

**NARRATIVE COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN WITH  
MIGRANT BACKGROUND**

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**Autumn 2010**

## **Abstract**

Many contemporary theoretical and practical research works have been dedicated to the analysis of different aspects of sociocultural and linguistic assimilation and integration of migrant minorities. Narrative competence of migrant children is one of such aspects, and it lays the foundation for further successful performance at school of children who have to adjust their cognitive and language development to two or more linguistic environments at the same time. This topic seems to be of particular interest in the face of the problem connected with school performance of migrant children, which is very often lower than that of monolingual native speakers.

This paper is aimed at presenting an overview of sociolinguistic aspects of narrative competence of children with migrant background. The following issues will be studied in this paper: factors, which have an impact on the development of narrative competence of migrant children in a multilingual situation, prerequisites for successful narrative development of such children, the importance of due language policies and educational agenda for pre-school children from migrant minorities. Methodologically, this paper will draw on cross-linguistic studies of quantitative and qualitative character. Due to restricted time limits, it will be impossible to carry out our own research work. Therefore, the ideas which will be put forward as well as final conclusions will be based on theoretical works about narrative competence in a multilingual context and previous experimental studies.

From the practical point of view, the study should result in a solid evidence that narrative competence in L2 of pre-school children with migrant background depends directly on migrant children's L1 development which is connected with their cognitive development, as well as on exposure to the literacy-related activities in their mother tongue, and that such children's school performance can be improved by an adjustment of the educational agenda, e.g., by incorporating teaching in migrant children's mother tongue in primary school.

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# 1. Introduction

Language development of children with migrant background has already been under research for some dozens of years. This paper will focus on socio-linguistic problems of narrative competence of children with migrant background. The main reason why I have chosen this topic is that it is of current interest and is to give an overview of the main aspects of the narrative development of children with migrant background. This research work can be used as a kind of a practical guidance for parents and teachers of migrant children.

In the time of globalization, close international connections, migration processes, millions of children live in a bilingual environment, and have to cope with two or more languages and cultural environments at a time. Very often, it so happens, that such children are challenge-takers. What are the main factors that influence narrative competence of migrant children? How can we help these children? How can we boost their linguistic development and how not to impede this process trying to make it more effective? What are the main guidelines for their parents? How should be educational agenda adjusted in order to meet the needs of such children? These are the main questions, which this paper should answer.

Recent theoretical works related to our topic have been dedicated to such problems as development of narrative production in a multilingual context (Verhoeven & Stromqvist, 2001), relating events in narrative (Berman & Slobin, 1994), identity in narrative (De Fina, 2003), sociocultural aspects of bilingual narrative (Boyd & Nauc ler, 2001), interdependence between L1 and L2 (Akinici, Harriet & Kern, 2001), language loss and language processing (Hulsen, 2000), origin-specific differences in L1/L2 acquisition by immigrant children (Brizi c, 2006), language setting varieties and narrative competence (Malcolm, 2010), narrative development and literacy (Shrubshall, 1997), bilingual schooling and mother tongue-based primary education (Matthews & Jang, 2007), (S ohn, 2005), (Conrick & Donovan, 2010). A lot of studies have been carried out by researchers from UNESCO teams on enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds.

We shall use the results of some of these and other previous theoretical and research works in order to 1) give an overview of the key modern method applied by researchers in the studies of narrative competence of children with migrant background; 2) explore factors

determining narrative competence of children in a multilingual context and highlight the prerequisites for successful narrative development of migrant children; 3) discuss the advantages of mother tongue-based educational agenda for pre-school children from migrant minorities.

## **2. Narrative competence of children as an object of sociolinguistic research**

In sociolinguistics, the term *narrative production* is applied to indicate cognitive and linguistic tasks that, according to Hudson and Shaplo (1991: 89), “draw on many kinds of knowledge”: general knowledge, personal memories and experiences, knowledge about some typical everyday situations, linguistic knowledge, such as the knowledge of word order and even an ability to predict reactions of the receiver of the narration. The term *narrative competence* is used to describe a certain level of a child’s capacity to tell or retell a story, to talk about a particular episode from his or her life.

Narrative competence of pre-school children has always been an area of research in a number of linguistic fields such as applied linguistics, cognitive linguistic, sociolinguistics. The reason for that is that narration performed by pre-school children is a multifaceted phenomenon, which comprises a number of properties: cognitive, linguistic proper, socio-cultural, and even typological ones.

