



## The Relationship of Bilingual Children to Reading and to Books

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### Abstract

*In the submitted article, we draw attention to the literary culture of families and children with a bilingual background. This article characterizes multicultural education as a process in which one creates ways of positive perception and evaluation of other cultures and regulates his behaviour to members of other cultures. It also presents multicultural education as educational program, which provides educational environment and contents adapted to the needs of pupils from language and cultural minorities. The article focuses on reading habits of pupils from multicultural environment and their relationship to reading and books. We find out which language pupils prefer more for reading and how parents and their reading interests influence on children' reading preferences in early childhood. The family is in determining the reading habits much more important than school. Quality support background of family clearly shaping and stimulating the reading interests of the child. The issue of reading and reading literacy in pedagogy is hugely discussed topic at all levels of education and includes a majority of domestic and foreign researches including didactic topics. Researches of these authors do not examine primarily the phenomenon of bilingual reading receptions rather they focus on the development of children's reading at all ages through methods based on a constructivist model of learning. This problem can be differentiated into two basic levels, both define the broader framework of multiculturalism question or cultural bipolarity and linguistic bipolarity of minority groups in society. The first one is about the inclusion of children from different languages society into the majority society. Outcomes related to the process of acculturation of children from ethnic minority families are the result of such research. Multicultural families has been increasing in today society, in this case we try based on case studies of three children refer to our stated objectives and provides insight into the research problems. We deal with, for example, whether children of multicultural environment rather prefer reading in the Slovak language or in a foreign language. In the study we decided to include children whose mother language is in addition to their second language of the country which they have linked life with. Children attend primary education and come from Slovak-Italian family, Slovak-Albanian family and Slovak family who lived in Spain for ten years. The research data were collected through interviews with these children.*

*Keywords: literary culture, multicultural environment, reading habits of pupils from multicultural environment*

### 1. Multicultural Reading of Children

The most appropriate means of improving the language is reading. Reading is a basic component of literacy. It affects the whole life of human. It is the reading that has a great impact on the development of speech, vocabulary or fantasy. Because reading is not an isolated process, through it, a child can have a contact with the language of its socio-cultural environment from an early age and discover the diversity of the world.

Multiculturalism can be understood as a description of the state of society in which there is a larger number of cultural, religious or ethnically different groups / communities, and this plurality is considered desirable [1]. The essence of multiculturalism is the co-existence of diverse national groups in one state unit. They are characterized by a different culture and language, contributing to the cultural diversity of the state and society. Citizens are so united, regardless of their origin, race or belief, while preserving their cultural differences. "Multiculturalism is the phenomenon of today's world, growing out of the past, and in today's conditions, the humanity has the opportunity to have diverse cultures next to each other (and sometimes also against each other) optimally managed. This

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deliberate action is called multiculturalism" [2]. Multiculturalism is also a topic that is currently touching each and every one of us, because of the increasingly globalization of the world. The members of the ethnic group are understood to be the proprietors of their own culture, i.e. they share memories of common history, value ideals, normative ideas, and, last but not least, the consciousness of the difference of one's own collective existence [3].

In a multicultural environment, a family naturally arises, fulfilling its roles and functions, creating the conditions for building a multicultural society. "Family is a basic social group associated with the bloodline or marriage, present in every society. It provides its members with protection, community, security and in accordance with specific cultural patterns and traditions as well as socialization." [4] The family, as the environment with which we are most reliant, influences us and we influence it. It creates its own cultural environment that shapes the personality of children. The family provides a balance between the emotional needs of its members and it is an important part of the life of each of us. In it, the young human's ideas of life mature, and a fundamental rank of values is formed for life. It is the place of transfer of basic life experiences, economic wealth, cultural, social and spiritual feelings. "It is perceived as almost absolute, ideal pedagogical model of optimal conditions of education. It is the symbol of cohesion, warmth, mutual understanding, appreciation, cooperation, mutual respect." [4]

