THE NEED OF DESIGNING THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN ROMANIAN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract: The national curriculum in Romania has designed a communicative profile of the preschool children, focused on grammatical and textual competences, in accordance with Bachman's model (1990). Starting from a previous study (S. Lesenciuc, 2012a), we illustrated that the sociolinguistic aspects are approached inadequately within the structure of contents related to Language and communication *area of expertise. The sociolinguistic competence, that is the ability to adequately communicate in various contexts, irrespective of the language, dialect or sub-dialect, is important for the further school achievements. Should this competence be developed during the preschool age, it adds to the minimum set of attitudes, behaviors and knowledge, necessary for developing the intercultural communicative competence in children. Based on the need of curriculum development in early education in Romania (the last National curriculum was approved in 2008) within* Language and communication *area, in order for us to update the results of the previous research, we studied the awareness of curriculum change in educators. We used a survey based on questionnaires filled-out by all preschool units of the multicultural city of Brașov as well as a group interview designed through the Delphi technique. Following the research findings, this paper aims to create a framework for designing the sociolinguistic competence within the* Language and communication *area. The framework is in accordance with the communicative profile of preschool children and aims at achieving further developments of intercultural communicative competence, consonant with the* Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) *drawn by Milton J. Bennett (1993).*

Keywords: national curriculum; preschool education; communicative competence; sociolinguistic competence; intercultural competence

1. INTRODUCTION. THE ROMANIAN MONOCULTURAL CURRICULUM

In Western European countries, the issue of integrating intercultural dimension into national curricula is up to date in terms of design. The implementation is not always in accordance with the real need of diversity. Through this dimension, the national curricula deal with concrete problems faced by Western societies, of emigrants and of cultural (ethnic, religious) minorities. This aspect, reflected in many academic studies, is characterized by the difficulties of changing the national curricula. The same feature characterizes the Romanian society, too. The intercultural dimension was formally included into an educational policy document, the National Curriculum, but the multi-, cross-, and intercultural issues are dealt with optional of facultative classes, more often taken by students and teachers not as

seriously as the topics need. Moreover, Romania has slowly aligned itself with the intercultural challenges. This slowing down maintained Romania in a partial shadowed area regarding the institutional openness towards Others. Even if the subsequent theoretical approach covered a large gap regarding the intercultural issues of the Romanian national curriculum, the Romanian education system is not well prepared for openness, diversity and tolerance. It is characterized by openness towards intercultural dialogue within the high education, in response to the necessity of managing the real need of universities' internationalization. But this openness is not sufficient. An intercultural curriculum should embrace openness at all education levels (especially in the compulsory education, pre-primary, primary, and secondary).

To discuss about the appropriate openness a high degree of visibility of Romanian education

system abroad, internationalization of study programs, foreign students attraction, increasing the number of contacts and collaborations with partner institutions abroad, maintaining the attractiveness of the educational system, and, especially, the stimulation of the individual involvement (and the involvement of schools) in international cooperation would be at least required. Following the implementation of policies that focus on openness towards multicultural issues, the effects on the intercultural dimension of the Romanian education system would be consistent. Under other auspices, one can only discuss about the openness towards the Other without the Other being nearby. That is to say, the intercultural dimension is formally invoked to consolidate a monocultural curriculum, as long as the Other is lacking (uninterested to be present).

The real openness can only be achieved by adopting an intercultural curriculum, by modeling identity taking into account the Others, by trying to know the Other in his cultural functionality, and by continually questioning the validity of means of knowledge, and of proper self-image. A mimetic bureaucratic 'integration' of the intercultural dimension in national curriculum (at every level) is not enough. The international experience and lessons of history are also necessary. The issue of curriculum redefining is not a simple exercise of alignment with certain standards, but an exercise of suiting to a concrete and relevant multicultural reality, especially for European countries. In this respect, the curricular consequences of the Bologna Declaration (1999) can be materialized into a modern curriculum, meaning the curricular redesign or redefinition on intercultural coordinates. From these reasons, a proper curricular design based on principles that reflect the intercultural reality, such as the principle of cultural selection and hierarchy, for example, is a fundamental direction. Moreover, the education system has to provide the necessary conditions for the development of the communicative competence, including its intercultural dimension.