As far as the narrative competence of children with migrant background is concerned, it lies primarily in the competence of sociolinguistics and ethnopsycholinguistics, because the narration of such children greatly depends on sociolinguistics factors. These factors are social and cultural background; language policies in the language environment; availability of linguistic resources, which children can get in a particular social group; and ethnopsychological peculiarities of migrant children.

## **2.1. Overview of the key-modern method applied in the study of narrative competence of children with migrant background**

When studying sociolinguistic aspects of narrative competence of children with migrant background the majority of modern authors use the *case-study method*. They examine a particular linguistics aspect of the narrative competence in a given multilingual setting, analyze a certain phenomenon and made conclusions based on a qualitative or/and quantitative research. It should be noted, that this type of research is a primary research.

The case-study method applied in the analysis of migrant children narratives, as I can assume, relates to the one used in studies of multilingual settings, for example, in *Urban multilingualism in Europe: immigrant minority languages at home and school* (Extra, & Yagmur, 2004). The latter gives an overview of data about minority language distribution and home language teaching for separate multilingual settings.

In general, the case-study method can give a complete idea of a particular issue in a particular language setting. It involves practical observations and interactions with children, parents and sometimes nursery and/or primary school teachers; and gathering data, which consist of the narratives told by the children participating in the experiment. Traditionally, the collection of data involves children telling a picture story. However, data gathering may include not necessarily picture story telling but also retelling a story after certain time either with scaffolding or not. If a case study is focused on an older sample group, it may involve telling a story based on a personal experience.

The-case study method in narration studies is usually based on the comparative analysis of the data received from migrant children and native speakers of the same age, usually, monolinguals. The data is then processed and analyzed in search of similarities and differences in a particular aspect of narrative. It can be the usage of tenses, actant reference, syntactic features (proportion of subordination or coordination), lexical richness, presentation of the setting or, for instance the structure of the plot or the role of scaffolding.

The case-study method has been widely applied by such researchers as Akinçi, Harriet, Kern, Shrubshall and many others. The advantage of case studies is that they have a high

practical significance, because the results can be applied to eliminate weak points in narrative tasks of migrant children in a particular minority group.

The case-study method may help to describe both linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of migrant children's narrative development. Such a description helps to illustrate what the role of socio-cultural background in narrative competence and performance at school is.

Case studies focused on socio-cultural aspects of narrative development can give an answer to the question why different migrant children living in the same hosting language environment acquire narrative competence at a different speed and with different qualitative indices. This method can be used to assess education agenda for migrant children and teaching policies in multilingual settings.

## **2.2. Research method and hypothesis of the paper**

This paper is a secondary research. Due to restricted time limits, it is impossible to gather enough data and process it for studying even one aspect. I shall give an overview of key-works on the topic and try to substantiate my hypothesis that narrative competence in L2 of pre-school children with migrant background depends 1) on migrant children's L1 development because the latter is connected with their cognitive development; 2) on the exposure to literacy-related activities in their mother tongue; and that 3) migrant children's school performance can be improved by the adjustment of educational agenda, e.g., by incorporating teaching in migrant children's mother tongues in pre-school educational institutions and in primary schools.

### 3. Narrative development in a multilingual context

Migrant children are exposed to a situation similar to some extent to that of majority bilingual children. The both groups have to master two languages while developing cognitive skills. The difference lies in the fact that majority bilingual children may have a balanced linguistic situation in the family, where at least one parent has an excellent command of the majority language. Majority bilinguals receive enough home interaction in the majority language with at least one parent. In other words, they develop to mother tongues in a balanced manner, whereas in immigrant families the majority language often remains a language of neighborhood or educational institutions, thus minority children do not receive much interaction in the majority language in their ethnic community and at home. This may result in major difficulties with their L2 acquisition.

Some linguists distinguish between *simultaneous* and *sequential (consecutive)* bilingualism. The first term is applied in connection with the children, who are exposed to two languages from birth and learn to speak them at the same time. “Sequential bilingualism is related to those children, who come in contact with their second language later in the neighborhood, or in the wider community” (Baker & Jones 1998: 36).

Consecutive bilingualism is typical of migrant children and it has an impact on migrant children’s narrative competence, especially in the majority language. This can be explained by the fact that migrant children’s mother tongues are often minority languages and are used in a closed minority group for intragroup interaction. As a result, a major part of communication in early childhood occurs in the mother tongue. Thus, narrative competence in L2 (majority language) develops with a certain delay and narrative quality in L2 lacks behind. Migrant children develop bilingual skills, but their bilingualism is of a consecutive character, that is to say, one language comes after another.

