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How Educational, Cultural, and Social Factors Shape Roma's Improvement of Language Competence in the Greek Case

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we provide an example of a quasi-experimental intervention that investigates the impact of educational, cultural, and social factors on improving language competence in a specific group of linguistically and culturally diverse pupils. In particular, based on empirical-qualitative and quantitative-data obtained from a specific type of teaching intervention for Roma pupils in the area of Zefiri (Attica), it is examined whether factors related to educational policy, the academic trajectory of each pupil, the cultural code of the child and their family and family practices regarding education contribute positively or negatively on the acquisition and improvement of the pupils' language competence. In this article, we argue that the issue of Roma pupils' language learning is multifactorial. Therefore, the quasi-experimental intervention contributes to exploring in depth the impact of each factor separately on the process of improvement of language competence.

KEYWORDS: Roma; diversity; intercultural education; citizenship; language skills; language competence.

Introduction

Since 1996, when the law on intercultural education (Law 2413/96) [1] was enacted in Greece, educational issues concerning the management of diversity in schools and Greek education abroad have been studied, projects for the school integration of returning, immigrant, refugee, and Roma pupils have been implemented and practices have been proposed with a view to the acquisition of intercultural skills by all pupils, as the Council of Europe points out (Council of Europe, 2014).

In this context, in recent years, the intercultural approach, through a process of reflection on its role in education in the light of all the changes brought about by contemporary multicultural societies, has shifted to the adoption of the model of citizenship which focuses on the cultivation of a critically thinking and active democratic citizen (Markou, 2010). Citizenship education focuses on the acquisition by pupils of the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that citizens should ideally possess to act effectively both in nation-states and in the global community (Cogan & Derricott 1998· Banks 2012). In this context, the concept of action is the key to successful citizenship education, as it is not enough for a pupil to be able to understand adequately what is happening around him/her, he/she must participate in it by developing, in addition to the qualification of observation, the qualification of action (Gotovos, 2003).

Adopting this perspective reverses the tendency of contemporary trends regarding the education of the citizen in contexts of diversity to confine the citizen to an institutionally protected group, seeking 'compensation' in case of school or social failure, a fact that does not apply to other citizens in case they face a similar failure (Gotovos, 2003), and is oriented towards ensuring unity through diversity by strengthening democratic values that will form the basis for ensuring the rights of all citizens (Markou, 2010). The advantages of applying this theoretical model are, on the one hand, that we are

allowed to revise the contemporary trend that promotes the recognition of otherness as a means of enclosing the "different" in a group, seeking differential behavior and attitudes from the state about the rest of the citizens. On the other hand, we highlight a multifactorial approach that focuses on interpreting the various factors that lead to inhibiting or improving language learning through the very act of teaching and the complete recording of pupils' progress.

In the context of the present research, intervention with this orientation is a central point of the research. It is an intervention that does not focus on emphasizing diversity and reinforcing specific identity to improve language skills, but on recognizing and accepting diversity and empowering the learner as a member of the wider community by improving his/her weaknesses and deficiencies to gain access to what remains a common goal, i.e., the acquisition of language skills as defined by the curriculum of the specific subject, but also of all other subjects.

Literature review

In the context of educational policy for the inclusion of Roma children, many types of research have been carried out in Europe to understand the problems they face in the educational process, the factors that have a positive or negative impact on learning, and the educational expectations of the children themselves, their families and educational institutions. According to the research of Lauritzen and Nodeland (2018), which includes a critical review of 151 selected articles from 1997 to 2016 on Roma and education in Europe, nine problem representations constitute the main themes of empirical research and studies. More specifically, they state: (a) the absence of Roma children from schools due to socio-economic factors and the absence of appropriate educational and teaching strategies; (b) under-representation in higher education; (c) socio-economic issues associated with low school performance; (d)



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cultural differences either in relation to the practices and values of Roma themselves and their incompatibility with education, or in relation to perceptions of the value of education e) the invisibility of both Romani Roma culture in the curricula and the bilingualism of Roma children as a negative element in learning f) the lack of intercultural competences and knowledge of the Roma situation on the part of teachers who may have a negative and/or hostile attitude towards them g) hostility from society, school, peers, stressing the need to combat discrimination against Roma; h) segregation which negatively affects learning and future educational opportunities; j) wrong policy and action both in terms of problematic policy and problematic policy implementation.

