THE NECESSITY OF CURRICULAR DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION WITHIN *LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION* AREA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to focus on the teachers' awareness of the necessity of reform in preschool curriculum, more precisely within Language and communication area. We are interested to identify the extent to which teachers in early education identify effective strategies to improve communication skill at preschool age and are aware of the necessity of curricular reform. The current curriculum was designed in 2008 by the Ministry of Education and Research, based on data regarding the educational dynamics between 1999 and 2006. The necessity of curriculum development, in a field of study or in a preschool/school cycle, is a necessity for continuously adjusting teaching/learning experiences to the new demands of knowledge and society. The mere highlighting of the necessity of preschool curriculum change, in a clearly defined area, involves consideration of both certain objective determinations leading to curriculum update as a consequence of the real need of education, and certain "symptomatic areas" that require a change of curriculum. The main objective of this paper is to identify the awareness of the necessity for curriculum development in early education within Language and communication area. The designed research strategy is standard, transversal, in three phases: quantitative, qualitative and mixed (comparative, quantitative-qualitative), through the agency of methods based on a survey questionnaire, applied to representatives of all 31 kindergartens in Braşov city, namely on a structured group interview, with teachers-experts from their original institution (Kindergarten no.29 Braşov), having a professional experience of over 10 years in preschool teaching, achieved through Delphi technique.

KEYWORDS: Bachman model, curricular development, early education, language and communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current paper, aiming at identifying the need for curriculum reform in the area of *Language and Communication*, is the outcome of some previous researches with regard to the communicative competence formation and development in kindergarten preschool children. The study proposing a theoretically substantiated model of current scientific knowledge in this area, adequate for the preschool age particularities and the national formative

realities, we considered it worthy to continue the research in depth and to bring about the manner in which the need for curriculum reform in the area of Language and Communication is perceived by the preschool teachers. Within the present research, we intended to use the results obtained in our previous researches and to optimize them, in agreement with the learning partners of preschool children, their teachers.

2. STAGE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN THE AREA

In order to make a distinction, the stage of scientific research in the area has to be valued both from the perspective of development psychology, and from the perspective of the communicative competence study. Regarding the development psychology, the Romanian specialized literature includes Ursula Șchiopu's studies (1963; 1981 in collaboration with Emil Verza), and those of Emil and Florin Verza (2000), among its most important titles. To these, other relevant studies may be added, written by Pantilimon Golu, Emil Verza and Mielu Zlate (1993), Elena Bonchiş (2000), Iolanda Mitrofan (2001), Tinca Creţu (2001/2009), Graţiela Sion (2007), Ioana Lepădatu (2008), Elena Cocoradă (2009) etc. In consensus with the understanding of the new subjects, we bring about a change of perspective, due to the French and Walloon school, according to which, the understanding consonant with the current curriculum framework regards the interactive social constructivism[15] (Bogaert *et al.*, 2012, p.18). In accordance with the previous researches (Lesenciuc, 2012), by analyzing preschool age's particularities and the possibilities of developing the communicative abilities/competence in late-preschool aged children, we proposed a reconfiguration of the communicative profile of the preschool child, considering the following dimensions: vocabulary enrichment, independent word formation, pronunciation, assimilation of basic syntactic structure, story organization based on conventions: introduction-body-conclusion, talking in terms of own experience, expressing action intentions, producing effects on communication partners, management of non-verbal communicative behavior and understanding facial expressions of communication partners.

From the perspective of the communicative competence, specialized research in Romania is only at its incipient phase. Similarly, at international level, research is not older than fifty years. Originating in Noam Chomsky's studies (1957, but mainly 1968) regarding the linguistic competence, defined as an ideal

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[15] This interactive socio-constructivist approach does not regard only the learning model promoted by the Ministry of National Education, but also a dominant theory, in relation with the development psychology, integrating constructivist, social and interactive elements. The model relies on recent studies belonging to Tardif (1992), Astolfi (1993), Stordeur (1996) and, especially, Jonnaert & Vander Borght (1999).

