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# AVIOR CASE STUDY REPORT - CROATIA

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Erasmus+ KA2 Project: Open Source Multilingual Teaching Materials Forum for  
Migrant Pupils in Europe – AVIOR, April 25, 2019

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*'It was very fun and instructive!'*

(parent, after using AVIOR materials)



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## Introduction

Roma (or Romani) people in Croatia speak several different languages. Bayash Roma in Northern and Eastern Croatia speak 'Ijimba dâ bjash' or: Bayash language.

Bajash Roma arrived to what is today Croatia during the middle of the 19th century, after the abolition of slavery in which the Roma lived in Vlaska (today Romania) and Moldova. In today's Croatia, around 36.5% of Roma speak 'Ijimba dâ bjash'. Except in Croatia, Bajash is spoken in Serbia, Hungary and countries to which this language group has emigrated to. Bajash language is the archaic Romanian dialect language, sometimes referred to as Romanian Bavarian. In Croatia there are actually three dialects of Romanian Bavarian ('Erdélyi', 'Baranjskomuntenski' and 'Ludarsko-Muntenski').

Bayash is mainly a spoken language and until recently there was no written standardization of the language.

Most Romani children starting school are either not fluent in Croatian, or do not speak/understand it all. Unlike other children, for whom Croatian is their first language, once they start school, or one-year pre-school program, Romani children spend every day in school, learning in a language they do not understand at all or very well.

Apart from that, about 95% of Roma children in Croatia live in poverty. This means that they have fewer books at home, that they probably visit libraries or theatres rarely or never, and that they might not have many toys to play with at home and are less frequently involved in extracurricular activities. In conclusion, poverty has a great effect on their language development as well.

Staff in some of the schools with a significant Roma population try to improve achievement of children from deprived communities by offering them more content (e.g., additional lessons, classes, more time in school) instead of merely accepting the fact that children do not speak or possibly understand Croatian. The creation of AVIOR material was taking place during a small revival of the Boyash/ Bayash language that aimed at improving educational outcomes for Roma students in Croatia. In collaboration with NGOs such as the Open Academy Step by Step Croatia and the people from the (Bayash) local community, as well with experts for Romanian language from the University of Zagreb, several materials were developed in Bayash recently, for children, teachers and parents.

However, there are still numerous misconceptions regarding learning second language (in this case, Croatian), shared by both teachers and parents in Croatia. Some we list here, as an example of what the AVIOR team detected and tried to tackle through the promotion of materials, and while using the materials:

- ▶ Misconception #1: For children who yet have to master Croatian (i.e. another official/new language of the educational system) it would be best if only Croatian is spoken around them in school.
- ▶ Misconception #2: When a child communicates in their first language it prevents them from mastering Croatian.
- ▶ Misconception #3: Parents should speak Croatian to their children at home.
- ▶ Misconception #4: At school, children should not speak in their mother tongue in any situation.
- ▶ Misconception #5: Children whose first language is not Croatian should follow a “reduced curriculum”.
- ▶ Misconception #6: Children who do not speak Croatian cannot achieve good results in school.
- ▶ Misconception #7: Roma parents don’t care about educational achievements of their children. (Many Roma parents, especially if not educated themselves doubt their own capabilities and as a result leave education to institutions entirely. Many fieldwork research points to the fact that Roma parents think education is very important, so it is up to schools to show them how they can better support their children in education.)

## Description school

NEPC and ISSA member, “Step by Step” Croatia, has been working for years in Roma populated parts of Croatia, aiming to educate and inspire local municipal and education stakeholders to better support the inclusion of Roma children, both in the pre-school and primary school systems. They have set up a national team of educators and teachers who cooperate with the organization regularly and due to the already existing cooperation, many responded positively and attended the first presentation of materials for educators in December 2018.

AVIOR material for children was translated through the cooperation with Elvis Kralj, member of the Bayash community from Međimurje in north Croatia, who works as ‘Roma educational assistant’ in one primary school in the area.

The kindergarten in question (Pirgo) is situated in the Roma settlement that is a part of the village of Kuršanec, in the Međimurje county. The population of Kuršanec in the 2011 census was 1,584. From the kindergarten website: *The kindergarten is attended by Roma children in the year before they enter elementary school. Their age is 5.5 to 7 years old. Children are divided into three age groups. In each group there is a teacher and a Roma assistant. The program is implemented from September 1 to June 30 in continuity, 5-6 hours per day. The main tasks of the program are to develop health and hygiene habits, to work on Croatian language skills, to familiarize the children with basic social skills and for them to acquire basic knowledge and skills necessary for successful inclusion in the first grade of the elementary school program. During the 2018/2019 year, thanks to the help of our director, and a professional team from the kindergarten "Cipelice" (Little shoes), the town of Čakovec and the Mayor, there are a lot of cheerful excursions, visits, socializing ahead of us. Also, we would like to improve the building of positive relationships with parents and the entire Roma community through various workshops and social gatherings. One of the examples of this is the implementation of the project "I will grow up to be big and strong just like..."*

*Pirgo* Program coordinator: Marijana Sabo; Assistant to coordinator: Valentina Mesarić.

