

Mihaela Racheva

“St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Interaction and Skills of Children in Nurseries and Primary Schools

Introduction

The paper discusses the building-up of children's competences by matching different language and social structures. It reviews communication as a process which facilitates socialization, the relationship between “children and cultures”, speech development and mastery of language skills at the pre-school and primary school levels of education. Communication and socialization of children are highlighted as key factors in the education and upbringing of pre-school children. The communicative behaviour of children is analysed from a double perspective: on the one hand, as a process which facilitates children's socialization; and on the other, as a product of this same socialization. The relationship between communication and socialization, which may in turn lead to the building-up of children's communicative competence, has been studied. It is directly linked to specific social occurrences where emphasis is laid on the process of widening and strengthening the relationship of children's personalities and the surrounding world by means of language. Therefore, communicative competence usually means the ability to establish and maintain the necessary contacts among individuals. For pre-school and primary school children it takes the form of a combination of common speech characteristics, which render not only the ability to form separate phrases and sentences but also the choice of appropriate ones that will reflect and represent adequately the social norms of behaviour in the specific acts of speech interaction (Angelov, 2005; Bradshaw, 2003). We

believe that the relationship between the social context of children's interaction, as well as the typification of their ways of communication by means of speech mechanisms define the degree of communication in a goal-specific situation set up by the pedagogue. Awareness and orientation of children to the meaning of words and their forms of sound form the foundation of other speech elements and events which are in constant interaction. Raising children's awareness of those elements is vital. We want to raise awareness of those elements or competences, or characteristics of speech that are part of the communicative competence. In the first place, this is the discrete character of the elements which defines their potential to combine with one another. Secondly, the linear character of speech makes it possible for language to function by forming specific systems of separate elements. Thirdly, the heterogeneous character of speech allows the different degree of complexity of the separate elements to emerge. Fourthly, the hierarchical structure of speech manifests itself in the ability to form interrelations between different elements in which parts of some elements become an integral part of another, more complex system.

Language is a system with specific characteristics which interact in accordance with the specific condition of communication. Therefore pedagogues can bring about certain aspects of these specific common characteristics. They should focus their efforts on engaging children in various communicative exchanges in which children can actively participate and form their own means of expression rather than blindly imitate adults' modes of speech. Language practice should stimulate children to build up their own system of rules and maintain their own individuality (Angelov, 2007). This can be achieved by:

Speech and individuality:

Awareness of one's own biography – experiences, family and kinship, place of birth as an opportunity to share speech achievements: readiness for a conscious sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, culture and community.

Differentiation of daily life and activities and understanding the processes and natural events in the surrounding world: readiness for independent statements and deductions.

Awareness of one's own and other languages and cultures: readiness for tolerance.

Development of communication and social skills: readiness for making direct speech utterances appropriate to the particular situation.

Mastery of techniques for making statements and supporting a point in difficult situations – being at the centre of others' attention when one differentiates parts of speech and shows readiness for supplying arguments.

Comprehension of the meaning of utterances: readiness for imitation of specific textual content and processing of words and phrases.

Language and communication with the others in the world:

Introduction to modes of communication with the others: readiness for sharing experience in different situations.

Identification of positive and negative communicative experiences and recognition of their causes: readiness to step into someone else's shoes.

Identification of mistakes when expressing acceptable social behaviour: readiness for receptivity and offering help.

Orientation towards a play/game media environment and its analysis: readiness to engage in a play/game style of interaction.

Awareness of the dangers of speech manipulation and inaccurate interpretations of utterances: readiness for supporting one's own point of view.

Identification of means of verbal and non-verbal play interaction and communication: readiness for differentiating and showing different types of participation - in routine and play situations. Practice of language and intellectual skills: readiness for applying rules and adopting appropriate forms of communication.

Utilization of play and game books and other available mass media recourses: readiness for acquiring information.

Understanding others when using the Bulgarian language: readiness for empathizing and employing feelings of concern towards others in communication.

Description and analysis of natural phenomena and social occurrences: readiness for adaptability.

Speech analysis of different role-plays and social roles: readiness for conscious responsibility.

