

DANIELA KOCEVA

LANGUAGE AS AN IMPERATIVE FOR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Faculty of Educational Sciences, Goce Delcev University – Stip, North Macedonia

daniela.koceva@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract: Language is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the emergence of human society and its existence in general. Hence, the observation that there is no human society without language in the true sense of the word. Despite the other means of communication, language remains the most sophisticated tool for communication, as the most understandable and precise way for mutual communication among the members of a community, and even among the individual communities themselves.

Hence, it also emerges as an instrument of human thinking and as a form of historical consciousness, which, through the written word, is transmitted from generation to generation, ensuring the continuity of human existence. This has given many sociologists and linguists the right to consider language as a factor in shaping a certain worldview and, especially, as one of the most significant elements of the identity of various social groups.

Language has enormous and invaluable significance when it comes to an individual's education, as well as for their socialization in society itself. The fact is that success in schools is determined by numerous factors that affect it both inside and outside the school. However, still, language is one of the possible factors that influence initial educational achievements and success. The goal of this work is to present the situation with language in the Republic of North Macedonia and its influence on the educational achievements of students.

Keywords: language, educational achievements, success, ethnic groups.

Educational achievements

We are aware that research on educational achievements at the state level is quite weak and below the levels of other European countries and neighboring nations. According to international studies measuring learning achievements (such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study - PIRLS, focusing on literacy rates, and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study - TIMSS), students' achievements in the country are significantly below international benchmarks. Some possible reasons for these poor results include outdated curricula, the absence of monitoring standards for learning achievements, insufficient teaching and learning materials, lack of initiative among teachers, and weak learning infrastructure. This includes spatial constraints (schools operating in two or three shifts, reducing the duration of classes, thus impacting the quality of learning) and outdated teaching methods (EC, 2007; OSCE, 2007). Some of these problems are linked to inadequate funding.

The government also acknowledges the issues in educational achievements. For instance, its National Development Plan, explains that courses and curricula at all levels of education are "outdated" and have recently undergone modernization. As detailed in the theoretical framework, improving equal access and increasing the quality of education positively contribute to human capital development in the country.

Poor educational outcomes are one of the factors contributing to insufficient economic development and high unemployment rates, indicating the need to invest in the quality of education by identifying the reasons for weak educational results. These differences are present along ethnic lines as well. Various policies, especially at the European level, are applied to eradicate these differences in educational achievements based on ethnic background. There is a particular emphasis on combating

educational inequality, promoting non-discrimination, and integrating marginalized groups, such as ethnic groups and immigrants.

These activities involve linguistic and cultural support, bilingual assistance in schools, initiatives to involve parents and special learning support. In the EU, there are various approaches, ranging from improving education legislation and promoting desegregation measures to providing additional resources for schools with a high proportion of marginalized students and promoting strategies to facilitate the integration of migrants/ethnic groups into the domestic culture, including language adoption support.

Causes of Disparities in Educational Achievements

When it comes to the reasons for differences in educational achievements, we are dealing with a network, a complex interplay of numerous factors that determine the success of students. In this section, only some of the reasons that influence educational achievements are highlighted:

1. **Current Socio-Economic Situation of Ethnic Communities in Macedonia:** The transition from one social system to another and the process of transitioning societal capital in the last decade led to the closure of many jobs, which had a significantly negative impact on all communities in Macedonia.
2. **Distance from Educational Institutions:** The socio-economic situation is often the reason that families from different ethnic communities choose less attractive living positions. They often reside in settlements where most members of the same ethnic community live, located on the outskirts of cities. In these settlements, basic or secondary schools are very rare or nonexistent.
3. **Culture, Tradition, and Habits:** The socio-economic status of ethnic communities does not allow easy integration into modern societal trends; instead, it fosters seclusion in ghettoized settlements where there is a sense of security among equals. Such separation and ghettoization of communities do not allow rapid changes in tradition and cultural habits. Under the influence of parents, underage marriages still occur, which is one of the reasons for dropping out of the educational process.
4. **Language Barrier:** Unfamiliarity with the Macedonian language, in which the educational process takes place, is another factor, another barrier, in achieving solid results in the educational process. From birth, the entire upbringing of children in most families belonging to different ethnic communities occurs in their mother tongue. Children who speak their mother tongue within their families and communities have no opportunity for a proper study of the language used in the broader societal community. These children lack opportunities for preschool preparation in which they would master the language in which they later need to be educated.