2. THE NEED OF CHANGING UP TO THE TOP

2.1 The curriculum for the pre-school education. If higher education, for example, is characterized by an international openness through mobility programs, study programs, research grants, and conferences, pre-university education remains part of the monocultural project of the national curriculum for compulsory education, defined as

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the set of educational processes and learning experiences the student enters during his/her schooling; the set of regulator school documents, in which are recorded the essential data about the educative processes and the learning experiences that the school offer to the student (Government Decision no. 231/ 2007).

Within this framework, the intercultural dimension means taking into account only the internationalization of norms and values at the level of post-compulsory education (ISE, 2015:9). With a view to the educational profiles of the graduating students of different levels of compulsory education, the "manifestation of openness towards empathy, diversity, alterity and interculturality" (ISE, 2015:15) is present among social and civic competencies, and "reception and interpretation of concepts, ideas, opinions, feelings orally or in writing expressed, depending on needs and interests, in various contexts, including intercultural communication" (ISE, 2015:16) among communication in foreign languages competences, starting with the 10th grade.

The current *preschool curriculum (3-6/7 years)* (2008), apparently centered on competencies, in line with D'Hainaut perspective:

> the focus of the curriculum must be the student, not the content (...); when it comes to curriculum content, we must understand that it is not about enunciations of subjects to be taught, but about goals expressed in terms of competencies, ways of student's acting or knowing, in general (D'Hainaut, *apud* CÎP, 2008:9),

is in fact centered on objectives. It refers to issues concerning the intercultural dimension in a different manner. The general objective "to know the elements of social and cultural environment, that position the human element as a part of the entire environment" (CÎP, 2008:40; 49; 57; 66), is related to the experiential area "Sciences". It operates at different levels of study, within the framework of behavior regarding the recognition of local elements (socio-cultural, economic, historical, religious, intercultural etc.).

Two important aspects arise here: the curricular design in Romanian education is not coherent in relationship with the intercultural openness; and the development of intercultural skills is not carried out within the appropriate experiential or study areas. From our perspective, in line with the perspective of Wiemann *et al.* (1997), the intercultural skills or competences are conditioned by interpersonal skills or competence.

For an intercultural openness of the National Curriculum and, implicitly, for an adequate design of intercultural skills or competence, they should be developed within the experiential areas related to communication. We justify our option in relation to a Romanian perspective, that belongs to Professor Grigore Georgiu from the National University of Political Studies and Administration, whose main subject of teaching is 'Intercultural communication':

> This competence is defined as *the individuals' ability to communicate effectively with interlocutors belonging to other cultures, based on acquired skills of social relationships, of understanding and adaptation to different cultural backgrounds* (...). Good communication is not just transmission of information, but also a mutual understanding of Other's wishes and needs. The competence of intercultural communication implies, therefore, the acquisition of complex capabilities that can be distributed into several levels: *linguistic, perceptive, cognitive, affective, attitudinal,* and *behavioral* (Georgiu, 2010:125).

In our case, the appropriate design should be related to the experiential area *Language and communication*, where the linguistic and communicational skills are developed in the native language – the knowledge of Other should start with the self-knowledge, from the ethnocentric stage in Milton J. Bennett's model (1993/1998). Moreover, the intercultural skills should be taken into account from the preschool age, in a coherent and convergent manner (from bottom to top, from the preschool curriculum to the post-compulsory one, from general to particular) and in accordance with the principle of adequacy to the context (the necessity of intercultural openness of the curriculum in the new European and international context).