Akinci (2010: 316) divides migrant children into 3 groups: born in the country, those who arrived before 6 (family reunification, mixed/non-mixed families), or after age 6. According to Akinci (2010), the turning point at which children start actively using their L2 is age 6. Usually it is when children go to preparatory school or primary school. However, some children may have earlier contacts with second language at the age of 2, 5, 3 - at nursery schools and kindergartens. “Earlier contacts with L2 mitigate the linguistic disaster – the new situation, when children have

no means to communicate – and the negative perception of this environment”. (Akinici 2010: 4). Gradually, L2 becomes a dominant language.

We can agree with Akinici (2010) on the fact that earlier contacts with L2 environment lay the foundation for a migrant child’s language competence in L2 and narrative skills. With a more open language environment narrative development goes faster and the transition to an exclusively L2-environment is easier.

In general, it seems reasonable to agree with Verhoeven & Stromqvist (2001) that narrative development in a multilingual context is characterized by the following aspects:

- children’s cognitive system develops simultaneously with the development of two different linguistic domains;
- usually children have to use code-switching while talking in different settings (at home and at nursery school), or the minority group where children are brought up may use several language varieties;
- pragmatic proficiency in L1 of migrant children depends on L1 children’s cultural orientation, presence of L1- speaking peers and parent involvement in education care;
- pragmatic proficiency in L2 of migrant children depends largely on children’s cultural orientation and family interaction in L2;
- grammatical proficiency in L1 depends on the extent of the caretaker interaction in L1, cultural orientation of parents and children;
- grammatical proficiency in L2 depends on children’s cognitive capacity, the period of educational guidance, presence of L2-speaking peers, family interaction in L2 and the extent of parent involvement in educational agenda. (Verhoeven & Stromqvist 2001: 4)

## 3.1. Factors determining narrative competence

### 3.1.1. Origin-specific differences

Among a wide range of factors, which have an impact on the narrative competence of migrant children, origin takes a particular place. Further, I shall distinguish between the terms *origin* and *background*. I shall apply the term *background* while describing socio-cultural factors.

It so happens that migrant children of different ethnic origins have different conditions or resources for the development of narrative competence. A vivid example is migrant children in Austria from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. The latter, according to the longitudinal study, described by Brizić (2006), had been showing a much poorer narrative competence. It is always difficult to explain why and how origin influences migrant children's language and narrative development. According to Brizić (2006: 342), "individual factors such as self-confidence or intelligence, as well as the quality of parental input, cannot be said to vary depending on ethnicity...and teachers' input cannot be the cause of origin-specific failure, because immigrant students who participate in sociolinguistic studies are usually taught together". Sociolinguistics has not been successful in explaining such a factor as parents attitude, as sometimes it is more than evident that parents of the so-called lacking behind children "wish the best opportunities for their children in the new environment and has a positive attitude to L2" (Brizić 2006: 342).

The answer is probably, that narrative competence cannot be exclusively determined by an individual contribution in the case with migrant children. In order to understand origin-specific differences we should taken into account some macro-level circumstances that have a direct effect on the language situation in a migrant family. Brizić (2006) presents a model, which can clarify the nature of origin-specific differences. This model is based on the research carried out in Austria, dedicated to German language skills of children, whose parents are immigrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. The research sounds convincing and its empirical component explains why migrant children of Turkish parents lack behind in their school performance and L2 acquisition compared to the migrant children whose parents are from former Yugoslavia. If the former lack in L2 acquisition it means, that their narrative competence in L2 also develops with a more considerable delay, than that of the children with parents from former Yugoslavia.

Brizić (2006) calls her model *Linguistic capital model* (LCM), it has three levels, and each level has its variables. The levels of the model are *micro-level* (children's linguistic starting point in the country of immigration), *meso-level* (parents' linguistic capital) and *macro-level* (macro-conditions of the language acquisition in the country of origin). *LCM* has a bottom-up structure. The variables are the following:

**Macro-level:** majority, education, language of instruction, official language, prestige.

**Meso-level:** transmission of parental L1, parents' language acquisition at school, exceptional linguistic situation in a general sense<sup>1</sup>, exceptional linguistic situation in a strict sense<sup>2</sup>.

**Micro-level:** children's starting point in their parents' L1 (L2, L3...), children's linguistic identity, children's proficiency in the language of instruction (Brizić 2006: 347).

The study carried out by Brizić (2006) illustrates the interdependence between the three levels. In terms of macro-conditions parents of the former Yugoslavian origin received in due time a proper instruction at school in the country of origin, both majority groups, such as "Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian speakers and members of minority groups, such as Hungarian, Albanian and Breznik speakers" (Brizić 2006: 348). In contrast to them Turkish parents, especially those from rural areas of Turkey had a limited access to instruction in standard Turkish, and as for minority languages in Turkey, they are even more disadvantaged. "They have never been granted a place in the education system, except for Armenian, Hebrew and Greek" (Brizić 2006: 348).