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locutor's (sender's) or receiver's capacity of producing or understanding an infinity of grammatically correct sentences, studies such as those signed by Habermas (1971), Hymes (1972), Savignon (1972), Canale & Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Halliday (1985), van Ek (1986), Bachman (1990), Celce-Murcia *et al.*(1995), or Celce-Murcia (2008) led to the configuration of a table of competences included within the communicative competence, as follows:

Table1. Component elements of the communicative competence

competence model	linguistic/ grammatical	discursive	socio-linguistic	illocutionary	social/ action-based	strategic
Chomsky (1965)	YES					
Hymes (1972)	YES		YES			
Canale & Swain (1980)	YES	YES	YES			YES
Canale (1983)	YES	YES	YES			YES
Van Ek (1986)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Bachman (1990)	YES	YES	YES	YES		YES
Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995)	YES	YES	YES		YES	YES
Celce-Murcia (2008)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

When speaking about elements included within the communicative competence, yet, going beyond the basic equivalence *communicative competence = linguistic competence*, which is still producing effects within the Romanian education, we can affirm that the most complex model is the one proposed by Lyle F. Bachman, in 1990. Special attention should be given to van Ek's model (1986), which was used to define the general competences of the Common European Framework of Reference[16] (EC, 2002, p.30; pp.108-130).

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[16] European Council (EC, 2002, p.5) defines the common framework as follows: "The European Council provides common basis for the elaboration of study programs, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a lifelong basis."

Bachman proposed a model named the *communicative language ability* (CLA), the communicative competence component elements being the following: the linguistic competence, referring to elements used in language-based communication; the strategic competence, aiming at the capacity of implementing the component parts of the linguistic competence in the particular use of language, in various contexts, respectively, the psycho-physiological mechanisms of an individual, regarding neurological and psychological processes able to facilitate the use of language. The linguistic competence includes other competences such as: grammatical, textual, illocutionary and socio-linguistic. The Bachman model constituted the basis for the projection and voicing of an assessment system of the communicative competences, especially within the North-American cultural space. Thus, we can enumerate some of the reference documents, in this respect: *Language Assessment System. Interpretation Guide* (2008) al Indiana English Language Proficiency Assessment Program, with the mentioning that the set of tests Language Assessment System (LAS) Links Placement Tests were proposed by Lyle F. Bachman (*LAS Links. Interpretation Guide,* 2008, pp.29-34); *Early Childhood Assessment* (2008), instrument coordinated by Catherine E. Snow and Susan B. Van Heme, whose specialized board in *Testing and Assessment* for the American preschool education was coordinated by Lyle F. Bachman; *The Kindergarten Program* (2006) of Canada, *Supporting English Language Learners in Kindergarten. A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators* (2007) and, especially, *Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes* (2007) a.o. We chose the Bachman model because it involved a complex and directly applicable approach in the specialized practice, and it was proven through results obtained within the North American preschool environment, in recent years.

3. CURRENT CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

The curriculum framework in effect is the one projected by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, in 2008, and it is based on the educational dynamic of the years 1999-2006. By means of this document, the following experience areas were analyzed: aesthetic and creative, man and society, language and communication, sciences and psycho-motric. The area *Language and Communication "covers the good command of oral and written proficiency, as well as the ability of comprehending verbal and oral communication"* (CÎP, 2008, p.10), which means that it is projected on different coordinates from the competences included within the communicative competence in Bachman model. The curriculum coordinates are component elements of one of the two forms that the communicative act may take, in accordance with the predominant communication channel, namely, the verbal communication. Within the projective limits of the preschool education

curriculum, oral communication implies a higher emphasis, due to the preschool-age characteristics, as compared to the written communication. In other words, we can reduce the preschool curriculum framework in the area of *Language and Communication* to the oral communication, aiming mainly at producing effects on interlocutors, which is a prevalence of the illocutionary function. Starting from this design, out of the four general objectives (GO); three are directly related to oral communication, whereas the fourth is in reference to the written communication (*CÎP,* 2008, p.27; *CÎP,* 2009, p.39):

- GO1: developing the capacity of oral proficiency, comprehension and correct use of the verbal structures meanings orally expressed;
- GO2: teaching a correct oral proficiency, from phonetic, lexical and syntactical perspective;
- GO3: developing creativity and expressivity in oral communication;
- GO4: developing the capacity of understanding and transmitting intentions, thoughts, and meanings conveyed through written language.