Language and Its Significance in Education

Language is one of the fundamental prerequisites not only for the emergence of human society but also for its existence in general. Hence, the observation that there is no human society, in the true sense of the word, without language. Despite other means of communication, language remains the most sophisticated tool for communication, the most comprehensible and precise way for mutual interaction among members of a community, and even among different such communities. Language also serves as an instrument of human thought and as a form of historical consciousness transmitted through written words, ensuring the continuity of human existence. Many sociologists and linguists consider language a factor in shaping a certain worldview, especially one of the most significant elements of the identity of various social groups.¹

In his sociological topics on language, Jovan Korubin identifies the following functions of language: communicative, reflecting the role of language as a means of communication; expressive, serving as a

¹ Korubin, J., Sociological Topics on Language, 2005, pg.15

means of materializing and expressing thoughts and feelings; accumulative, involving the collection and preservation of societal experiences and knowledge; aesthetic, expressed in literature and art; ethnic, expressing individual ethnic and national affiliation; and magical, particularly evident in various religious and other ceremonies.

The way of life and cultural development of individual linguistic communities determine the richness of the development of their languages. Each language has its own unique development. Some languages disappear with the disappearance of specific cultures, while others remain at a certain level of development. It is an ongoing process of language change, disappearance, improvement, and even recognition of certain languages as global languages in international communication.

Language has immense and invaluable significance when it comes to the education of an individual and their socialization in society. An example that illustrates this is the story of the Indian emperor Akbar, who ordered a group of children to be raised without any language instructions. He wanted to confirm the religious belief that, in the end, they would speak Hebrew (the language of God). The children never spoke, and their level of communication was limited to gestures. This example highlights the importance of language for the socialization of a person, a concept that encompasses education as well. The acquisition of language begins with primary socialization in so-called primary social groups: family and neighborhood children's groups, where the language of that group is most often adopted. Even when entering school, children discover that there is another, standardized language: first in contact with teachers, and later through the process of literacy.

However, language is not just a technical means of exchanging information; it is also a strong element of recognition as a symbol of ethnic or national belonging, a cohesive force within individual human groups, and thus a kind of share in other such groups. Modern processes, given that the majority of states today have a multiethnic and multicultural character, emphasize the understanding that monolingualism of the state is some kind of natural state from which the monolingualism is considered a norm, are increasingly emphasized as an anachronism and as an expression of undemocratic tendencies. The use of another language alongside the one considered state or the use of multiple languages in public communication only changes the character of the state, not the attributes of a nation or a national language. Each individual exists within the framework of their nation and their national language, creates on that language, nurtures their culture, and does not lose their identity. It is a matter of losing linguistic identity, and with it, national domination within a state. The practice so far shows that such domination only increases societal and interethnic tensions and that the question of multilingualism, from a cultural perspective, transforms into an ideological and political one. If the process of the past melting pot of different ethnicities and languages does not prove to be successful, today multiculturalism is increasingly affirmed, where the domination of one language or another is established not according to state criteria, but according to societal functionality and prestige, with formality being based on real processes. With the changes that occurred in Macedonia, the linguistic situation also changed, with North Macedonia abandoning the model of a nation-state and aligning itself with contemporary global processes, defining itself as multiethnic and multicultural, hence also as multilingual.

The Language Question and Education in the Republic of North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-confessional state with a unitary character, where 33.4% of the total population belongs to other ethnic communities. Through the Framework Agreement and Constitutional amendments, the official language is the Macedonian language, and in certain local self-government units where a community constitutes more than twenty percent of the population, languages other than the official one are used in group communication. This raises questions about language (or languages) and their use in public life, particularly in educational institutions, making this issue complex and problematic from that perspective.