That is why in terms of meso-level we can see, that the linguistic capital and transmission possibilities of parents with former Yugoslavian origin are richer than those of Turkish parents, because the latter did not receive enough instruction in their mother tongue, which is their children's L1. As a result, in terms of micro-level, the children's starting point in their parents' L1 is more advantageous in the case with the children whose parents have come from former Yugoslavia. Consequently, they have more chances to use their parents' linguistic capital for their cognitive development, which determines the narrative development, both in L1 and L2.

We can make a conclusion that the Yugoslavian children will be more exposed to literacy activities in the process of L1 development, and their parents will use a more or less standard L1 in interaction with children. Thus, the children of Yugoslavian parents will have more linguistic

capital from their parents and this will later result in a higher level of L1 competence and, consequently an easier development of L2.

However, it is worth noting that the children of immigrant parents, who have the same origin, may develop their language and narrative competence differently. It may vary from family to family. No matter how good and efficient parent's instruction was, they may not know how or not want to transmit their linguistic capital to their children. As Brizić (2006: 348) puts it "such individual factors as parents' attitude to the maintenance of their L1 and the percentage of interaction in L2 play their part", as well as a child's own "aspirations, peculiarities, and socio-cultural identities" (Gregory, 2000), and preferences developed under the influence of interaction with the majority language peers.

### 3.1.2. Socio-cultural background of migrant children

In the previous section, we spoke mostly about children's background in terms of nation or origin-specificity. In this section, we shall discuss socio-cultural background of children as a factor, which determines a migrant child's narrative development.

“In both monolingual and bilingual contexts, children's linguistic environments are to a large degree shaped by the beliefs and attitudes of the people who constitute these environments” (De Houwer 1999: 91). It is undisputable, but speaking about narrative development of minority and/or migrant children, raised either in a bilingual or a monolingual environment, one should always consider not only parents' attitudes and beliefs, but also cultural and social patterns used by parents to transmit their linguistic capital to their children.

In the case with the narrative development of migrant children, this “mode of transmission” concerns mainly the way in which a story telling or retelling is arranged in a family. Story telling for children is one of the most frequent linguistic practices in many cultures. However, there are major cultural differences in the way the narration is performed. Story telling in early ages involves minor participation of a child. After age 3, the so-called *scaffolding* is usually introduced, when a child himself or herself is involved in story telling, but a caretaker helps to form the narration with the aid of questions and hints. The advantages of scaffolding are that it gives a child an idea of what the key-points in the plot are, what parts of the plot should be presented, how to speak about the main characters and so on. However, the role and degree of a caretaker's participation differs from culture to culture.

Let us take an example with a Western European cultural community and an Islamic one, to be more exact a Swedish and a Turkish one. Moreover, this combination implies religious differences, which have a direct impact on culture. A major study on the narrative promotion patterns has been carried out in Sweden called *Language socialization in immigration families and its relation to language learning in the Swedish pre-school (1992-1995)* (Boyd & Nauc ler 2001: 130). The data was collected during different types of narration related activities. One of the activities was as follows: both Swedish and Turkish children were told picture *Frog story* at home and at preschools. Then the children were to retell the story to an experimenter looking at the pictures. The idea was to “eliminate” scaffolding as opposed to Berman and Slobin's cross-linguistic studies on relating events in narratives, in which caretakers prompted story narration

and thus, the results were not that objective. The study was aimed at investigating adults' strategies and children narration in different settings.

Altogether eight Turkish families living in Sweden and seven Swedish working class families took part in the experiment. At home, Turkish children carried out linguistic tasks on *Frog story* in Turkish, at pre-schools all the children spoke Swedish. The recordings showed that Turkish mothers helped their children much more than Swedish mothers did. Here are some examples from Boyd & Naclér (2001: 139). The first extract is an illustration of a Turkish mother's strategy:

- (01) Mother: Ali and his dog get up on the bed and go to sleep. When Ali and his dog have fallen asleep, the frog climbs carefully out of the jar. Look, because frogs cannot live in a jar. Frogs live by lakes. They live where there is water. Is it OK?  
Feliz: mm...  
Mother: That is why he carefully climbs out. The frog runs away from the house. Morning comes and the sun comes up. It gets nice and light. Ali wakes up. First, he looks in the jar to see what the frog is doing. Then he sees that his frog is gone. It has left the jar. The dog looks too. They look together. Ali is surprised when he cannot see him and wonders where it has gone. Look! They start to look for the frog right away. They look in the house. They lift up the furniture. They look in the boot in case it went in there. Did you see?  
Feliz: mm ... (see Boyd & Naclér 2001: 139).

