group status.

The Turks speak different Turkish dialects. They are concentrated in the north-east and in the southern parts of the country. Their total number was approximately 1 million a few years ago, but how many there are today is unknown, because many of them have dual citizenship—Bulgarian and Turkish—and they live partly in Bulgaria and partly in Turkey.

Officially, the total number of Roma in Bulgaria is approximately 300,000 (results from the last census). However, this number seems to be far from the truth, because one group of Roma are Muslims and they speak Turkish. These Roma also tend to identify themselves as Turks. Another group of Roma are Christians and speak Bulgarian. These individuals tend to identify themselves as Bulgarians. Many Bulgarians and Roma believe that the most accurate estimate of the total number of Roma is somewhere between 800,000 and 1 million.

The Armenians and Jewish communities are quite small, but nevertheless they do have their own cultural centres and schools and are connected to international Armenian and Jewish organisations.

All four groups have the right to study their own mother tongue at school. Minority children learn to read and write in their mother tongue during four lessons a week. However, the other two small groups mentioned above do not have these rights. The Pomaks are originally Bulgarians, but adhere to the Muslim religion. They live in the southern part of the country, in the Rhodopi Mountains, and they speak a dialect of Bulgarian. The total number of Pomaks is unknown.

The Vlaxhs (or Kutsovlaxhs) speak a Romanian dialect, and they are Christian. In other countries they are known as Boyash or Beyash. They usually live near the Danube River, but one can also encounter them in the countryside. Their total number is also unknown. In Bulgaria they do not identify themselves as Roma or Gypsies, although the attitudes of the other ethnic groups towards them is similar to those towards the Roma. They identify themselves as Romanians.

## **3. Teaching Bulgarian as a Second Language**

During the communist regime, Roma children were not recognised as having a similar status to Turkish, Armenian and Jewish children. The latter three minorities had the right to have their own schools and to receive education in their mother tongue. The Roma children did not have such rights. Also, there were no textbooks or teaching materials for minority children to assist them in improving their Bulgarian.

It was not until 1990 that a team was assigned the task of documenting what was taking place in preparatory classes for children who do not speak Bulgarian, and also to write a programme, teaching materials and guidelines for teachers. The aim was

again to facilitate the acquisition of Bulgarian and the acquisition of general knowledge in primary school.

Admittedly, there are approximately ten books that have been published during the last 20 years concerning the problems of educating children who do not speak Bulgarian. Some of these, however, are outdated because they were written according to the older curriculum, stemming from 1973.

Kaleshev & Ejubov (1972) have focused attention on the problem of Bulgarian language teaching for non-native speakers in mainstream schools, where the total number of such pupils is rather higher. Nedelchev (1974) looked at the language education process in primary schools as a system of activities. The latter identifies the following tasks for bilingual children in primary school: (a) they have to acquire a minimal number of high frequency words in Bulgarian, which provides them with opportunities to read and write in Bulgarian; (b) they have to acquire the basic structures of the Bulgarian language in practice. Mirkova (1974) claims that, in order to acquire Bulgarian, Turkish students have to be trained to construct correct sentences and to use correct grammatical forms. The same author thinks that acquiring a notion of grammatical agreement about words contained in the sentence would improve the oral and written performance of the students.

According to Mihajlova & Abazov (1976), Bulgarian language acquisition should be taught throughout schooling as a separate subject in the curriculum. The authors' opinion is that there are two main goals that need to be reached in Bulgarian language classes: (a) to acquire a certain amount of lexical items in sentence- and dialogue-contexts; and (b) to acquire the respective sounds and letters, and the skill to read syllables and words in connected texts. According to Vladimirova & Make-donska (1977), the sentence is the main unit of speech, and therefore it should be the main subject of teaching. In another publication, Vladimirova *et al.* (1989) point to the ways and conditions under which children would acquire modern Bulgarian in kindergarten.