These issues seem to occupy the scientific debate on the education of Roma children even today. According to recent research based on qualitative data on the situation of Roma in 10 European countries, high rates of discrimination in education and experiences of exclusion, deprivation, and racism in the daily life of Roma communities can be observed despite the positive steps taken in terms of material and housing situation and the reduction of harassment and hate-motivated violence (FRA, 2022). School dropout seems to remain a key issue related not only to poverty and socio-economic problems (Pescaru, 2018) but also to the attitudes of Roma themselves towards their language and identity, as well as the attitudes of teachers towards them. A recent empirical study on the case of Romanian Roma migrants in the UK refers to the contradictory attitudes and inaccurate information that Roma students and teachers have about these issues, focusing on the need to raise teachers' awareness of different socio-linguistic characteristics of Roma to achieve their inclusion (Matras et al., 2020). According to Alexiadou (2019), the educational trajectories of Roma pupils are not predetermined but are negotiated with the school, the family, and the community. This is confirmed by the results of studies examining cases of Roma who faced discrimination from both the majority of society and their communities in their choice to continue their education. An illustrative example is Reimer's (2016) research on the cases of Roma and Sinti women in Germany. Moreover, a recent comparative European survey of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia shows that various forms of segregation (in-school segregation or separate schools) affect the daily experiences and future aspirations of Roma pupils (Messing, 2017).

Beyond the problems in primary and secondary education, the percentage of Roma children attending university, especially in STEM, humanities, and arts fields of study, is even lower, according to the empirical research of Garaz and Torotcoi (2017) in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. In the context of relevant papers, the educational policy in Europe focus on Roma access to primary and secondary education rather than higher education is highlighted, emphasizing that it is not only an issue of social mobility but also a matter of academic justice (Morley, 2020). Other empirical research with Roma students or

graduates explores the factors of their engagement rather than exclusion from education (Drust & Nyiro, 2018· Gkofa, 2020).

However, despite the good practices proposed and implemented with positive results in terms of reinforcing practices on the part of education (Gould, 2017· Goga, 2019· Parthenis, 2019), parental involvement (Flecha & Soler, 2013· Wauters et al., 2017) and the involvement of Roma mediators in schools (Herlakorpi et al., 2019), the pandemic seems to have affected Roma communities in such a way as to make them more vulnerable socially and educationally (Fra, 2022). Recent research shows that Roma communities are at increased risk due to their vulnerability, lack of social protection, and increasing inequalities towards them (Varga, 2020· Magano & Mendes, 2021· Miconi et al., 2021). An illustrative case is that of Slovakia, where the inhabitants of six Roma settlements were subjected to more discrimination and more restrictive measures than the rest of the population (Surova, 2022). Particularly in education, the inability to use online educational platforms during distance education reinforced discrimination against Roma (Nevická & Mesarčík, 2022).

Aims and research questions

The purpose of the present research is to study in depth the factors that improve or hinder the process of language acquisition of pupils with linguistic and cultural differences such as Roma pupils compared to other pupils (non-Roma) and to interpret the importance of each factor for the process of language acquisition of pupils from the specific Roma community.

We argue that this purpose is essential for two reasons. First, in contrast to approaches in which the issue of language learning is interpreted in a one-dimensional way, focusing each time on one of the factors as the most influential, we examine the language learning of Roma students in a multifactorial way, aiming to highlight the connection of all those factors to the issue of language proficiency in the framework of intercultural education. Secondly, we highlight the differentiation that is observed within the Roma social group itself depending on the area in which they live. Through this research, we aim to contribute to the debate on the education of Roma children in Europe. Although there are common characteristics in terms of school dropout and attendance of Roma pupils in Europe, the present research contributes to highlighting a Greek case in which we intervene by following a contemporary intercultural orientation in the teaching of this particular group of pupils.

In this context, the following research questions were formulated:

- (a) *Does a citizenship-oriented quasi-experimental intervention to Roma's classroom learning affect the level of their linguistic competence?*
- (b) *How does the use of Romani shape Roma pupils' acquisition of school knowledge and language skills throughout their passage from primary to secondary education?*



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(c) How does the school's stance towards Roma cultural code give shape to Roma's school trajectory?

The Greek context for the education of Roma pupils

The term Roma is usually used as an umbrella term for various Roma groups. The Greek Roma (also called Gypsies [2]) is one of many such groups. In the 1970s, the Greek state recognized the Roma as Greek citizens in the sense that they held Greek citizenship, although they were identified much earlier in Greece (Gotovos 2003· Tsakiris 2004· Markou 2013). It is estimated that there are approximately 117.495 permanent Roma residents in Greece today according to the registration of Roma settlements and population at national level by the General Secretariat for Social Solidarity and Poverty Alleviation in 2021 [3]. In total, according to the same report, 462 areas are identified where Roma live and housing policies are: a) in houses or apartments within the urban fabric b) in dwellings in settlements inhabited only by Roma and located close to the urban fabric c) in shacks or houses in camps where only Roma live and which are far from the urban fabric (Sideri, 2015). The mother tongue of most Greek Roma is Romani (various versions) and Greek.