This example shows that a Turkish mother's narrative strategy is not encouraging and cooperative, but rather dominating. It is based on the monologue-principle. The only interaction occurs when the mother asks some "control" questions just to see whether the child is following her story. Swedish mothers take a different narrative strategy:

- (02) Mother: And now the boy and the dog have gone to bed but –  
Mona: – and the boy is lying with his legs on the pillow.  
Mother: do you think so?  
Mona: and there you see the frog getting away.  
Mother: yes he sneaks away. (see Sally Boyd and Kerstin Naclér 2001:140).

In this case, mother asks prompting questions and her questions force the girl to continue the story, thus a child gets involved in the narration. "This story is more of a collaborative activity, where Mona and her mother construct the story together" (Boyd & Naclér 2001: 140).

Two different parental strategies allow different narrative involvement. The strategy applied by Swedish mothers is more efficient, as they try to stimulate children to narration by asking questions when children themselves retell the story. Turkish mothers on the contrary dominate in the story telling and ask questions only to receive a sort of feedback from their children. In the case with the Swedish mothers, "the narrative turns out to be symmetric co-

operative” (Boyd & Nauc ler 2001: 141), while in the case with the Turkish mothers the narrative is performed by an adult alone with a minor degree of co-operation.

This is a major cultural distinction in the way Turkish and Swedish parents try to develop the narrative competence of their children in L1. Turkish children are behind their peers at school in narrative and other language-related activities, because they are simply not trained to display their cognitive potential in the manner Swedish children are used to, even if they have a basic command of Swedish. As a result, Turkish children face major problems with socialization at Swedish classrooms and they form a negative attitude to classroom tasks. The root of the problem remains partially in their parents’ cultural strategy of training their narrative skills.

Moreover, narrative genres develop from the simplest to the most difficult one: from a directed dialogue to a free dialogue, followed by directed monologue and finally reach the level of a free monologue. Thus, Swedish parents lay a solid foundation for the narrative development by training a directed dialogue, which is the bulk of other narration genres, compared to a poorer one laid by Turkish parents.

It is of interest to notice that, according to Boyd & Nauc ler (2001), Turkish mothers who received their education in Sweden use the same strategy as Swedish mothers in developing their children’s narrative skills. As for socio-economic factors, they could not account for this specificity of Turkish mothers’ strategy, because Swedish families who participated in the research were of the same socio-economic background as Turkish families. It is obvious that the reason lies in socio-cultural patterns.

Thus, we can conclude that early co-operative narrative activities in L1 with a migrant child will help him or her to develop a well-functioning ability of an independent narration, which in its turn leads to a better socialization and performance at school.

### **3.1.3. Exposure to literacy-related activities**

As was mentioned above, “grammatical proficiency in L2 depends on children’s cognitive capacity, the period of educational guidance, presence of L2-speaking peers and family interaction in L2” (Verhoeven & Stromqvist 2001: 4). Beyond these factors, another one should be highlighted. It is exposure to literacy-related activities, which concerns all types of interaction in L1 and L2.

This factor is particularly relevant for those families where parents’ linguistic capital is not so rich, as that of the mainstream population or in the cases when migrant parents and children belong to a non-literate community. The point is that narrative competence may only develop if a child’s cognition develops. The ability to cognize the world is closely connected with logical and analytical thinking, which are necessary for relating events, phenomena and objects in narration, and only, “those being brought up in “fully literate” social groups, are claimed to have the capacity for logical and analytical thinking” (Boyd & Naclér 2001: 136).

By literacy-related activities we mean parents’ story telling to children, reading books and oral literate narration activities which make a part of everyday interaction between a child and a parent, for example parents’ personal narratives. In other words, activities that give a child access to a literate discourse. Shrubshall (1997: 404) presents Gee’s (1989) classification of narrative discourses, which give varying access to what he describes as “essay-text literacy”. The development of “essay-text literacy” lays the foundation for children’s further literate narrative performance.