- (1) In a communicative situation language acquisition is a natural process that is realised in communication. No language can be acquired outside communication for lack of motivation. The communicative approach towards language teaching requires the focus to be on the sentence in its capacity as the main unit of communication.
- (2) Modelling and minimising of speech: young children should be taught modelled minimised speech in order to facilitate systemic language acquisition. As a minimum, the most frequently used phrases in a given situation should be acquired, which will provide children with knowledge and opportunities for an adequate intellectual and communicative development.

All the publications mentioned above shed light on individual aspects of the problem. The existing phenomena, however, have not been investigated as a whole. After the democratic changes in 1989, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education started to think more effectively about teaching Bulgarian to minority children, and some measures were consequently taken to address the problem. The first step that was

taken to deal with the problem as a whole was the so-called “preparatory classes documentation”, drawn up in 1990.

The most recent curriculum for preparatory classes (Curriculum, 1990) states: “The aim of the preparatory class is to provide six-year-old children who do not speak Bulgarian with a relevant intellectual, psycho-physical and aesthetic preparation, facilitating their successful education in the first grade.” In addition to the “Curriculum”, there are also “Guidelines for Teaching Methods” for the teachers and an “Album” (a textbook) and individual “Tables” for the students. The “Guidelines for Teaching Methods” state that the communicative approach is the basis for Bulgarian language acquisition in the preparatory classes.

The communicative approach requires that the children acquire the language in the process of communication and for the purposes of communication. This implies not simply speaking to the children about Bulgarian, but addressing the children in an appropriate way so that they can become natural communicators.

Earlier (Kyuchukov, 1992), I made an attempt to define the factors that facilitate the development of 5/6-year-old bilingual children’s speech in Bulgarian. I arrived at the conclusion that these are: speech situations, observations and excursions, poems and fairy tales, songs and arts. In that publication I also suggested a classification system for children’s errors when producing Bulgarian.

An ABC textbook was published to promote literacy in Bulgarian in the first grade, especially for the children of minority groups. This ABC book (Zdravkova *et al.*, 1994) is a variation of the ABC book for mainstream schools. Its goal is to facilitate the process of acquiring Bulgarian for bilingual children.

During the past few years, I have made suggestions regarding teaching Bulgarian as a second language to minority (Roma) children in Bulgaria (Kyuchukov, 1995, 1996, 1997 a, b, c). For the most part, I have offered methodological guidelines to the teachers on how to improve language education among bilingual children. All suggestions are based on research, something which was not very common for the publications of the last 20 years. The most helpful aspect of these more recent publications is that the language difficulties of the children, which stem from their mother tongue, have been taken into consideration.

#### 4. Classroom Interaction

In the scientific literature teacher–pupil interactions occupy a very important place in language education. The manner in which the teacher speaks to the children in the classroom is much more important when the children who learn the language are from a minority background and the education takes place in their second language. In such a situation it is much more difficult for the students to understand the teacher’s instructions.

Cazden (1986, p. 440) claims that “one paradox of the question/answer sequence is that pupil answers are essential for the progress of the lesson and yet the answer expected by the teacher is rarely obvious”. The author tries to qualify the strategies used by the teachers questioning the students.

- One strategy is called reformulating: teachers preface the question they want the children to answer with one or more utterances which serve to orient the children to the relevant area of experience.
- A second strategy is reformulating, when the initial answer is wrong.
- The third strategy is simplification techniques.

Cazden also refers to the “teacher-talk register”. A “register” is a conventionalised way of speaking in a particular role and is identified as a marker of that role. One familiar and well-studied register is the “baby-talk” register that adults use when speaking to babies. There has been some research on features of teacher-talk register, and there are some indications of what it includes (Cazden, 1986, p. 443):

*Control Talk*—The most obvious feature of teacher talk is its preoccupation with matters of behavioural control and of speech itself.

*Special Lexicon*—The vocabulary of the teacher’s language of instruction can be categorised in several ways: subject-specific or more general; explicitly explained or not; and whether it has a conceptual function in making important referential distinctions, or simply a socio-cultural function identifying the speaker in a certain role.

*Prosodic Features*—Teachers of young children report frequent use of high pitch utterances and exaggerated intonation contours similar to the “baby-talk” register, and sometimes interpret such talk as condescending.