Until today, Roma politics were dominated by non-Roma, although since 2016, the Panhellenic Confederation of Greek Roma (ELLAN PASSE) was founded to improve the living conditions of the Roma community, while local associations and non-governmental organizations with similar objectives have been established in various regions of Greece [4].

The first institutional interventions concerning the improvement of school attendance of Roma pupils and the literacy of Roma adults started in the 1980s by the General Secretariat for Popular Education with relevant projects implemented mainly in Agia Varvara and Achagia (Pavli & Sideri, 1990). In the late 1990s, state projects funded by national resources and the European Social Fund for the education and integration of Roma were designed and implemented by universities in Greece, focusing on actions to combat school dropout, enhance school attendance, literacy for Roma adolescents and adults, psychosocial support for Roma families and teacher training, the results of which have been reflected in surveys conducted during the implementation of these projects (Conference proceedings, 2003· Conference proceedings, 2004· Karagianni & Peppas, 2015· Parthenis, 2018· Stavrianoudaki et al., 2023· Chatzidimou et al, 2023).

Nowadays, in the context of European Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion, and participation [5] the state attempts to implement relocation or infrastructure improvement projects in areas where Roma population live, but in many cases, the residents of the settlements face serious living problems, while the local community and municipal authorities have a rather negative attitude towards them. In the field of education, a project entitled "Supportive interventions in Roma communities to enhance access and reduce dropout among children and adolescents" throughout Greece is implemented by

five partner Greek universities. Improvement of education is one of the main aims of this project. It has been estimated that approximately 7.000 - 7.500 Roma children are supported throughout Greece according to the Projects' data.

However, research data shows that Roma pupils are characterized by low school performance and early school leaving. Dropout among Roma children and the numbers of pupils not applying to secondary education is higher than average among the Roma (FRA, 2022: 16). Prejudice, racism, and bullying of Roma pupils are common in Greek schools and communities (Gotovos, 2004· Lambridis, 2004· Lagios, 2008· William, 2012). Additionally, the expectations of Roma families regarding the education of their children and the economic and cultural position in society influence the schooling of Roma pupils (Alexopoulou & Penderi, 2016· Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016· Tsiouli & Penderi, 2016· Tourtouras, Pavlis-Korre & Kyridis, 2016· Zachos & Panagiotidou, 2019).

Methodology

Study context

This research was carried out at the 1st High School in Zefiri (Attica). The duration of the research was two school years, from 2017 to 2019, during which I was in charge of teaching in the remedial teaching class for Roma pupils through the European Project for Roma Integration and Education, which was implemented by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The research combined observation and intervention both at the level of relationships and communication and at the level of language teaching based on the theoretical model of civic education, taking into account the needs and potential of pupils as children regardless of their minority background and emphasizing not individual but common characteristics and qualities that students should acquire as future citizens with common knowledge, values, and attitudes. In other words, our intervention sought to fill the learning gaps that the pupils present in the Modern Greek Language course that come from the past and are related to the educational path of each pupil which reverses the so-called identity empowerment that minority education models adopt as a good practice.

Research design

For the present research, we chose a quasi-experimental research design to study in depth the issue of improving the language competence of a specific group of Roma pupils. The reason why this research design was chosen is the fact that the participants of the intervention were not randomly selected so a quasi-experimental research design is the most appropriate choice since it is superior to weak designs (Burke-Johnson & Christensen, 2020). More specifically, an intervention with an intercultural orientation in the teaching of the Greek language was carried out to investigate if such an intervention influences the process of improving the language competence of the Roma pupils who attended the remedial class at school. Such transactional strategies require an experimental group and a nonequivalent untreated comparison group, both of which are



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administered pretest and posttest measures (Burke-Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

In this case, we create two groups, an experimental group of Roma pupils and a control group of non-Roma pupils. However, we did not follow the formal principles of randomization for the selection of the groups as in the classical experiment because of the school and the researcher's involvement with it. I was assigned to teach only the remedial class of the Greek language teaching for Roma pupils.