In the interethnic dialogue in Macedonia, the use of languages other than the official or administrative language is one of the most sensitive topics. Why is this so? Seeking an answer to this question leads to the conclusion reached by many sociologists dealing with this issue, that the demand for

a higher status for the language of a minority group in a given environment is rooted in the pursuit of social promotion (Tasheva, M., 1995, "Language and the Nation," Dialogue, No.5). Given that minority groups concentrated in specific localities (regions, rural municipalities, urban centers), where they make up a significant or majority part of the population, are often familiar with the official state language only among those with higher education, emphasizing the importance of the language at the level of local administration practically opens up opportunities for more individuals from that linguistic group to participate in administrative activities. One of the subsequent consequences is the intensification of intergroup conflict, as competition in the job market increases, favoring those belonging to the majority group.

Another reason for prioritizing language demands in the list of demands of special groups in multiethnic societies is the search for symbols that can solidify the identity of the group seeking to highlight its distinctiveness. This, in turn, leads to new demands that align with this distinctiveness.

There is also another tendency, using language choice to bring one group closer to another. In environments where groups, due to their size, cannot ensure their reproduction and are exposed to assimilation, the choice of language, as in the case of Muslims in Macedonia, is an indicator of one group's preference over others. This choice usually conveys multiple messages: dissatisfaction with the barriers faced by the group with whom they share the same language, fear and resistance to assimilation pressures on a minority group, and the selection of another group as the closest and desirable for integration.²

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the concept of bilingualism is confusing and unclear, leading to the misconception that bilingualism in Macedonia, if implemented, would mean that everyone in the country should speak the Macedonian language as the official language, while the majority Macedonian community should not be familiar with the languages of other minority communities living in the country, specifically the Albanian language—the language of the largest minority community. Essentially, bilingualism in North Macedonia refers to the use of the Macedonian language as the official language and the use of the Albanian language by the Albanian community, the largest minority community, which is in a majority position in certain regions compared to the Macedonian community, which is the majority at the national level. According to the latest census, the Albanian community is represented by a little more than 25%, which, according to the Framework Agreement and the 2001 Constitution, means that at the state level and in those local self-government communities where members of the ethnic community constitute 20% or more, the official language in interpersonal communication, in addition to the Macedonian language, will be the language of the other community (in this specific case, Albanian).

Bilingualism, in other words, means that ethnic communities in ethnically heterogeneous regions, regardless of majority or minority status, should speak both languages if they meet the criteria outlined in the Framework Agreement for language use. Bilingualism in education entails that all children continue their education in both languages. Typically, this is achieved by having each ethnic community teach core subjects in its own language, while other subjects are taught in either one language or the other. If the language of the majority group is less represented, special classes are organized for learning the second language. In our educational practice, there is not bilingualism but diglossia, meaning one group knows both languages, while the other knows only its own. In our case, this relates to the relationship between the Macedonian majority community and other ethnic communities.

In North Macedonia, members of all ethnic communities, according to numerous studies, are familiar with both their mother tongue and the Macedonian language. However, members of the Macedonian community, with few exceptions, usually know only their own language. Thus, communication occurs in one language instead of two, which would be true bilingualism.

The situation of diglossia, in the context of implementing a bilingualism policy, implies the exclusion from administrative services of those who do not speak the second language well. The sudden introduction of bilingualism in the institutions of North Macedonia, without adapting the educational system in this direction, will lead to undesirable consequences in the labor market and significant layoffs of administrative officials, particularly in municipalities where Albanians are a majority, half, or a quarter,

² Tasheva M., 1998, 118

due to the lack of knowledge of the Albanian language. This is also connected to the demand for proportional representation of community members in all institutions, which is another reason for the dismissal of majority group members.

However, members of minority ethnic communities in North Macedonia, in addition to their mother tongue, also know the official Macedonian language. Unlike them, Macedonians know the languages of minority ethnic communities in the country in small numbers. Research in this area has shown that language knowledge depends on the settlement, whether it is ethnically mixed or ethnically homogeneous.

The introduction of bilingualism in the country needs to be carefully prepared by adjusting the educational system to meet the needs of the entire population to become bilingual.

Regarding the recent decision of the Government of North Macedonia for Albanian students to study the Macedonian language from the first grade instead of the fourth, it has faced condemnation from Albanian political parties, parent councils, Albanian mayors, school directors, and non-governmental organizations. They argue that this decision is illegal, and several NGOs from Skopje, Tetovo, and Gostivar have initiated efforts to overturn this decision through the Constitutional Court of North Macedonia.