Two other important issues that Cazden (1986) raises are cultural differences in the classroom and differential treatment. Studies of cultural differences and differential treatment reflect complementary hypotheses about this issue. Because of prior experiences in their home community, students will be better served if teachers took differences into account more than they now do. In fact, teachers now differentiate among their students in ways that may perpetuate, even increase, the inequalities relating to information access and the potential for skill development that was present when the students started school. In the scientific literature there are three categories of comparative studies relating to cultural differences. The first category includes observations both at home and at school. The second category of studies is conducted only at school, and compares teachers and/or students from different cultural groups. The third category contains studies that only analyse the culturally “deviant” case and take existing literature as the standard of comparison.

Another important issue is the interpretation of differences and differential treatment. Finding differences in patterns of interaction is not the end of the interpretation problem, but the beginning, and it is important to consider alternatives. For example, one explanation of Aboriginal speech acts would be the cultural discontinuity between the home and school environments, and support for that interpretation comes from ethnographic descriptions of speech events in Aboriginal communities. With respect to differential treatment, the most important question is whether such treatment can be considered helpful individualisation, or detrimental bias. In other words: is it affirmative action (discerning and responding to the

individual needs of children) or negative discrimination (reacting prejudicially to children as members of low-status categories).

In the opinion of Nunan (1989, p. 84), teachers' speech acts have "indirect and direct influence"

*Indirect influence:*

1. Deals with feelings.
2. Praises or encourages.
- 2(a). Jokes.
3. Uses ideas of students.
- 3(a). Repeats student response verbatim.
4. Asks questions.

*Direct influence:*

5. Gives information.
- 5(a). Corrects without rejection.
6. Gives directions.
- 6(a). Directs patterned drills.
7. Criticises student behaviour.
- 7(a). Criticises student response.

Chaudron (1988, p. 121) has studied the differential allocation of teacher speech to learners. The author points out that "lack of attention or negative functional treatment will at least not promote, and may inhibit, students' progress. There is clear evidence that in mixed classrooms, second-language learners risk being less involved in exchanges with the teacher, and possibly less involved in instructionally relevant interactions.

Keeping in mind the theoretical studies conducted in the area of teacher-pupil interaction, I have attempted to investigate the situation in Bulgarian classrooms, when teachers teach Bulgarian to Roma children. Until now, no studies have been conducted focusing on the Bulgarian classroom situation.

## 5. The Case Study

### *The Aim of the Study*

The aim of this study was to investigate the speech that teachers use in Bulgarian classroom situations when giving instructions to Roma children in the Bulgarian language. Until now, no instructions have been developed for teaching Bulgarian as a second language in Bulgaria. Very often teachers use the same methods and approaches for both native and non-native speakers when teaching the Bulgarian language. When speaking to non-native speakers, teachers rarely take into account the difficulties that the children might have in understanding the instructions.

My idea was to observe the classroom interactions during literacy lessons in the first grade of the basic Bulgarian school. The children in the study had a Romani

background and were educated in mainstream schools by Bulgarian teachers. The textbooks used for Bulgarian language education are the same for the entire country: the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education have to be followed by all schools and all teachers.

### *Pupil Observation*

Lessons with three groups of Roma children were observed. The research method used for the study was ethnographic observation and analysis. The following groups of children were observed:

Group I—First-grade Romani-speaking Roma children from the village of Gradinarovo, north-east Bulgaria.

Group II—First-grade Turkish-speaking Roma children from the village of Lyatno, north-east Bulgaria.

Group III—First-grade Romanian-speaking Roma children from the village of Kapitanovtsi, north-west Bulgaria.

All the children were between 6 and 7 years of age. For the purposes of the study the literacy lessons in classrooms were observed and recorded (10 hours of recordings). Later on, the records were transcribed and analysed.

The children from Group I were from the village of Gradinarovo and were Muslim Roma. Their native language was a Romani dialect mixed with Turkish words, and most of the children starting school did not know any Bulgarian.

The children from Group II were from the village of Lyatno. These Roma children did not know any Romani. They only knew a Turkish dialect. The children also did not know any Bulgarian when they started school.