One type, used in more oral cultures, depends more on additive relationships (e.g. coordinating conjunctions) and involves readers or listeners making inferences about how components of the story are connected; prosody, rather than lexis or syntax, provides thematic cohesion in this type of discourse. The other type has more syntactic and lexical devices to signal thematic cohesion (e.g. subordinating clauses, nominal complementation), relationships are signaled explicitly and not left so much to interpretation by the listener; it does not rely so much on prosody. It is argued, that this latter narrative style leads more easily to essay-text literacy. This involves the presentation of a topic followed by an explicit and reasoned engagement with it. Essay-text literacy provides a gateway into academic discourse and success in school literacy. (Shrubshall 1997: 404).

Relying on the study, described by Sally & Nauc ler (2001), we can assume that literacy in Turkish families is closer to the first type, as Turkish mothers stress more the importance of interaction in social activities as beneficial for the development of language, while in Swedish families it is closer to the second type. In general, the study showed that Swedish mothers pay more attention to literacy-related activities with their children in comparison to the Turkish mothers.

It is possible to conclude that with a more oral-oriented narration style, Turkish mothers should compensate for the lack of explicitness in their narration discourse, because children get used only to the colloquial variant of their L1 and later this may cause difficulties in children's handling with literacy-related tasks at school.

So, parents with literacy which is more oral-style oriented should expose their children more often and more regularly to literate texts and make their interaction with children closer to literate-style to lay the foundation at least in L1 for the school literacy in L2.

Other comparative studies of narrative quality of Turkish bilinguals in France and French monolinguals in three age groups (5, 7 and 10-year old children) carried out by Akinci, Harriet & Kern (2001), showed that Turkish monolinguals have a certain delay in macro-structure of narratives at the age of 5 when they have already mastered basic syntax and grammar of French. As for the 10-year-olds, the delay has been marked in such components of their narratives as unfolding of the plot and resolution of the plot. It should be noted that this delay is evident both in the Turkish and French version of the story told. However, according to Akinci, Harriet & Kern (2001), "the bilingual delay observed in French, particularly in the 10-year-olds, should not be attributed to their bilingualism. ...the difference between the bilingual and monolingual subjects is due to differences in the amount of exposure to literacy-related activities".

Learning to use a language in narrative contexts requires a certain amount of exposure to those contexts. While French children receive extra exposure to literacy activities in French at home, the overwhelming majority of Turkish children do not have that possibility. Reports show that 50% of Turkish parents do not practice story reading and telling to their children and the second half do that irregularly (see Boyd & Nauc ler 2001: 136). This accounts for the delay in the narrative development of Turkish migrant children.

### 3.1.4. Setting of a narrative activity

Setting of a narrative activity is another major factor that has an impact on a migrant child's narrative development and narrative quality. By the term *setting* we mean the place where a narrative task is being performed. Very often migrant children have to face different requirements set for the narrative quality and the degree of involvement in narrative activities at home and at school. For example, as we have described above, while performing a narrative task with a child at home a Turkish mother dominates her child, thus her child cannot get used to a directed dialogue and then gradually to a monologue. When Turkish children go to school, they experience a linguistic shock. On the one hand, their L2 skills are not that developed, because the most part of the interaction at home was in Turkish, and they have a disadvantageous position from the very beginning as compared to native monolinguals. On the other hand, teachers demand that such Turkish children should perform narrative tasks at school in the way it is done in Western classrooms. The result is that a child who is more used to listening rather than to telling himself or herself cannot display his or her knowledge and relate events in narrative into a coherent story, even if the plot is familiar to him or her. The teacher, according to Moreno (1991: 404), "grows less and less confident in the child's ability to understand the task at hand". Thus, when minority children meet with majority institutions, like formal education, continuity between home and school is often minimal (Moreno, 1991).

The conclusion is that their parents in migrant families should practice corresponding class activities at home while developing children's narrative competence, because home narrative activities will then influence migrant children's performance at school.

Setting has a great impact on L2 acquisition. It occurs faster if there are constant contacts with L2 speakers, who can give numerous examples of using linguistic units in various communicative situations. In the case with migrant children this process can be facilitated through an early socialization, for instance in kindergartens. Wong-Fillmore (1991a) described the model of "language learning in social context". It contains three components: learners, speakers of the target language and a social setting. According to Wong-Fillmore (1991b: 65), "the social model implies that whether or not children in such situations can learn a standard variety of the language depends on their getting help from the target language speakers in the settings". That is why we can suppose that parents should pay attention to whether caretakers in

kindergartens, who are usually majority language speakers, help their children in communication and give some guidelines in interaction or not.