2.2 The development of communication skills in pre-school education. Previous research. The current curricular framework was adopted in 2008 by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth based on the educational dynamics in the period 1999-2006. Through this document, a set of experiential areas were taken into account, as "integrated cognitive fields" (Vlăsceanu, *apud* CÎP, 2008:9): aesthetic and creative; man and society; language and communication; sciences and psycho-motricity. *Language and communication* area "covers the mastery of oral and written communication, and the ability of understanding verbal and written communication" (CÎP, 2008:10), i.e. it is designed on coordinates that differ from competencies subsumed in communication competence. The curricular coordinates are components of one single form of communication act: the verbal one. Verbal communication understood as a set of habits belonging to the members of a linguistic community or as a sum of conventions specific to that community is correlated with a part of human communication. Within the projective limits of the curriculum for preschool education, oral communication is prevalent in relation to the written one. We can summarize, in other words, that the preschool curricular framework in *Language and communication* area predominantly focuses on producing effects on the interlocutor. Starting with this design, three of four general objectives (GO) of the area are directly related to oral communication and the last, to written communication (CÎP, 2008:27): GO1: developing the capacity of oral proficiency, comprehension and correct use of 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 general objectives have been divided into 19 specific objectives that are directly related to communicative competences, or that exceed the *Language and communication* area.

Since 2008, we have been studying the possibility of developing strategies to improve communicative skills to preschool aged children for future school integration, for effective development and management of children acquisitions for socializing. In 2012 we took into account the possibility of developing the skills of children communication in their native language, in accordance with the age particularities and with the subsumed competences in communication competence: grammatical, textual, illocutionary sociolinguistic, strategic/nonverbal (S. Lesenciuc, 2012a). Through that study, we aimed to identify the directions of development of communication skills/competence of preschool children for future school integration. Furthermore, we intended to set up the communicative profile of preschool age and to compare the educational effects produced by the application of the curriculum to the educational effects resulted from the projection of a strategy designed to develop the communicative competence.

We have used the assumption that there is a distinction between the current design of training in *Language and communication* area and the design based on competences subsumed in communication competence. We have built the

research instruments in accordance with the correct, adequate and efficient communication requirements in the preschool child's daily activities (in the kindergarten, in family, outside the familiar frameworks). In this respect, we have changed the assessment sheets/forms based on the model of communication competence proposed by Lyle F. Bachman (1990), correlated the items with the subsequent competences and identified a prevalence of grammatical competence in relationship with other competences. Consequently, we proposed *Language and communication* curriculum structure, based on Bachman's CLA model (1990). The research results were published in the most important Romanian journal in preschool education issues, *Revista învăţământului preşcolar şi primar,* no.3-4/2012 (S. Lesenciuc, 2012b). Later on, we focused on the research of the appropriate ways for curricular reform, on identification of the awareness degree of the need for curricular development in preschool education (within *language and communication* are) and, more precisely, on the comparative analysis of evaluation instruments. We also did a comparative analysis of information gained through quantitative and qualitative analysis and we proposed the general framework of forming/developing communication competence, in line with the new society trends and with the preschool child need for future adaptation to the dynamics of society and knowledge (S. Lesenciuc, 2014). The research resulted in a series of residual data, not properly used till now, regarding the sociolinguistic competence. The purpose of this paper is to use the residual data of the 2014 research regarding the sociolinguistic competence for motivating further development of the intercultural competence within the national curriculum for compulsory education.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Through the previous research we intended to identify the communication skills/competence directions for preschool children for later school integration and, based on results, to identify the degree of awareness of curricular change in preschool education, starting with *Language and communication* area. One of the quantifiable results of the first study (S. Lesenciuc, 2012a) was the communication profile of preschool children related to the set of competences subsumed in Bachman's CLA model (1990), that served afterwards for the analysis of the standard evaluation instruments and of the designing of the general framework of forming/developing the

communicative competence and, implicitly, of curricular design. In this respect, the research was carried out, in a first phase, on a group of 31 teachers of preschool education from Brasov, with more than 10 years of teaching, one of each of the 31 kindergartens from Brasov. In the second phase, the research was applied on a group of 10 teachers with more than 10 years of experience from the school unit of origin (experts). The research carried out based on a standard research, transversal, done in three phases: quantitative, qualitative and mixed (quantitative-qualitative), on a questionnaire survey (for the first group) and a group interview, structured and done through Delphi technique (for the second group).