The children from Group III were from the village of Kapitanovtsi, and were native speakers of a Romanian dialect. Many knew some Bulgarian when they started school, but nevertheless had problems communicating in Bulgarian.

### *Research Questions*

One of the core questions that the study attempted to answer was how teachers give instructions in Bulgarian, knowing that some of the children do not understand Bulgarian. The second research problem related to how teachers question the children during the lessons.

### *Data Collection*

The data were collected in the children's daily learning environment—in the classroom and, in particular, during the Bulgarian language lessons. The lessons were observed and audio recorded. In order to analyse the lessons, the tapes were transcribed. This gave us the possibility of observing more carefully the speech of the teachers, and also of making some methodological recommendations aimed at improving the teaching of Bulgarian as a second language for Roma children.

*Data Analysis*

Literacy lessons were observed in which Bulgarian letters from the Bulgarian alphabet were the topic of conversation. All teachers used the same ABC textbook for Grade I of the Bulgarian basic school when they were introducing the letters of the Bulgarian alphabet.

The observed lessons were grouped as follows:

Group 1 lesson (Romani-speaking Roma children): introduction of the Bulgarian letter “g”;

Group 2 and Groups 3 lessons (Turkish-speaking Roma children and Romanian-speaking children): introduction of the Bulgarian letter “z”.

The teachers teaching in these classes were instructed to work with the children as they would normally do. The teachers did not know each other, nor did they have any contact with each other. The lessons were given to the children in a normal classroom situation. The data revealed some very interesting results.

The lesson addressing the letter “g” (with Romani-speaking children) started with a riddle. The approach was as follows. When the children recognised the riddle the teacher asked a question:

*Teacher:* What is the first sound you heard in this word?

*Children:* The sound “g”.

*Teacher:* Very good. Today I will introduce to you the new letter “g”.

Subsequently, the teacher showed the differences between the stamped and hand-written letters. In other parts of the lesson the teacher gave exercises involving the following activities:

- creating words with the new sound at the beginning, middle and at the end of words, following specific models;
- reading and analysing the text from the textbook;
- explaining the meaning of some words contained in the text.

In the other two lessons, with the Turkish-speaking Roma children, on the one hand, and Romanian-speaking children, on the other hand, the teachers also used traditional approaches for introducing the new letter. During various parts of the lessons one could observe the same approaches mentioned above. One might ask: why do teachers use the same methods and approaches, respectively the same “language”, even though the children in their classes have different knowledge levels of Bulgarian?

Tsui (1995, pp. 11–12) claims that “in the language classroom, be it first, second or foreign language, classroom language and interaction are even more important because language is at once the subject of the study as well as the medium for learning. When the students listen to the teacher’s instructions and explanations, when they express their views, answer questions and carry out tasks and activities, they are not only learning about the language but also putting the language that they are learning to use. In situations where the target language is seldom used outside

the classroom and the student's exposure to the target language is therefore mainly in the classroom the kind of input and interaction that is made available is particularly important."

In our study, we did not observe any cultural differentiation or differential treatment of the children in order to address the fact that some of the children had different levels of language knowledge and that they had a different ethnic background. The Bulgarian teachers are not trained to teach bilingual children in classrooms where one finds children with a limited knowledge of the majority language. A consequence of this is that children who are less talkative tend to be less involved in classroom exchanges with the teacher, and also less involved in instructionally relevant interactions. The main reason for this is again that the teachers have not learned how to communicate with these kinds of children. The repertoire of the teacher in our study proved to be very limited: teachers only tended to use the so-called *direct influence method*. S/he usually gave information and directions, and corrected the students without rejection. However, the teachers did not use the possibilities of *indirect influence*. This would include making jokes or focusing on the feelings of the children, in order to allow them to speak more freely in the second language.

### *The Teachers' Questions*

By listening to the teachers' questions, one can get the impression that these questions are very difficult and complicated. In the lessons of all three groups, the questions were connected to the newly introduced sound and letter, defining them as voiced or voiceless, placing them in different word groups, etc. Very often the Roma children did not understand the instructions and could not answer the questions. However, the teachers did not take the difficulties that the children faced into account.