### **3.1.5. Mother tongue and L2: Narrative quality, interference, attrition of L1**

Various studies showed that a poor development of skills in L1 hinders progress in L2, in quality and quantity. Thus, “there is a direct relation between a child’s competence in his or her first language and his or her competence in the second language” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukoma, 1976). This conclusion is relevant for the narrative development as well. A migrant child who has not mastered his or her mother tongue at a required pre-school level, is running the risk of showing a poor performance at school. Some authors call such children *semilinguals* who confuse and mix both languages, and have unstable language skills (restricted vocabulary, faulty grammar, difficulties in expression in both languages) (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukoma, 1976).

Narrative development of a child depends crucially on his or her cognitive development. Cognitive development is realized through different forms of interaction in a language. In the case with migrant children, this interaction should be carried out in children’s mother tongue before late pre-school age to promote their cognitive development, especially, if migrant parents cannot provide communication in L2 at a rich and literate level.

Promotion of mother tongue competence in language minorities has been a common practice in France in recent years. Special mother tongue courses and classes have been launched not only for migrant children, but also for their parents. Parents are encouraged to interact with their children in their mother tongue to form a solid basis for a quick L2 acquisition.

The reason for that is that due to various activities in mother tongue, including narrative tasks and exposure to literacy activities, children acquire a required level of intellectual development and master a wide range of every-day schemas. Later children use these schemas to produce their own context-independent narratives. The conclusion is that the more stories parents read and tell to their child in L1 and involve him or her in story telling, the better chances this child has for a successful L2 development.

So, we see that cognitive and intellectual development depends on parents’ choice of language of interaction. In general, “migrant parents can be divided into two groups, those who feel their cultural identity threatened, and those who impose the use of host language as a linguistic tool for successful studies in future” (Akin, 2010). Both attitudes do not improve migrant children’s narrative development. The first one creates a negative perception of the

majority language, and the second one suppresses a mother tongue identity of a child, while on the contrary, mother tongue identity should be supported by parents, and a positive image of the mother tongue culture and language should be provided for the successful development of narrative competence of migrant children. One of possible ways to do that is to give the child a narrative task with an evident culturally determined plot, familiar to him or her. It may be a story based on a cultural event, such as a celebration, for instance.

An experiment on how cultural familiarity with a topic of a narrative task influences the narrative quality has been conducted in Netherlands.

One story dealt with a topic related to the ethnic minority children's cultural background (Ramadan), one story dealt with a topic related to the Dutch children's cultural background (Carnival), and one story dealt with a topic both groups of children were familiar with (playing at the schoolyard). All children spoke in Dutch, which implies that the ethnic minority children performed all tasks in a language other than their family language, whereas the Dutch children performed the same tasks in their native language. (Hell, Bosman, Wiggers & Stoit 2003: 283).

The experiment showed that ethnic minority children's stories based on Ramadan event were longer and had more connective ties than their Carnival stories, and Dutch children's Carnival stories were longer than their Ramadan stories and had more elaborated usage of conjunctions than their Ramadan stories. The conclusion is that topic familiarity can boost and facilitate narrative tasks at earlier stages, when stories are still context dependent.

It is evident, that at an early stage of narrative development a migrant child, exposed to one language at home and another one at nursery school may have difficulties in harmonizing the two languages in narrative tasks. *Interference* may take place, especially in the vocabulary, when for example L1 nouns appear in sentences built up in compliance with L2 sentence patterns (Pfaff, 1999).

This problem can be not that serious and in the course of time, a child will master distinction between L1 and L2. However, sometimes a minor interference develops into the situation when L2 starts to be dominating before a child has mastered the required level of his or her mother tongue. This may be caused by a child's own aspirations and some psychological

reasons, such as fear for being rejected by majority language peers or an attempt to get accepted in the majority community.

An early attrition of mother tongue can be also “stimulated” by pre-school courses in L2, in communities, where language policies encourage early L2 learning. The state of Texas in the USA, for instance, “led the way some years ago by passing legislation that provided pre-school programs in English for 4-year-old children from minority backgrounds”. (Wong-Fillmore 1991b: 324).

However, there have been numerous discussions about the consequences of early L1 attrition for further social and cultural well-being of migrant children. *The No-Cost Study on Families* (see Wong-Fillmore, 1991b) showed that early L1 attrition may have severe consequences for migrant children. According to Fillmore (1991b: 345), “the consequences of losing a primary language are far reaching, and it *does* affect the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development of language-minority children, as well as the integrity of their families and the society they live in”.

If there is a connection between an early mother tongue loss and difficulties experienced by many minority language children at school (Wong-Fillmore 1991b: 342), we can assume, that narrative development will be impeded as well in this case, and narrative quality in L2 in primary school will be affected under the influence of an early L1 loss. That is why migrant parents should encourage interaction in mother tongue at home with their children, especially if children attend L2 courses.