Number of children in the year 2018/ 2019: 57

The **primary school in question (Dr. Ivan Novak School)** is situated in Macinec, a village located around 12 kilometres from the centre of Čakovec, the county seat of Međimurje County, near the border checkpoint between Croatia and Slovenia. The population of the village in the 2011 census was 585.

From the school’s website: *The school was built in 1989, and due to the lack of space upgraded in 2006. School sports hall still lacks. Students come from four neighboring places that are less*

*than 4 km from the school. These places are: Trnovec, Macinec, Črečan and Gornji Hrašćan. They come to school by an organized free of charge school-bus. This school year we started with 433 students in 15 basic classes (192 students) and 14 classes in subject teaching (211 students). The specificity of our primary school is that most of the students are Roma (79%). The school has 47 teachers, 3 professional associates, administrative-technical staff and 4 Roma facilitators who help teachers and students in classroom work. School is organized in two shifts. This year as well, in our school, there exists a pre-school program run for 5.5 hours a day. Pre-school education is mainly done for Roma students who are not included in any other pre-school programs in the area, but other children can join in as well. This pre-school year, 52 pre-schoolers (pupils) attend the program. They are divided into three age-groups. Pre-school is free for all participants because funds are provided by the Ministry of Education and Međimurje County.*

Grades involved: 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (6-8 y old pupils).

## Case study process

Materials were presented to a professional community of preschool teachers, primary school teachers and language experts and representatives of Croatian National Teacher Training Agency during **REYN - C conference (Roma Early Years Network-Croatia) in December 2018**. 18 participants were present at the workshop, all of which either work in areas with Roma population or share a professional interest in Roma issues or Romany languages. Teachers who later implemented the materials in their schools and kindergartens were “harvested” at this event.

Later, in February and March 2019, materials were implemented by four professionals, two of them primary school teachers (Vesna Perhoč and Bernarda Novak) and two of them preschool teachers (Marijana Sabo and Valentina Mesarić).

### How did parents receive instructions for using the material?

All age appropriate materials were presented and used. In the **kindergarten** context, AVIOR materials were presented during a workshop for parents and children. It was planned in such a way that children and parents work together on AVIOR materials first at kindergarten, and then they will continue to play and work on these at home. All participants shared that they understand what the purpose of materials is; and the teachers stated that they now recognized more the importance of preserving mother tongue for the purpose of development and learning in general.

In **primary school** the materials were presented to parents individually or in pairs. In several occasions in school, teacher explained to older brother and sisters how they can play with their siblings. They understood very well how they can use the materials.

In several occasions in the school, teacher explained to older siblings the exercises and encouraged them to try introducing the materials to their younger siblings.

**In total, the materials were presented to 20 parents.**

## Methodology

### *Team members involved and method used*

Materials were presented by NEPC and Step teams in December, and the later communication with the teachers was done by Step by Step team. The action research method was used, proposed and designed by Ellen-Rose Kambel (Rutu Foundation) earlier in 2018.

### *Result assessment*

The first presentation of the materials was organized as a focus group, during which the teachers had the chance to become acquainted with the materials and ask any questions

before they go into the classroom and test these with children and their parents. After having done so, they reported to NEPC & Step by Step, answering questions via emails and on the phone (NEPC/ Step team would also call them to ask how it went, and some of the things they shared are also reported in this report).

### *Parents' response*

Parents felt proud. They understood that their support to children at home has a positive influence on children development and learning. It was very interesting for them that materials were bilingual. In some families all members participated in doing the exercises with the child. For most parents it was the first time that they saw Bayash in the written form.

“It was fun! We [the parents] also learned how to pronounce some words accurately ourselves. So, we are learning something with our children. And playing while learning.”