Despite this, missions from the EU, NATO, OSCE, and the USA in Skopje, concerning the developments around the government's decision, emphasized that teaching the state language in non-majority communities should start early, enabling all citizens to speak it fluently after completing their education. This aligns with the recommendations of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (Knut Vollebaek). Learning the state language, among other measures, is seen as essential for integrating different communities, providing better opportunities for education and employment later in life, and creating favorable conditions for the wider implementation of the optional study of Albanian and other non-majority languages in the country. However, representatives of OSCE, EU, USA, and NATO in the country believe that it is of vital importance for the government to carefully prepare the gradual implementation, working with all communities and involved parties at national and local levels, especially with teachers and parents, to ensure that changes in the curriculum take place in a spirit of mutual understanding and consensus.

Language and Success

It is a fact that success in schools is determined by numerous factors that influence both within and outside of it. However, one of the possible factors affecting initial educational achievements and success is language.

Students coming from different ethnic communities that have used their mother tongue in families face significant challenges in adapting to the new school environment. They encounter difficulties in following the curriculum and achieving success because, for the first time, they are confronted with the standardized, official Macedonian language.

To achieve equality in this regard, the Government of North Macedonia decided to introduce the study of the Macedonian language to all students of different ethnic backgrounds from the first grade, even if only phonetically. This decision applies not only to Albanian students but also to students of Turkish, Roma, Vlach, and other nationalities.

Regarding the language of education, particularly characteristics are the data obtained from the research conducted by Prof. Marija Tasheva and collaborators in 1997. Several questions were posed in this survey. The first question was: If your child cannot study in the mother tongue, do you think they should study in another language? The responses clearly showed that resistance to learning a language other than the mother tongue is greater among the Macedonian population than among members of other ethnic communities living in the Republic of North Macedonia. This resistance is more significant among those who rarely face such a problem in reality, but those who naturally should confront it. Macedonians from Debar and Gostivar, representing a minority in their locality, expressed opposition to education in another language, as did those living in Kocani, where they constitute a dominant group.

For Albanians, the attitude toward the language of education showed a remarkable conditionality based on their concentration in the settlement. Negative responses were most numerous where they felt a

dominating majority and progressively decreased with the reduction of their concentration. In any case, the percentage of negative responses among Albanians was lower than among Macedonians but significantly higher than among the other three groups, those with smaller numbers and lower concentrations. Among the latter, higher values exist only where their concentration is greater, as is the case with Turks from Debar and Gostivar and Serbs from Skopje. About this, as well as many others, Roma presented themselves as the most open to other groups, meaning the largest number of them accepted their children to study in a language other than their mother tongue.

To examine the attitude regarding which other language their children should study if they cannot study on their own, a list of languages spoken in the Republic of North Macedonia was offered, supplemented with an alternative to a foreign language.

Interesting results were obtained, particularly in terms of the preference of the Macedonian group, which does not include the languages of ethnic groups living in North Macedonia. This group responded that if their children cannot study in Macedonian, they would accept only studying in a foreign language.

A quarter of the surveyed Albanians preferred foreign languages, but even a third chose Macedonian as an option. In municipalities where the Albanian population has a higher concentration, the number of preferences for foreign languages was higher than for Macedonians.

If studying in the Turkish language was not possible, Turks gave preference to the Macedonian language. The majority of respondents opted for it. Similarly, surveyed Serbs expressed themselves, while among Roma, the inclination toward the Macedonian language is the greatest.

Ethnic Affiliation and the Language of Education

Regarding the correspondence between ethnic affiliation and language, the following questions were posed:

- **Language in which they pursue education in primary education**

Out of the total number of respondents, 217 students, or 72.3% of them, pursue education in the Macedonian language, while only 83 students, or 27.7%, pursue education in the Turkish language.