#### **4. Language policies and educational agenda for pre-school children from migrant minorities**

A lot of efforts have been made today in different countries to promote mother tongue-based pre-school instruction for children from migrant families. “UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue-based instruction in early childhood and primary education since 1953” (Ball 2010 :1). If migrant children continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in secondary school, they will emerge as fully bilingual (or multilingual) learners. “If, however, children are forced to transition from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language too soon, their first language acquisition may be attenuated or even lost” (Ball 2010: 2). By providing instruction in mother tongue, educational institutions invest into social and cultural identity of migrant children and their future academic success.

It is important to distinguish between *mother tongue-based instruction*, which implies the usage of L1 as a primary language, and *mother tongue instruction*, the latter is used to describe a limited number of mother tongue teaching, as a part of the curriculum.

It is the mother tongue-based instruction at early years that gives positive results for future performance at school. Mother tongue-based instruction may and should be continued in primary school. Reports on mother tongue-based programmes have concluded that children who learn in L1 for the first six to eight years of formal schooling have better academic performance and higher self-esteem than those who receive instruction exclusively in the official language or those who pass too early from the home language to the official language. (Ball 2010: 24).

For example, *Studies on the Effects of Mother Tongue Instruction* (see Axelsson 2005:113-115,) in Sweden showed: that the most successful students were those who participated in L1-based instruction from pre-school through primary school. The least successful were those who only experienced limited L1-based instruction. Moreover, the former had a positive attitude to their mother tongue; most of them associated themselves with their ethnic minority and they were in general more satisfied with the programme chosen.

Of course, we should take into account such factors as the parents’ more supportive attitude in the case with the first group of students, or we may assume that the students’ own investment in L1 and L2 were more considerable in the first group. However, the fact remains to

be the fact that L1 promotion in early childhood and instruction in it in primary school may ensure future success of migrant children in academic sense, boost their self-esteem and assimilation in the host language environment.

According to Ball (2010: 25), “research and theory support the gradual introduction of L2, first through formal instruction in L2 as a subject of study, and subsequently, through the use of L2 in a gradually increasing number of academic subjects in the curriculum”. It should be noted that transition to L2 in pre-school, if any at all, and in primary school should be slow and gradual.

As far as L2 instruction for migrant pre-school children is concerned, it can be introduced through some activities at home, such as singing songs, playing games, story retelling with a caretaker, which totally or partially correspond to narrative tasks.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to give an overview of the main aspects of narrative development and narrative competence of children with migrant background. Using the previous experimental studies and theoretical works related to the topic of this paper, it is possible to conclude that migrant children's narrative development and narrative competence occur in a challenging situations. Very often, it can be hindered because of either parents' unawareness or incompetence concerning the language development in a multilingual context or a poor and inappropriate educational agenda. However, in some cases this parents' unawareness or incompetence is not a result of their negative attitude to the majority language environment, but rather the consequence of macro-economic and even political situation in the country of their origin, where they could not receive enough education in their L1 and consequently have a little linguistic capital to transmit to their children.

We can conclude, that to promote L2 narrative skills of migrant children parents should develop children's narrative competence and language skills first and foremost in their mother tongue. By doing so, they will invest into the cognitive development of their children and their good academic performance at school. This investment should include:

- active home interaction in mother tongue if a child attends pre-school with instruction in L2, or L2 - courses for migrant children in order to avoid attrition of the mother tongue;
- narrative tasks practice at home in the manner which would imitate the one, used in pre-school and primary school;
- maximum involvement of a child into a narrative task;
- exposure to literacy-related activities in L1 and L2: reading books, watching high-quality cartoons;
- early exposure to the social settings of L2, such as kindergartens.

Finally, we have substantiated the idea that early mother tongue-based instruction in pre-schools and then continued in primary school can build a firm basis for a successful academic performance of migrant children. Moreover, it will build a positive image of the ethnic identity of a child and form his or her solid and efficient cognitive skills. This will facilitate L2 acquisition through social interaction with L2 speakers.

## 5. Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The concept of *exceptional linguistic situations in a general sense* refers to the lack of possibilities for acquiring the L1 or the corresponding state language at school. This is considered an exceptional situation since the possibility of accessing comprehensive academic proficiency in any language is strongly limited by such circumstances.” (Brizić 2006: 350).

<sup>2</sup> An *exceptional linguistic situation in a strict sense* entails the loss of the L1 in favour of a dominant language. This is considered an exceptional situation particularly when at the same time the school does not facilitate sufficient mastery of the dominant language.” (Brizić 2006: 350).

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