4. THE RESEARCH OUTCOME

The research results have been the subject of other papers, but data that were used aimed strictly at identifying the awareness of curricular development in preschool education. A series of research data, so called residual data even if they are important in the curricular design, has remained unused so far. Among the most important data on preschool communication profile are those related to the sociolinguistic competence.

4.1 The sociolinguistic competence. The sociolinguistic competence (SLC), or, as Bachman (1990:85) defined it in *communicative language ability* (CLA) model, the linguistic pragmatic sociolinguist competence, refers to the ability of appropriately communicate, despite language, dialect or speech (A. Lesenciuc, 2017:74). In general, the current model of communication competence includes the sociolinguistic competence (sometimes defined as a socio-cultural competence too), as follows: Hymes (1967; 1972), Canale & Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Van Ek (1986), Bachman (1990), Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995), Celce-Murcia (2008) etc. Initially, the sociolinguistic competence aimed only at recognizing the sociolinguistic rules of language use, i.e. the ability to use language in different sociolinguistic contexts, to communicate within limits imposed by a subject of discussion or to use the appropriate grammatical forms for different *communicative functions* in different sociolinguistic context (i.e. in Canale & Swain model, 1980). Subsequently, Jan A. Van Ek (1986) discriminates between sociolinguistic competence, that is the awareness of the ways in which the forms of language are selected depending on context, relationships between the communication partners,

communicative intentions etc., and sociocultural competence, meaning the use of the particular framework of communication, depending on the cultural context (Coperias Aguillar, 2008:60-61). Lyle A. Bachman brought the two directions together, into a sociolinguistic competence regarding the control of the language use conventions in relation to the context (social, cultural, linguistic) of communication. In Bachman's terms, the sociolinguistic competence refers to the sensitivity to dialect/variety, sensitivity to register, sensitivity to naturalness that is the way in which elements of language are formulated and interpreted not as linguistic accuracy, but as the sense of *native-like way*, and cultural references/ figures of speech (Peterwagner, 2005:94-97).

In terms of sociolinguistic competence level at preschool age, the Romanian studies usually treat projective aspects of curricular documents within the *Foreign languages* area. The starting point is the operational stage of child development, and the focused area is composed by language functions and level of formalism in language. Other studies highlights reflect the role played by child's parents/family in influencing his language. Children are heirs of certain dialects or speech styles and they use a restricted or elaborate code in communication depending on their parents` level of education, their different social backgrounds. They have a particular sensitivity to register and naturalness depending on their home education, called in Romanian „cei şapte ani de acasă" (*good family upbringing during early childhood*). Important studies, such as Labov's (2001:416-417) emphasize that in school "children must learn to talk differently from their mothers" as a first consequence of adaptation to a certain level of language or, more precisely, as a proof of sociolinguistic communication skills.

4.2 Level of sociolinguistic competence at preschool age. In our proposal of redesigning the training and evaluation instruments within *Language and communication* area, we drafted, based on the following structure of competence:

Table 1. The structure of sociolinguistic competence (based on Bachman, 1990:85 and Peterwagner, 2005:94-97 perspectives)

SLC	cultural references and figures of speech	aspects regarding the ability of adequate interpreting of cultural references and figures of speech, of understanding particularities of certain cultural settings, of extending meanings given by a particular culture to particular events, places, institutions, rituals etc.
	sensitivity to naturalness	aspects regarding the way in which elements of language are formulated,

	sensitivity to register	understood and interpreted, not in terms of linguistic accuracy, but in terms of native belonging to a particular language, dialect, subdialect etc.
		aspects regarding the variations within a single dialect or subdialect, highlighted through identification of registry variations (formal, informal)
	sensitivity to dialect	aspects regarding the identification of dialect variations

observable behaviors of preschool children, as follows:

Table 2. Observable behaviors associated with sociolinguistic competence in preschool