According to Burkart (2000) communicative skills or communicative competence is the ability of the individual to send and receive information in any and every given situation. This communicative competence is related to and can therefore be developed into any communicative situation, in which the communication partners can undertake specific, independent actions. Thus, the pedagogic communicative model should imply that a role exchange between the sender and receiver of information may occur at all times. The participants in the communicative act should not be defined according to rigid hierarchically defined positions, but according to their functions in a communicatively organized structure of relationships. That means that the two participants are partners in the communication process. "In communication there are always two perspectives: that of oneself, and that of the others. In each communicative act we make a difference between these two perspectives but at the same time we are capable of sharing emotions and feelings." (Sofronieva 2012:3). The education and upbringing of children are conditioned by communication in which participants share equally emotions, feelings and experiences in the specific context of each communicative situation.

The priorities in pre-school education are:

1. Expanding opportunities for children aged from 3 to 7 years. This is related to *setting up a system based on specifically devised learning contents and techniques* which will facilitate the inclusion of

minority children and children from lower social backgrounds in the reception year of schooling. There is a need for a new model of pre-school education, based on the principles of tolerance and equal opportunities for all. On the other hand, *a special strategy for educating parents* should be devised and applied, too. Parents need to appreciate the advantages of pre-school education. The current social work interventions that are offered to families are not sufficient to achieve this goal.

2. Introduction of *information and communication technologies* – play games and computer-based media programs.
3. Systemizing the *general learning and social skills* of pre-school children which lead to ensuring future sustainability and long-lasting interest in learning at school.

Quality training and teacher preparation need to be ensured. Teachers should be able to adapt to the constantly changing dynamics of the environment; they should have *skills for integrated interaction (in the Bulgarian language, in a different language spoken in the family and in foreign languages) in pre- and primary schools* (Gyurov, 2006). The new challenges regarding children's readiness and transition from pre-school to primary school level of education are:

1. The new requirements expected of all citizens for lifelong learning and the need for purposeful education from an early age. Nowadays education is becoming a key factor in achieving a better standard of living and prosperity in life. A successful start in primary school guarantees, to a great extent, future success in the years of schooling that follow.

2. The differences in children's standard of living and educational capabilities. The growing social differentiation in Bulgarian society, just like in other countries, which has been caused by social and economic factors, has led to substantial differences in children's living standards and in particular their educational capabilities (Starkey, 2002). There is a great number of children from marginal communities and families, and the proper education of such children is hindered by insufficient

resources. Moreover, communication in these families and communities often takes place in the children's mother-tongue or another dialect form of language. These, as well as other macro and micro factors of children's socialization, have led to considerable differences in children's capabilities when they start formal schooling.

3. The new legislation. The adoption of the decision to introduce a compulsory reception year, i.e. a preparatory class for children's transition to formal education in primary schools, has led to the need for appropriate instruments to diagnose and measure children's overall development at this entry stage, thus serving as a foundation for organizing and offering effective education, synchronizing the methods and curriculum content in primary schools.

4. National and international research findings. There are numerous research findings regarding the parameters, aspects and criteria for diagnosing children's readiness for school on the national and international levels. All these should be improved and expanded. Nowadays, along with the traditional psychological, physical and speech development of children, greater emphasis is being placed upon the **cognitive** (James, 2001) and intellectual development viewed as one construct which encompasses **social, aesthetic, artistic, and emotional development**. New emphasis is laid on **parents' active and direct participation** in their children's welfare, education and upbringing. Offering training and guidelines to parents will enable them to monitor and facilitate their children's development at home, in the family environment. This is a relatively new trend in current research and in particular in the area of diagnostics.

5. Methods for diagnostic screening. Attempts to introduce certain methods for diagnostic screening at the administrative level in the educational system without sufficient scientific background, planning and funding of research projects in this area, might result in misrepresentation and a reduced appreciation of the need to develop and apply appropriate methods.

The need for diagnosing effectively children's readiness for school should be part of the new cultural and social environment in Bulgaria, in

which **reform in education and the new educational paradigm** which centres on the **children/pupils' wellbeing and worth** are of utmost importance in education. Future development and improvement of pre-school and primary school education should take all the factors mentioned above into account.