The four objectives were divided into nineteen specific objectives, most of them being in direct connection with the competences included in the Bachman model, but there are also objectives that exceed the reference area of *Language and Communication*; their role is to connect areas, for example, *"to understand and discriminate between shapes, sizes, colors – objects, images, geometrical shapes, types of contours etc. "*(*CÎP,* 2008, p.28; *CÎP,* 2009, p.39).

In harmony with these objectives, there were also created forms of assessment in the area of *Language and communication*, specific for the age segment of 5-6 years old. The first three objectives were translated into homonymous indicators, and they were related to a number of items, as follows: GO1 – 8 items; GO2 – 6 items; GO3 – 3 items; whereas objective number four was divided into two indicators, "capacity of understanding and transmitting intentions, thoughts, meanings conveyed through written language – READING", with 9 items, respectively, "capacity of understanding and transmitting intentions, thoughts, meanings conveyed through written language – WRITING", with 5 items. In the current formula, GO1 – 8 items; GO2 - 6 items; GO3 – 3 items and GO4 – 14 items, the assessment form has been used for one year, including the school year of 2012-2013, based on the Formal Communication no. 65.310/26.10.2012, issued by the Directorate General for Lifelong Education and Learning within the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, sent to County School Inspectorates, the previous formula was GO1 – 7 items; GO2 – 5 items; GO3 – 2 items and GO4 – 23 items (11 – READING and 12 – WRITING).

This discrepancy between the preschool-age particularities and its corresponding forming requirements, rather meeting the forming requirements at grade "0" level (preparatory grade), made us reanalyze the assessment form and propose formulas for curriculum reconfiguration, with regard to the area of

Language and Communication at preschool ages. We projected the current research considering the preschool teaching staff's need for knowledge analysis related to forming competences included within the communicative competence, respectively, the analysis of the awareness degree in relation with the curriculum reform in the area of *Language and Communication,* for an adequate projection of the general objectives and for a correct assessment of the communicative profile of the preschool-aged child.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
4.1. Research objectives
The general objective of the present research derives from the initial projection upon the necessity of early childhood education curriculum development in the area of *Language and Communication.* The analysis of the theoretical corpus and the review of previous research results are naturally projected to be followed by an applied research whose general objective may be formulated as:

GO: The general objective of the research is to identify the awareness degree of the need for early childhood education curriculum development, in the area of *Language and Communication*.

For the achievement of this objective, the following specific objectives (SO) need to be accomplished:

SO1: the comparative analysis of standard and proposed assessment instruments, in the area of Language and Communication;

SO2: the comparative analysis of data obtained through quantitative research methods and data obtained through mixed research methods;

SO3: proposal for the reconfiguration of the general framework of forming/developing the communication competence, in accordance with society's new demands and the preschool child's needs to adjust to society's dynamics and knowledge.

4.2. Working hypotheses
We formulated the following working hypotheses (H) in our approach:

H1: The more familiar the preschool teachers are with the competences system included within the communicative competence, the higher the awareness degree becomes, in relation with the necessity of curriculum development in the area of *Language and Communication*. This hypothesis derives from the presumption that, in the absence of a configuration of competences included within the communicative competence deriving from the practical need of adjustment to a further school and extra-school life, teachers are used to the objective-framework system that defines the current *Preschool education curriculum.*

H2: Should the subjects of our investigation (preschool teachers) come across other assessment instruments, designed in agreement with some classical models for developing the communicative competence, then the awareness with regard to the necessity of changing the assessment sheets/forms will be higher. This hypothesis is generated by the assumption that once the communicative competence has been structured, following its creation, development and assessment based on a firm theoretical model, it will naturally generate a re-assessment of the current training, development and assessment framework of the communicative abilities at preschool age, through curriculum instruments projected by the Ministry of Education.