The other groups of questions were aimed at the development of children's oral communicative skills. Often the teacher would repeat the sentences produced by the children and interrupt the children's speech. The repetition of the teacher's own questions and the ensuing child's answers interrupted the interaction and made it unclear. Sometimes the teacher would interrupt the child to correct his/her errors and this did not give the child the possibility to freely create speech.

The scientific literature shows that error correction in the classroom is an issue, which raises the following questions:

- (1) Should learners' errors be corrected?
- (2) When should learners' errors be corrected?
- (3) Which errors should be corrected?
- (4) How should errors be corrected?
- (5) Who should do the correcting?

Many authors have attempted to answer these questions, and there exist different opinions regarding error corrections. For example, De Keyser (1993) found that error corrections did not have an overall effect on student proficiency in their second

language (L2), but that it did interact with learner variables. Hence, learners with low extrinsic motivation did better on oral tasks after error correction, whereas those with high extrinsic motivation did better on oral tasks without oral correction. This study highlighted the fact that instructional treatments such as error correction may interact with learner characteristics and contextual features in complex ways.

Lyster & Ranta (1997) distinguish six different types of feedback used by teachers:

- (1) *Explicit correction*—refers to the explicit provision of the correct form.
- (2) *Recasts*—involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error.
- (3) *Clarification requests*—indicates to students either that their utterances were misunderstood by the teacher, or that these utterances were incorrectly formed in some way and that a repetition or a formulation is required.
- (4) *Metalinguistic feedback*—contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form.
- (5) *Elicitation*—refers to at least three techniques that the teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from the student.
- (6) *Repetition*—refers to the teacher's repetition, in isolation, of the student's erroneous utterance.

My data show that Bulgarian teachers do not use all six types of corrections. The corrections they used stem primarily from the second type—*recasts*. The teacher reformulates the student's answer without the error. However, I did not observe any cases in which the fourth type of corrections—*metalinguistic feedback* (where the teacher gets the correct form from the student with questions) were used. Not very often, but on occasion, teachers would make corrections that belong to the other types mentioned above, such as explicit corrections, clarification, elicitation and repetition.

### *The Teachers' Explanations*

The data show that it is obvious that the teachers did not use explanation during the lessons. All three teachers explained only certain words from the texts contained in the textbooks, but never their own speech. All three teachers' input was not modified. The classroom language input of the teachers was almost the same—very high, academic-level language. The fact that very often the teacher's speech was unintelligible for the children was not taken into consideration. I did not observe speech addressed to the children that would match their level of language knowledge.

## **7. Conclusions**

In conclusion, we can state that teachers of Bulgarian use the same methods and approaches when teaching literacy, irrespective of the child's language abilities. The teachers clearly do not take the Roma children's bilingualism into account. If we

examine the data, the most common approaches and methods used by teachers appear to have been:

- creating words with a given sound;
- creating words with given models for words (with 3, 4, or 5 sounds);
- creating words with a given syllable;
- reading words from the blackboard or from the textbook;
- analysis and explanation of the semantic meanings of words from the text;
- reading sentences and texts from the blackboard or the textbook;
- analysing the semantic meaning of a sentence read out or a text;
- creating sentences with given words;
- oral language games;
- writing letters, syllables and words with a given sound;
- writing sentences from the blackboard;
- creating sentences with a given word;
- retelling a text or story from the text.

The methods and approaches listed above resemble those recommended by Zdravkova (1991). In her own "Methods for Bulgarian Language Teaching in Primary classes", Zdravkova fails to recommend any methods for promoting literacy among bilingual children. All Bulgarian teachers are obliged to use the methods developed by Zdravkova, since these have been given official approval by the Ministry of Education. All other existing publications cannot be used in practice because they have not been recognised as official documents. Of course, this situation makes the educational process very difficult and ineffective, because most Roma children are still illiterate by the end of the first grade. There is, unfortunately, no available information that would give us a good picture of exactly how bad the actual situation is at this level of education. Research into issues involving Roma children remains a highly unpopular topic, which is not very welcome among teachers and society as a whole.

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