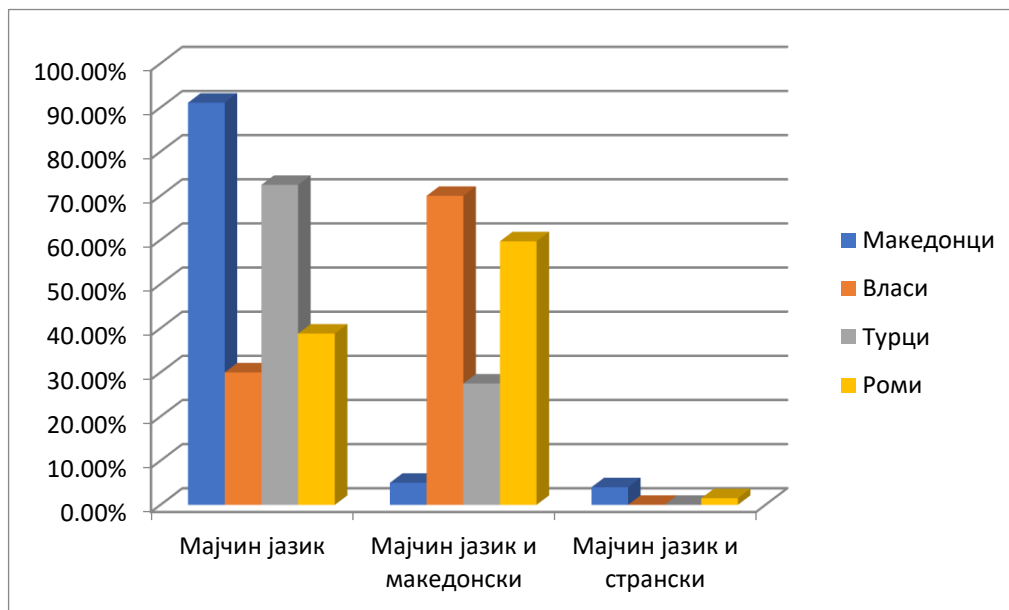


Image 1

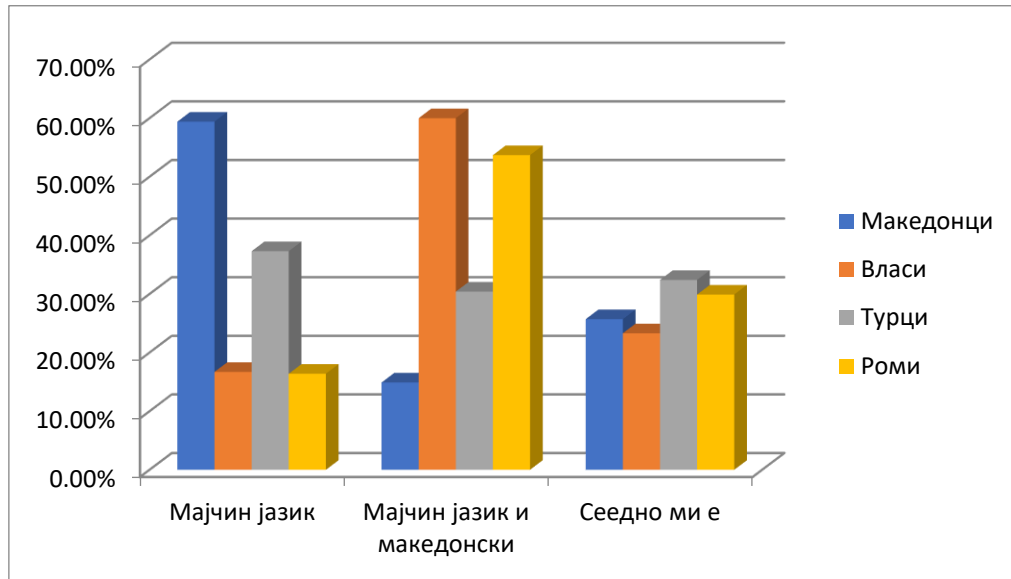


Image 2

- **Language or Languages Spoken by Surveyed Students in Their Families**

Out of the surveyed students, 201, or 67% speak their mother tongue. 94 or 31.3% speak both their mother tongue and Macedonian, while 5, or 1.7% speak their mother tongue and a foreign language.