Bilingualism is closely related to multicultural education, but the very concept of "multicultural education" in world scientific practice is not uniform. "As bilingual is usually known anyone who moves on the scale, which one (ideal) end would represent individuals knowing both languages at the level of monolinguals and at its other end are people only passively knowing a second language." [5] Intercultural education highlights importance of the role of the mother language and encourages bilingual education. Even in the 1960s, hypotheses emerged that bilingualism is too much stress for a child. "New studies, on the contrary, emphasize that bilingualism is a very good brain training, which leads to the development of other cognitive abilities." [6] Bilingual or multilingual education has its advantages but also disadvantages. A person cannot perfectly know both languages. One language is always more dominant and the other weaker. The dominance of one language means its preference and, as a rule, better control by the child. "In general, the child's language skills in each of its languages correspond to that of the child. The more the child uses the language, the better it speaks it." [7]

Except the family, also support given to the language coming from the environment is important, but the most important thing to create, but especially to maintain bilingualism, is motivation. The child must have the motivation to keep both languages. When communicating with both parents in one language, they lose the need to use the other. Problems with language development will be addressed in the case of long-term residence in the country where the language is spoken. These children have the advantage that, if they choose to live in another country whose language they speak, it will be a lot easier to begin than for someone, who does not know the language at all [8]. The knowledge of two languages allows bilingual individuals to communicate with a wider circle of people, to better understand their habits and culture, and thus become more sensitive and tolerant towards different ways of thinking. Bilingual education becomes a common and desirable phenomenon.

Reading expresses the visual perception of the text or its reproduction loudly. Reading engages our brain and eyes, which try to transform by looking at the sequence of written characters and symbols their meaning into words, sentences and paragraphs that have a certain meaning and have the same noticeable value for us. We also consider reading as a tool for achieving different goals that are key to success in social, working and personal life. Reading is a natural part of the main cultural skills, namely communication. During childhood, it is important to intensively look after children's reading, to give them an example, to create situations where children's reading habits are shaped and deepened, to lead children to in-depth understanding and live the reading. Parents must also be influenced to enable and facilitate an interest in reading. The family background is much more involved in reading development than the school. The first steps in reading support begin already in pre-school age. It is not about letting children know the letters, but especially about the development of vocabulary, the quality of speech, the enjoyment of reading, the habit of dealing with books and reading. Parents become natural patterns of behaviour and acting.

## 2. Research Section

In the theoretical part, we did not accidentally mentioned the concepts that will overlap in the research section of this article. As a subject of research, we chose a multicultural family environment, assuming



that children will also communicate with other than mother language. The family environment plays an important role in the development of reading habits. Building a relationship with reading and books depends primarily on parents, the family environment that provides space for working with books.

It was essential for us to find out how the reading process is taking place in selected multicultural families and what the children's relationship to reading is in the languages they speak. In addition to the mother language, their second language is the language of the country which their life is connected with. In the interview, we focused on a number of aspects, including the genres of books that are available in children's libraries, which people lead them to read, the predominant language used in reading, how children ponder the differences between Slovak and other-language books, language preference when buying books, which language they consider to be more difficult when reading, what kind of problems they have with understanding the text, etc.

To achieve the goals, we used the qualitative research method of a semi-structured interview. The essence of this method is to gather information from the interviewer by answering questions. In part-controlled interviews with previously prepared questions, we obtained data for more consistent interpretation and for capturing essential data for further processing of research.

As we have already informed in the abstract of the article, the research is formed by a case study. The survey sample consisted of three pupils of the fourth year of primary education. The condition for the inclusion of the child in the research was to come from a multicultural environment and to speak at least two languages. We used a method of deliberate and available selection for the selection of participants. We included three children attending a primary education (6-10 years) in the case study. The age of the child is also deliberate in this case, as it is conditional by the goals of the project *Reading Dimension in the families of children from the bilingual environment* in which we participate. In this post, we try to point out on the partial output of three children, later expanding this number to at least 50, so we can generalize the data.