4.3. Research type

The research topic, together with its study objectives, leads to the outlining of a transversal, *standard research strategy*, achieved in three phases: quantitative, qualitative and mixed (quantitative-qualitative, comparative). The first two phases regard the research based on interaction with people, whereas the third phase focuses on the comparative analysis of results obtained throughout the first two phases and the documents analysis. The main research method is the *survey*, by means of which focus is laid on stimulating the verbal behavior of subjects, who are representatives of preschool institutions from the city of Brașov. The survey interpretation will be achieved throughout the third phase of our research. The projected survey is accomplished by means of a *questionnaire*, containing closed questions, individually self-administered. The next method is a structured, *group interview*, conducted with teachers from the education institution of origin (Kindergarten no.29, Brașov), with a preschool-teaching experience of more than 10 years and holding a specific degree of expertise in this profession. The interview is conducted by means of a particular technique, namely, the *Delphi* technique. Through this interview, the intention was to obtain relevant data, in relation with the research objective and following a negotiation of personal opinions and a consensus connected with expressing a viewpoint of a preschool educational institution where, two years ago, an ameliorative educational program was piloted, a program consisting of games-exercises for language and communication development, having the role of stimulating the communicative abilities/competence.

4.4. Research instruments elaboration and research organization

The instruments related to data collection are the questionnaire and the collective interview form, presented in annexes 3 and 4, containing 11 items, respectively, three debate topics. The research was conducted throughout the following dates: between 5th and 15th of May - for data collection as a result of the questionnaire administration and the completion of the group-interview; 16th and 30th of May – for results interpretation.

The quantitative research was conducted within the 31 kindergartens (K) existent in the city of Brașov, as follows: K1 and K2 of the Schei quarter; K3, K8, K13, K14/14A and K15 of the central quarter of Brașov; K17 from Valea Cetății quarter; K18 and K21 of the Noua quarter; K19, K22, K23, K24, K25, K26 and K27 of the Astra quarter; K28 and K29 of the Florilor quarter; K36 from the Scriitorilor quarter; K12 and K31 of the Triaj quarter; K9, K10, K11, K32/35, K33 and K34 of the Tractor quarter; K4/37, K5 and K7 of the Bartolomeu quarter. The qualitative research was achieved in K29.

5. RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The research contributes to identifying the degree to which kindergarten teachers recognize the need for effective strategies to improve the communicative abilities in preschool-aged children, are aware of the sum of particular aspects brought about by the preschool education projective documents, and, especially, are aware of the need for curriculum reform in the area of *Language and communication*. The paper accomplishment implied a transdisciplinary approach, preponderantly communicative, pedagogical and psychological, more precisely, starting from the psycho-pedagogical communicative models, going through the didactics of early childhood and early school educational activities, docimology and assessment, education sociology, quality management, community problems reflected by the educational act, with a focus laid on educational projection and curriculum management, in agreement with the research methods in education and finishing with peer relations and psycho-pedagogical intervention in education. This approach focused on a topic that should, at least, be of interest for the early childhood education, so long as the current projective documents do not realistically aim at achieving competences, but rather at meeting some objectives, which do not guarantee for forming particular competences, but for some particular abilities regarding school finalities and finalities of living within communities.

The investigative enterprise was accomplished so as to guide the theoretical approach toward the practical reality of Brașov's education environment, more precisely, the preschool education, and, much more precisely, toward the development of the communicative competence in Brașov's kindergartens. Aiming mainly at identifying the awareness degree of the need for curriculum development in preschool education, in the area of "*Language and Communication*", and, further on, the comparative analysis of data obtained through quantitative research methods and through mixed research methods and proposing a reconfiguration of the general framework of forming/developing the communicative competence, in accordance with society's new demands and the preschool child's needs so as to adjust to society's dynamics and knowledge, we obtained the following outcomes:

Table 2. Research outcomes

Research phases	General objective	Specific objectives	Methods (transversal)	Techniques	Means	Instruments	Outcomes
Quantitative phase	Identification of the awareness degree of the need for early childhood education curriculum development, in the area of *Language and Communication*.	SO3: proposal for the reconfiguration of the general framework of forming/developing the communication competence, in accordance with society's new demands and the preschool child's needs to adjust to society's dynamics and knowledge.	Data collection	Survey	Individually self-administered questionnaire	Pencil-and-paper test	- subjects under investigation agreed only partially with the current curriculum framework in the area of "Language and Communication"; - corresponding values between the current assessment form items and the communicative competence component parts in Bachman model were mostly the same with the real corresponding values; -once the awareness of the competence forming possibilities has come in place, subjects mostly found the changing of assessment forms necessary, contrary to results obtained for the first indicator;
Qualitative phase			Data collection	Group interview	Delphi	Interview guide	-- subjects under investigation disagreed with the current curriculum framework in the area of "Language and Communication"; - following the investigation regarding the correspondence between the current assessment form items and the communicative competence component parts in Bachman model, there appeared qualitative observations, stressing on the discrepancy between general objectives and specific objectives of preschool curriculum, related to the area "Language and Communication" and the projection based on objectives rather than competences; - subjects mostly found the changing of assessment forms necessary, contrary to results obtained for the first indicator;

Comparative, mixed phase		SO1: the comparative analysis of standard and proposed assessment instruments, in the area of Language and Communication; SO2: the comparative analysis of data obtained through quantitative research methods and data obtained through mixed research methods;	Data analysis	Qualitative analysis	Comparative analysis	- the adequacy level of the current assessment forms in the area of "Language and Communication" to the need for projecting the communicative competence differs a lot, from the perspective of the questionnaire respondents and that of expert participants in the group interview; - the current context of preschool education requires an adequate curriculum development and an alignment to changes already in place, in accordance with the curriculum management steps at strategic level; - the preschool communicative profile projected by the current curriculum framework does not differ, in the view of the quantitative research subjects, respectively, qualitative research ones, in what concerns competences developed by the current curriculum framework: GC –TC –NVC; - the final item reveals an almost identical need for curriculum framework change, although in case of Braşov kindergarten teachers this necessity was perceived and assumed during the questionnaire administration, whereas in case of experts it had been previously been identified; - the research objectives were accomplished, the research hypothesis no.1 was confirmed, whereas the research hypothesis no.2 was partially confirmed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper contributed to:
- development the theoretical framework configured by previous researches and its adjustment to the Romanian education environment regarding preschool-aged children;
- elaboration of research instruments and their application so as to identify the awareness degree of the need for curriculum development in preschool education, in the area of "*Language and Communication*";
- reconfiguration of the real preschool children's communicative profile;
- qualitative analysis of the national curriculum framework with regard to the area of "*Language and Communication*";
- reconfiguration of the observation sheet used for assessing preschool children from the perspective of a real communicative competence development;

- projection of the area of "*Language and Communication*" from the preschool education curriculum, based on competences (C) to be formed (and not on basis of general or specific objectives), as follows:
  - **C1 (GC):** adequate use of words for correct communication, in agreement with deduced grammar rules;
  - **C2 (TC):** expressing coherent string of ideas;
  - **C3 (IC):** obtaining effects upon communication partners;
  - **C4 (SLC):** adequate communication in standard language, irrespective of ethnical origin, dialect or sub-dialect used within families;
  - **C5 (SC):** expressing message or communicative intention, irrespective of linguistic constraints or context;
  - **C6 (NVC):** adequate interpretation of signs, gestures or facial expressions of communication partners and control over own gestures and facial expressions;

Starting from the projective framework of the current paper, a quantitative retesting might be performed, aiming at identifying the real need for curriculum development in the area "*Language and Communication*", at the level of county school inspectorates or even at the level of Ministry of Education. In this respect, we find it useful to continue research at an ampler level, so as to obtain relevant data for the entire Romanian preschool teaching population, to publicly debate the real need for reform, to pilot a new curriculum framework in the area of "*Language and Communication*", under the circumstances of an adequate projection in relation with the communicative competence, and not only to meet general objectives or specific ones with regard to school finalities, and, maybe, to achieve the curriculum reform in this area, starting from the projective framework proposed by the current paper.

Once the general objective and specific objectives of the research have been achieved, as well as the general objective of the current paper, and we have had the confirmation, to a greater or smaller extent, of the working hypotheses, we consider that the present paper is a valid projective attempt, which might constitute the starting point for curriculum development, more precisely, the starting point for a diagnosis-analysis necessary for projecting a new curriculum.

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