Research tools

The intervention was an intercultural oriented teaching strategy with an emphasis on the cultivation of citizenship. It included teaching plans for each unit of the Greek language course which were enriched with additional activities of intercultural content to improve the Roma students' language skills. The specific teaching plans were implemented in the remedial teaching department where I taught and the intervention lasted for one school year (2018-2019). In this intervention, qualitative and quantitative tools were used to collect data on the effectiveness of the intervention and the factors influencing the improvement of language competence.

The qualitative tools that were used for data collection were:

1. Participant observation which allows us to penetrate the perspective of the research subjects and record visible and non-visible data (Robson, 2010). The principles of participant observation according to Tierney (2007) were followed for better data recording. Specifically, a diary was used which was completed after the end of each course and in which the student's behavior during the course, their participation in activities, the difficulties they encountered, and their reactions to the teaching style and content of the course were recorded.
2. Individual interviews (Bryman, 2007) were conducted during the intervention school year. The participants were the 10 Roma pupils attending the remedial teaching class. Demographic characteristics (family profile, living conditions, living area characteristics) were recorded in the interviews to compose the pupils' profiles.
3. Focus groups that took place during the intervention school year. Five discussions were held with Roma pupils in the remedial teaching class and covered the following topics: views on education, identity, marriage, gender roles, and place of residence. The reason the focus group was chosen was the composition of the team. We had a group with common characteristics and through discussions obtained their perceptions,

opinions, and attitudes on the research topics (Kleiber, 2004).

At the same time, the quantitative tool used was a language competence diagnostic test for the middle school children. The test was constructed by the researcher based on similar tests that had been constructed in the context of educational programs to support the education of Roma pupils (Garavelas, YY).

Sample

The sample of this research consists of 20 pupils (Roma and non-Roma) who attend the second grade of the High School in Zefiri (Attica). Specifically, the ten pupils that make up the *experimental group* are Roma children who attend the remedial teaching class. The sample was suitable for the study as it consists of a homogeneous group. They are Roma pupils who live in the same area, attend the same school, and regularly attend the remedial teaching class in which the experimental intervention took place. The other ten pupils who form the *control group* are non-Roma children who attend the same class and do not attend the remedial teaching class in which the experimental intervention took place. The sample belongs to the case of the convenience sample, and we are fully aware that this sample is representative of itself and allows generalization only to corresponding groups that present common characteristics as the group we are investigating (Bruke-Jonshon & Christensen 2020).

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to process and analyze the qualitative data (Schreier, 2012). More specifically, the data recorded through participant observation were collected on the one hand, and on the other hand the pupils' discourse from the individual interviews and focus groups and sorted into categories. The categories emerged from the processing of the data and contributed to the recording of the pupils' profiles.

The statistical program SPSS was used to process and analyze the quantitative data of the language proficiency diagnostic test. Specifically, simple descriptive statistical analysis and frequency analysis techniques were used to compare the results between the two time periods for both groups (experimental and control groups) and the groups with each other by plotting the results in graphs.

Results

In the course of quantitative data analysis, the results of Roma (experimental group) and non-Roma (control group) pupils in the language competence diagnostic test were obtained in two phases, in October 2018 and May 2019. As an illustration, we present the comparison table of the averages of the pupils' performance on the language test for the two groups in the two measurements.



Table 1: Results of quantitative data

Units of the test	Experimental group (F.M.)	Control group (F.M.)	Experimental group (S.M.)	Control group (S.M.)
Unit 1 Comprehension of narrative text – max 16	8.6	8.7	11.1	10.4
Unit 2 Understanding of textual genre – max 30	7.7	18.8	17.5	19.7
Unit 3 Written production – max 12	5.8	6.3	6.4	9.5
Unit 4 Identify etymologically related words – max 10	6.4	7.8	7.9	8.9
Unit 5 Exercise in morphology – max 20	28.6	32.6	33.4	35.2
Unit 6 Spelling exercise – max 123	95.7	111.9	103.0	113.0
Unit 7 Accenting ability – max 42	10.8	32.0	14.6	32.7

As can be seen from the above table, the experimental group in the second measurement shows an upward trend in the average in all sections of the test as a whole, which confirms the hypothesis that an intercultural oriented intervention in the model of citizenship contributed to the improvement of the pupils' language level. Furthermore, comparing the averages of the two groups, it can be seen that there is a tendency for the two groups to converge in the second measurement, with the result that the experimental group no longer stands out as having negative performance.

The analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the profiles of Roma pupils. The processing of the data collected through participant observation and interviews during their analysis led to the emergence of ten categories which formed the sections for the presentation of the profiles of each pupil individually. These categories are:

1. Early childhood and educational pathway in primary school
2. Educational path of the pupil in secondary school
3. Family situation
4. Identity
5. Views on education
6. Future professional ambitions
7. Leisure and peer groups
8. Marriage
9. Relationships and roles in the family
10. Group attachment

As an example, two categories are presented with examples of pupils' profiles.

Early childhood and educational pathway in primary school

In this category presents data on the attendance of pupils in kindergarten and primary school (school drop-out, repeating classes, attending remedial teaching) as highlighted in the relevant examples.

P4: *The pupil's attendance in kindergarten was irregular, while in primary school he had regular attendance and participated in the remedial class.*

P9: *The pupil did not attend kindergarten and has repeated the first grade of primary school because she was diagnosed with dyslexia. She did not attend the remedial class because she had a teacher at home.*

Marriage

In this category presents pupils' views on marriage (early marriage, the custom of virginity, the choice of husband or bride) as shown by the examples.

P1: *He considers marriage and virginity as Roma customs and accepts them, but believes that one should marry at the age of 18. However, he believes that a child cannot disobey his father when he decides it is time to get married.*

P9: *In her opinion, marriage is a development related to the need to create a family and it is logical to prevent any other development. She believes that a good age for marriage is 18 years old, and for the custom of virginity, she believes it is important for her community because the family gets money.*



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Discussion

Before the quasi-experimental intervention, Roma pupils continuously experienced failure and had few opportunities to engage in actual learning and improve their language competence. According to the results of the survey, the improvement of the average of the observation group in the second measurement in the language test, the tendency of assimilation with the control group, the tendency of homogenization of the members of the observation group and the examples recorded from the qualitative data allow us to support the necessity of going beyond the existing research framework for Roma. This is because the prevailing approaches are mainly single-issue approaches and, as has already been pointed out in the literature, the exclusive consideration of one factor for the inclusion of Roma students in the educational process puts other factors that may be equally important either on the sidelines or excludes them (Markou, 2018: 69).

Equally important is the factor of family practices in improving students' language competence and engagement in education. It confirms what has been pointed out in the literature about Roma family practices which are incompatible

with school requirements, the main one being early marriage, especially for girls (Pavli-Korre, 2018). However, incompatible practices do not include Romani as the language of communication at home and consequently, the bilingualism that Roma pupils display when coming to school. This finding needs further investigation because the Romani language is seen as a barrier to the acquisition of linguistic competence, although it seems that language is a means of supporting students in the classroom and a means of communication for parents, so it is necessary to take it into account in the context of Roma education policy (Matras et al., 2020).

Finally, as the research found, the attitude of the school towards Roma pupils has a significant impact, especially in cases where they exhibit exclusionary behavior. This type of reaction is a catalyst for the pupil's retention in school. A school acting in attraction modus, trying to gain Roma pupils, may help in creating high educational expectations for pupils, while a school acting in repulsive modus, trying to get rid of Roma pupils, discourages them from participating in the school reality as already established in the literature (Gould, 2017).

Notes

[1] http://www.et.gr/idos/nph/pdfimageSummaryviewer.html?args=sppFfdN7IQP5_cc--m0e1_FG3G1iQCVOVkyFtObxHCu8rzSZFxgk-Tda860J-jpikAYi3ORfmapDjq9tTrDvLn_MmMsAgsoW4kicnjz_3u4G8qOBIZzQoc77k1-A9Eyz7vqZ2xJ5_DZMCKd3BHxf-GQU6Pb78JEh6fPG_owmrMBjMqlZhDFHZQ

[2] The names/terms used for either self-identification or hetero-identification in Greece are analyzed in Gotovos, 2003 (145)

[3] https://egroma.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/%CE%95%CE%98%CE%9D%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%97-%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%91%CE%93%CE%A1%CE%91%CE%A6%CE%97-%CE%A0%CE%9B%CE%97%CE%98%CE%A5%CE%A3%CE%9C%CE%9F%CE%A5-%CE%A1%CE%9F%CE%9C%CE%91-2021_FINAL_compressed.pdf

[4] <https://ellanpasse.com/>

[5] http://www.opengov.gr/minlab/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2021/12/%CE%95%CE%B8%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%A3%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CE%A3%CF%87%CE%AD%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BF-%CE%94%CF%81%CE%AC%CF%83%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%9A%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%88%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%BE%CE%B7-%CF%84%CF%89%CE%BD-%CE%A1%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%AC-2021_2030_21_12_2021_final.pdf

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