Two main goals can be defined. They are interrelated and guarantee a new approach.

1. **Equal opportunities for and access to education** – quality education for every child.
2. **Quality education:**
 - a) *enhancement of knowledge and development of skills;*
 - b) *stimulation of children's creative thinking and decision making;*
 - c) *effective socialization of children, encouragement of their initiative, curiosity and autonomy.*

When discussing children's development, we should take into account the current educational policy in Bulgaria. The national strategy for development of school education places emphasis on the need to offer the most favourable conditions to all children in order to ensure their optimal development and educational outcomes. This strategy has its merits but it will not automatically create a finer, more active system unless we utilize and employ the personal and professional potential of our contemporary teachers (Gyurova, 2009). A precondition for achieving this goal is applying an **interactive paradigm** which is grounded in the belief that children grow, change and develop during a process of diverse and enriching cognitive, social and emotional interactions with their teachers. This is based on a number of official documents, i.e. Regulation 4 on pre-school education of the Ministry of Education in Bulgaria of 18 September 2000, the National Programme for Development of School Education and Pre-school Education (2006–2015) and **the eight key competences of the European framework (European Reference Framework, 2007), recognized as parameters in future educational policy in Bulgaria, namely:**

Communication in the mother tongue;
Communication in foreign languages;
Mathematical (competence) literacy and basic competences in science and technology;
Digital competence;
Learning-to-learn;
Social and civic competences;
Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
Cultural awareness and expression.

Conclusion

The true merits and dimensions of any interaction of children at pre-primary school level is best revealed in the content and volume of the mutual activities which they are expected to undertake to best fit the pedagogical task, and their respective cooperation. That leads to a deeper understanding of the term **“social competence”**. It should be looked upon as a competence related to developing and nourishing valuable, positive attitudes in children towards developing their own understanding and sense of the surrounding world, the participants in the interaction and, last but not least, themselves. With regard to this issue, some of the key factors are **individual motivation** and **the emotional – assessment component**, i.e. how a child accepts and evaluates a situation. These factors complement the characteristics typical of the children’s world. Furthermore, they are the cornerstones of the **socio-emotional school readiness** of children which have recently received more attention. The enhanced requirements of primary schools (with regard to the children’s age to start their formal education, the contents and organization of the pedagogical process, the organisation of the work and duties of the primary school teachers, the smooth transition from pre-primary to primary schools for children) provide clear evidence of the importance of understanding well all that is involved in the term school readiness. More and more primary schools, especially in the private sector, put up

specific enrolment requirements. Children's readiness to start school is tested in various ways; for instance, by having their aptitude to early second language learning tested. Therefore, screening and diagnosing children's readiness for school should be enlarged and enhanced in order to be effective. In a nutshell, educators and experts are now interested in the **socio-emotional, aesthetic and artistic, and motivational readiness** of children.

The necessity to develop key competences which lead to improved educational outcomes lies in the foundation of the EU strategies. Clearly, there is a need for further research and the implementation of a new approach which is on the one hand based on the existing social and economic environment in Bulgaria, and which on the other hand strives towards the further development and improvement of the education system in the country.

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Abstract

The paper discusses issues related to building up and enhancing the communicative skills of children and their relationship with the specific socio-cultural

environment of nursery and primary schools. Emphasis is laid on the importance of developing children's linguistic competence by providing favourable conditions. This allows desirable modes of verbal and non-verbal behaviour to be exemplified and expressed, and therefore allows interaction to take place.

Key words: communicative competence, interaction, pre-school and primary school education

Information about the author:

Mihaela Racheva is a doctoral student at the Department of Preschool Education, Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education, Sofia University. The main focus of her research is on the communicative and media competences of pre-school and primary school children. She has MA degrees in Psychology and Pedagogy of Mass and Art Communication.

Department of Pre-school Education
Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education
"St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia
69A Shipchenski Prohod Blvd.
Sofia 1574
Bulgaria
mobile phone: +359 889589387
e-mail: mbangelova@yahoo.com