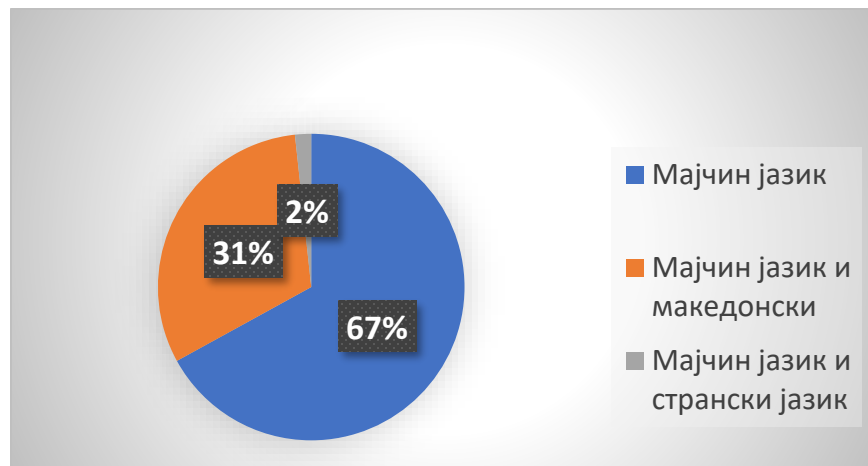


Image 3

- **Language or Languages Spoken by Surveyed Students in Their Families According to Ethnic Affiliation**

Ethnic Affiliation	Language(s) Spoken in the Family
Macedonians	Mother tongue (91.1%)
Albanians	Mother tongue (61.2%)
Turks	Mother tongue (72.5%)
Roma	Mother tongue only (38.8%)
Vlachs	Mother tongue only (30%)

Table 1

Macedonians predominantly speak their mother tongue at home (91.1%). Among national minorities, Turks communicate most with their families in their mother tongue (72.5%). Only 38.8% of Roma and 30% of Vlachs speak exclusively in their mother tongue. Interestingly, both Roma and Vlachs tend to speak more in Macedonian, in addition to their mother tongue, with percentages of 59.7% and 70%, respectively.

- **Students' Views on the Language for Continuing Secondary and Higher Education by Ethnic Affiliation**

It is noteworthy that the majority of students, 114 or 38%, believe that they should continue their education only in their mother tongue. Additionally, 100 students or 33.3% think that they can pursue education in both their mother tongue and Macedonian. On the other hand, 86 students, or 28.7% express indifference to the language in which they will continue their education.

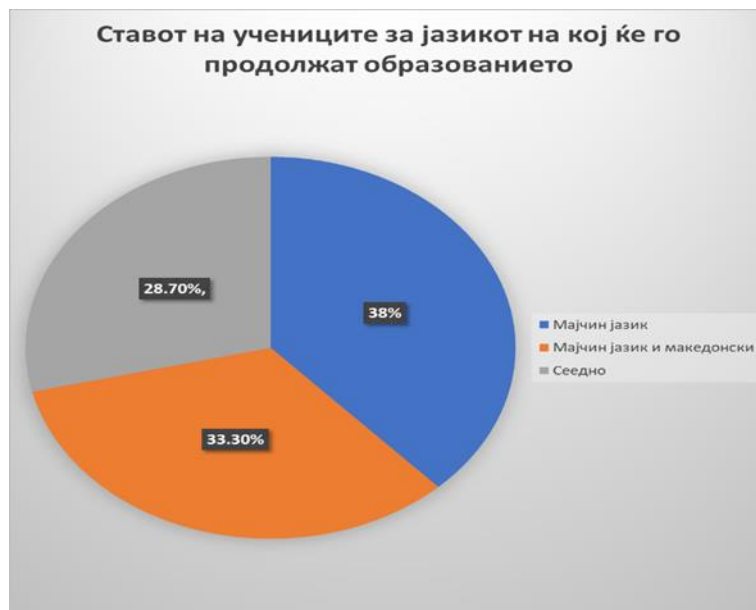


Image 4

- **Students' Views on the Language for Continuing Secondary and Higher Education by Ethnic Affiliation**