SLC	cultural references and figures of speech	SLC1: Understand and express appropriately his/her belonging to a community: family, city, country
		SLC2: Understand and express the specificity of certain secular or religious feasts, of their specific rituals
		SLC3: Understand communication particularities of his/her classmates/relatives of different ethnic background (if applicable)
		SLC4: Understand the specificity of certain secular or religious feasts with respect to different ethnic classmates or relatives (if applicable)
	sensitivity to naturalness	SLC5: Use language elements in accordance with his/her family speech habits
		SLC6: Use appropriate patents' or grandparents' specific sentences (if applicable)
		SLC7: Understand differences between standard language used in kindergarten and language used in the family
		SLC8: Identify the peculiarities in the language used by his/her classmates (if applicable)
	sensitivity to register	SLC9: Use appropriately the politeness formula
		SLC10: Salute in accordance with the communication settings
		SLC11: Appropriately suit his/her communication to the formal register
		SLC12: Appropriately suit his/her communication to the informal register
	sensitivity to dialect	Not for Romanian[1]

Using a five-step Likert scale for measuring the communicative behavior, as follows: 0 – never; 1 – rarely; 2 – sometimes; 3- often; 4 – always, we have found that, at the initial stage, the sociolinguistic competence (SLC) reaches values of 1.79 in the control group, respectively 1.98 in the experimental group. After the implementation of the ameliorative program, the final score of sociolinguistic competence in the control group has reached the value 1.96 (an increase with 0.17,

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[1] On the territory of Romania, there is a single dialect used, the Daco-Romanian one.

based on training in accordance with the curriculum design within *Language and communication* area), while in the experimental group has reached the value 2.47 (a significant increase, with 0.49). The increase of 0.49 points in sociolinguistic competence is the lowest in relationship with other competences. The highest increase was 0.75 for grammatical competence. A first direct observation concerns the fact that cultural references and figures of speech are difficult to train, because differences in score were insignificant after the application of the ameliorative program. The sensitivity to register can be trained by play exercises (the final stage score in the experimental group was with 0.39 points higher than in the control group). A second direct observation is that, in the final stage, the control group has the lowest score for the sociolinguistic competence, the only one with a value less than 2.

Studying the awareness of the need for curricular development, we found that the teaching staff in preschool education in Brasov is not familiar with the term of 'sociolinguistic competence' and does not well understand the role of this competence. Being trained within the limits of a monocultural national curriculum and professing in accordance with such a curriculum, the teaching staff from the experimental groups received the openness to sociolinguistic competence with reluctance. Only after understanding the components of this competence and the observable behaviors associated to them, teaching staff assessed the communicative profile of the preschool children within the current curricular design and attributed him the score 1.61, a value close to that one gained from experimental results and very far from the value 3.74, allocated to grammatical competence (S. Lesenciuc, 2014:34). It is worth mentioning that, after becoming aware of the role of sociolinguistic competence within the general communicative profile, more than a half of the first group of teachers (subjects) brought to the forefront the necessity of developing the sociolinguistic competence, that were really not valorized in the current curricular framework. The results differed in the second group of subjects. The group of experts, subjected to the group interview, allowed us to conclude:

> In order to compensate the level of developing the subsumed competencies in Bachman's model, the experts considered necessary to develop with priority the illocutionary and strategic competences during school time. They distanced themselves in the first

case from the opinion of the respondents from Brasov kindergartens, who considered the focus on sociolinguistic competence necessary. Experts considered that, given the cultural background of the Romanian preschool education, the development of sociolinguistic competence is not a requirement of the system, but a subsequent adaptation to a transnational cultural context (S. Lesenciuc, 2014:39).