**First family:** Slovak-Italian family. Father from Italy, mother from Slovakia. They completed secondary education. The children - daughter Sabrina and son Riky, were born in Italy. They have Italian citizenship. They have been living in Slovakia since 2010. The daughter attended a kindergarten in Italy and she went for the first grade of elementary school in Slovakia. The son finished the third grade in Italy. At home, they speak Italian, they watch Italian television and listen to Italian songs. The interview was conducted with daughter **Sabrina**.

**Second family:** The Slovak-Albanian family lived first in Switzerland, later in Germany and also in Albania. The father graduated at secondary education with a school-leaving examination, the mother graduated secondary vocational school. At present, children with their mother live in Slovakia and their father still works in Germany. Their children, **Radko** and Dayna, speak German, Albanian, Slovak and older son English as well. It is him that we have conducted a semi-structured interview with to diagnose reading habits in families with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

**Third family:** The Slovak family lived in Spain for 12 years. Both father and mother have graduated secondary vocational school. They have two daughters - Karin and Vanesa. We interviewed younger **Vanesa**. She lived in Spain since the third month of her life. She attended pre-school facilities and three years of elementary school. At the Slovak school, she started attending the fourth grade. The girls spoke only Spanish to each other abroad. With parents and grandparents, they spoke Slovak. Even in Slovakia they often speak Spanish. They often call with friends from Spain to not forget that language. They only listen to Spanish songs, which they download from the internet.

## 2.1 Interpretation of research findings

As the interview with the three pupils was relaxed, we also categorized the results of their responses based on the prevailing topic circles and the relatedness of their responses. We tried to capture relevant data that will meet our goals. For data's correctness, we also provide authentic examples of students' testimonies.

For the limited size of the post, we only name the categories that were created:

*The importance of reading; Dominant language; Differences among Slovak and other-language books; Favourite language; Difficulty of languages; Rating of stories; Problems with understanding the text; Reading in family; Reading idols; Book genres; Discussions about books; Favourite books; Unfavourite books; Favourite heroes in Slovak books; Favourite heroes in foreign books; Choice of a book.*

## 3. Conclusion

The aim of the published research was to find out how a sample of pupils of younger school age is being approached to multicultural reading. The research was conceived as a mapping study into the



real functioning of bilingual children in the field of obtaining reading habits. We focused on the reading habits of pupils from multicultural families, their relationship to reading and books, which language they prefer more when reading books, and evaluating books written in the Slovak and other languages they commonly communicate in.

Data obtained from pupils from a multicultural environment indicates that reading generally belongs to their favourite activities. None of the children said they would not like to read or the reading in one of the languages explicitly rejected. We also found that children read different genres of books, not just fairy tales. Books are chosen according to their interests, either it is sports or different mysteries, alternatively other themes. They devote time to reading mainly to acquire information, improving vocabulary, spelling and grammar of the Slovak language. All the children we selected grew up in a foreign country and considered the Slovak language to be difficult. Despite the fact that all of them live in Slovakia today, they are more likely to read other-language books. The environment, which they lived in, significantly influenced them. We consider this aspect to be the most important in terms of the data we got, because the environment, which the child grows in contributes to this fact to the greatest extent. The great importance has an attendance of a pre-school facility in a foreign country; in the case of Vanesa, also the elementary school that she has begun to visit in Spain plays an important role. It is also arguable that children who are exposed to the language in which they communicate every day will know it better. This was confirmed especially in the case of Vanesa and Sabrina. As these pupils still have not read enough books in different languages, vocabulary and understanding of meaning of each word are gradually being improved (both in the mother language and the second, possibly in the third language).

All pupils realize that multilingual learning gives them better opportunities for education. Through reading, they learn about the culture and mentality of the countries which they have (had) connected a life with. Another reason why they prefer to read other-language literature is not to forget the language of the country, which they lived in. This leads us to the conclusion that children often prefer reading in a foreign language, other than in Slovak. They were greatly influenced by the language environment, which they grew up in. An irreplaceable role in this is also played by parents, who want their children to read in multiple languages, so they buy books and talk to them about read texts. By reading them from early childhood, they developed reading habits in them.

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