### Influence on teacher-parent communication

The main difference between communication of teachers with parents in preschool and school in general (at least generally in Croatia) is that the relationship between the two is closer while children attend preschool. A lot of the times, if children live close to a school, once they start school, they will commute in groups or alone, unaccompanied by parents, so the parent-teacher communication will depend on the frequency of parents' visits to school (during 'consultation hour' or teacher-parents' meetings). In both cases, the response of the parents to the materials was positive – they were intrigued by seeing school-approved (official, so to speak) usage of materials in their own language. Because of the often difficult and marginal position of the Roma in Croatia, and sometimes their own reluctance to take part in their children's education, for all of the reasons explained elsewhere in this report, every effort to have Roma pupils and students feel more welcome in schools, and excel better in their learning outcomes, such as this effort through the Avior project, counts.

### Obstacles encountered

There is a great misunderstanding about parental role in developing pre-reading and prewriting skills in the Roma community. Most of parents (and professionals as well) believe that they should not speak and read to children in Bayash because they will not learn Croatian properly, or because it will somehow be at the detriment of adopting Croatian, once children start preschool or school (some are acquainted with Croatian for the first time only as they start the mandatory one-year pre-school programme, at the age of 5 or 6). The consequence of this attitude is that children do not learn a good vocabulary in neither language as most of the parents do not speak Croatian fluently.

Specifically speaking about Roma parents and their communication with Croatian teachers in schools and kindergartens, usually there exists a challenge, as teachers do not speak Bayash



(or other Roma language) and parents are not always fluent in Croatian – or they lack specific vocabulary to help their children with school work or follow what goes on in school – here the role of the educational assistant for the Roma is crucial.

For the preschool teachers who worked with AVIOR material, the reported communication with parents was even better than before.

Primary school teachers quoted parents saying:” For the first time somebody wanted to talk to us in Bayash and we and our children were \*encouraged\* to talk in Bayash”. (Most parents teach their children not to speak Bayash when in school as “the teacher will not understand them”. For the first time it was clear to everybody that Bayash is not only ‘allowed’ but recommended.)

The introduction of AVIOR materials by teachers has shown parents that they and their children are respected in school since most of teachers do not speak Bayash language and even do not allow children to speak Bayash language at school. The timing for the introduction of material was just right as just recently around 20 teachers from Medjmurje county finished a course for learning the basics of Bayash language. The course is relatively new and initiated by Romany language enthusiasts from the University of Zagreb and the Teachers’ Academy in Zagreb, Petrinja (town in Croatia) and Čakovec (‘capital’ of the Međimurje county).

## Conclusions

The usage of AVIOR materials contributes to busting the myth/ misconceptions #1 and #2 (described on page 2), both with professionals (teachers) and parents. New insight into cognitive development actually suggests that it takes for the child to understand something (concepts, vocabulary) in their own language first, or at least parallel to acquiring the new knowledge in the new language. Otherwise, the child will be deemed not intelligent enough to understand something, while it is not a matter of intelligence but language and understanding. Ultimately the lack of exposure to their first language, might in the long run affect their cognitive abilities altogether.

The materials demonstrated to the parents that the teachers value the parents'/the children's language (thus, their culture), while allowing teachers to accomplish a better contact with parents. IT also allowed the parents to interact with their children while doing school assignment in more depth, because it concerned their own shared language.

During one occasion when parents were present in the classroom to learn about the materials, the teacher was able to first-hand see how they instruct the children to do assignments which enabled her to better detect if they did not provide correct explanations to children, so that the parents later better understand the point of the assignments and are encouraged to practice them at home (because a number of parents, out of fear they will communicate something incorrectly, would rather not supervise the child during homework, even if the child asked for it). So, the materials also bust the misconception that if the parents have not graduated or attended school (or those who identify themselves as 'uneducated') they should not take part in their children's education and homework.

Avior materials inspired the teachers to create, together with the pupils, name tags for things they can see around the classroom, in both languages. This will hopefully also help create the atmosphere of a recognized and accepted Roma Boyash identity in the classroom.

Many parents have never seen the language written down, so it was a novelty for them, as well as the children then, who showed interest in the specific letters present only in Boyash and not Croatian.

The teachers encouraged the parents to try and write down words and sentences in Boyash, and which words would these be, and they talked about the specific letters and how to write them down. As some of the teachers took a Roma Boyash language course, they were able to explain to the parents that there is an ongoing debate whether this language should be written down according to the standards of the country/ language in which the Boyash live, so if it is Hungary should they use Hungarian letters as well, or insist on a unified Boyash alphabet.

Seeing the letters and learning the Boyash alphabet helped teachers understand about the specifics of Boyash pronunciation and some stated they now finally understood why Boyash pupils mispronounced Croatian words, where they don't pronounce some vowels – which they took from their own native language. Before they thought that they simply cannot master Croatian.