In the preschool children communicative profile drawn by experts, the sociolinguistic competence has not been capitalized in the same manner that in the other group, but its development is necessary. The design of all competences, subsumed in communicative competence, is argued by the expert group, as it results from the excerpt from the *Group Interview Stenogram*:

> **D.M.:** Final conclusion?
> **M.B.:** It's needed.
> **G.V.:** It's needed, starting from the family's culture.
> **D.I.:** Interculturality is important, but we have no objectives.
> **M.L.:** Intercultural competence is developed within *Man and society* area, through tolerance, openness towards foreigners, but we discuss about sociolinguistic competence. It is not included within general goals, but we can also refer to GO3.
> **L.G.:** No.
> **M.L.:** From my perspective, it is much broader than what is expressed through GO3. In conclusion, it does not exist, but we need it.

As a conclusion of the interpretation of residual data concerning the sociolinguistic competence, we can affirm that there is a predominance of some competences in the current curriculum, as follows: grammatical (GO2 and GO4), textual (GO4), illocutionary (GO1) and nonverbal/strategic (GO3) competence. The sociolinguistic one is completely neglected. This finding, in relation to a set of curricular documents that still produce effects within Romanian preschool education, is completed by the lack of knowledge (and awareness) of formative valences of sociolinguistic competence. The real preschool children communicative profile highlights the lack of valorization of sociolinguistic resources and the last rank in the hierarchy of competences subsumed in communicative competence. In addition, in the estimative profile of preschool children communication the sociolinguistic competence has the same last rank in the hierarchy. All these conclusions, resulted from data not yet exploited and valorized, regarding the interpretative convergence according to the role of sociolinguistic competence, have only one pertinent explanation, from which we started the

argumentation of the present paper: the national curriculum is monocultural and its intercultural dimension is formal, inappropriate and incoherently applied.

5. WHAT CAN WE DO? CONCLUSIONS

The simple reconfigure tion of the real preschool children communicative profile, the reconfiguration of the observation sheet/form for the assessment of preschool children in terms of real communicative competence development, even the redesign of *Language and communication* area within the national curriculum based on competences (and not on general and specific objectives) are insufficient under these conditions. Also, piloting a new curricular design in *Language and communication* area meaning the communicative competence and not general and specific objectives, even the curricular reform implementation in the Romanian preschool education, would produce positive results but would still be insufficient in the effort to train according to the realities of the multicultural world we live in.

The easiest way to solve this problem is to become aware of the real need to develop the national curriculum on intercultural coordinates. Once aware of this aspect, and implicitly once the sociolinguistic competence is designed in the curriculum for preschool education, we can debate, at other education levels: primary, secondary, and high-school, on models of forming/developing the intercultural competence, appropriate to the Romanian culture. In line with the proposed openness through the development of sociolinguistic skills in preschool education, an appropriate model could be the one proposed in 1993 by Milton J. Bennett, entitled: *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS). The experience of the difference in this model aims at changing the set of standards, from the personal one (or of the culture of origin) to those of the context of producing intercultural communication, meaning the phases of denial, defense and minimization (the ethnocentric stage), respectively of acceptance, adaptation and integration (the ethno-relativist stage) (Bennett, 1998:26). The association between the necessary sociolinguistic profile and the model of developing the intercultural communicative competence proposed by Bennett is not accidental as long as sociolinguistic competence is based on the concept of linguistic/cultural sensitivity and Bennett`s model primarily focuses on intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, Bennett's model has been

successful in some intercultural projects, such as those of Intercultura Foundation[2], within a cultural environment (Italian) not very different from the Romanian one, taking into account the cultural values in Hofstede model (1980/2001).

Consequently, the redefinition/redesign of the national curriculum on intercultural coordinates required by the natural setting of multicultural Europe can be achieved only if the linguistic/ cultural sensitivity is coherently developed, without gaps, starting with preschool education. In this case, the optimal solution is the sociolinguistic competence development within *Language and communication* area.

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[2] Intercultura *Onlus* Foundation, emerging in 2007 accumulating the heritage of international educative experience of the homonimous association (founded in 1955), invited Professor Milton J. Bennett within the second Forum on Intercultural Learning and Exchange, *The Other Side of Exchange: Host Family Intercultural Learning*, Colle din Val d'Elsa (Siena), October 28th and 29th 2011, v. Bennett (2012:3-8).

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