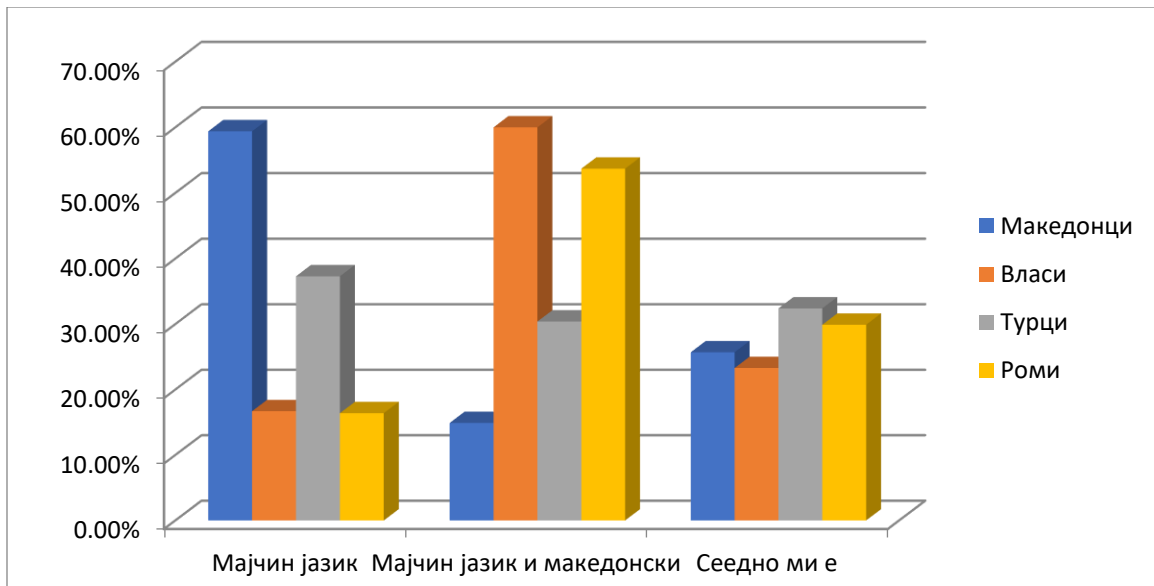


Image 5

Nationality of the Respondent * Language for Continuing Secondary and Higher Education

- **Macedonians:**
 - 59.4% prefer to continue their education in their mother tongue.
 - 25.7% are indifferent about the language of their future education.
- **Turks:**
 - 37.3% of Turkish students favor education in their mother tongue.
 - 32.4% are indifferent about the language of their future education.
- **Roma:**
 - 53.7% of Roma students choose to continue their education in both their mother tongue and Macedonian.
 - 29.9% are indifferent about the language of their future education.
- **Vlachs:**
 - 60% of Vlach students opt for continuing their education in both their mother tongue and Macedonian.
 - 23.3% are indifferent about the language of their future education.

Summary:

The data illustrates that success in schools is influenced by numerous factors both within and outside the educational environment. Language stands out as one of the factors affecting initial educational achievements and success. Students from different ethnic communities, accustomed to using their mother tongue in their families, face significant challenges in adapting to the standardized, official Macedonian language upon entering a new school environment. While North Macedonia has created conditions for education in the mother tongue for all ethnic communities in primary and secondary education (if legal prerequisites are met) and, since 2001, in higher education, statistics indicate varying degrees of representation of certain communities in educational institutions. Despite fulfilling international standards in legislation for the education of ethnic communities in their mother tongue, the statistics reveal disparities in the enrollment of certain communities in educational institutions, although their inclusion has gradually improved.

Bibliography:

1. Bureau for Development of Education, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia (2007), "Concept for Nine-Year Basic Education," p.44, available at: [link](#)
2. Korubin, J. (2005), "Sociological Topics on Language," Skopje: Faculty of Philosophy
3. Republic of North Macedonia Millennium Development Goals Report, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, June 2005, available at: [link](#)
4. Tasheva, M. et al. (1997), "Ethnic Groups in Macedonia - Historical Context," Skopje: Faculty of Philosophy
5. Tasheva, M. et al. (1998), "Ethnic Conditions in Macedonia - Contemporary Conditions," Skopje: Faculty of Philosophy