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School pedagogical research of communication competence in secondary schools

Thesis of PhD dissertation



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I. Introduction

1.1. Rationale for the choice of topic

The focus of the research was on the examination of the curricula for the secondary school age group (*NAT 2012, Framework Curriculum 2012*) and later on, due to the new, revised curricula (*NAT 2020, Framework Curriculum 2020*), their comparative analysis. The primary aim of the research is therefore to provide the recipient with an insight into how the curricula currently in force approach the development of communication competence and what proportion of the components of communication competence are present in the different areas of education. A further aim was to narrow down the topic to an overview of personal communication competence. As *József Nagy (2007)* writes, personal communication competence is an existential competence, i.e. a competence for the survival of the individual (*Andok, 2016*), which consists of four types: self-protective, self-sufficient, self-aware, self-developing competences.

(*Nagy, 2007*) The four areas of personal competence largely determine the extent to which an individual can adapt to labour market demands in later life and the pace at which he or she can train and retrain. (*See, Radó 2017*) Exploring this "little researched and little known" (*Nagy, 2007: 33*) area can be of interest both at the level of curricula and school practice. A further aim, therefore, beyond the study of curricula, is to gain insights into everyday school practice; to form a picture of what students' communication competence looks like and what methods teachers can best use to develop this particular communication competence in addition to teaching the curriculum.

1.2. Structure of the thesis

The second chapter, which follows the first introductory section, deals with the interpretation of the concept of competence and the importance of communicative and communication competence. It provides an overview of international educational reference frameworks that focus on communication competence. It clarifies the concepts on which the research builds, and the author attempts to organise digital communication competence within existing conceptual frameworks.

The third chapter summarises the methodological solutions and methodological elements that are characteristics of modern education. The logic of the methods has led the author to create three groups, taking into account certain elements of communication competence that are of paramount importance in the 21st century. The methods supported by digital tools and networks include micro-content and the flipped classroom. Offline, non-digital methods include training methodologies, solution-focused team coaching, drama pedagogy and literary therapy. The third, so-called hybrid group, includes discovery learning supported by LEGO tools, gamification for its gamification 1.0 and 2.0 possibilities, and storytelling for its traditional and digital versions. This chapter is intended to provide an understanding of the research material. Certain modern options (e.g. paper theatre) have been omitted from research as they are less suitable for teaching secondary school age children.

The fourth chapter offers the reader a detailed insight into research methodology. The literature aspects are complemented by the research methodological aspects of the pilot research carried out and the subsequent study, describing the research methods used and their embeddedness in the overall research process. Hence, the research methodologies of document analysis, content analysis, interviewing, observation and testing are also presented. In addition, the context of the research will be described in more details, with reference to sampling, coding and data analysis, and ethical implications will be outlined. The chapter provides details of the results of the pilot

study and then describes the answers to the research questions of the final study. Following the answers to the questions, a summary of sorts is provided in each research question subsection. In the fifth section, the author reflects on the work of the past years and formulates directions and research opportunities that could build on the research results in the coming years.

1.3. Expected results of the research

The intended outcome of this school-based pedagogical thesis is to bridge the gap between science and everyday practice in schools. The analysis and good transparency of curricula can facilitate the process of planning lessons for development. It can also help those involved in the development of local curricula in schools, as it can highlight both strengths and weaknesses, so that each institution can reflect on them in a way that is appropriate to its profile. The summary of methods also serves this purpose, as it provides an easy overview and interpretation of the modern methodological options that can help teachers in their work, motivating children and providing planning opportunities for colleagues. The need for methodological development was also repeatedly raised by teachers during the interviews.

The interviews, observation and test results provide a picture of the reality of the school in relation to the curricula and the extent to which they are in line with each other - curriculum and reality. What methods do teachers know? What methods and opportunities do they consider suitable for developing communication competence? What are the background factors behind the practice of competence development in everyday school reality that influence the process? - These are the main questions to which this dissertation seeks answers.

II. The research

2.1 The relevance of personal communication competence in education

Lifelong learning requires that individuals have developed communication competence. However, this must be accompanied by a 'need' (intrinsic motivation) for self-development, for the individual's capacity for self-reflection, without which permanent learning will not take place. From a pedagogical point of view, it is therefore essential to know and develop as effectively as possible the personal communication competence of students. As *Tapio Saavala* writes, lifelong learning skills have been a priority in *the European Union since 2000* (Saavala, 2011), and the chances of new, hitherto unknown professions emerging unexpectedly on the labour market in the 21st century are a good indicator of their importance. Schools can no longer adapt to this at a sufficient pace and to a sufficient extent, so that flexibility and the ability to adapt to the changing needs of the world, among other things, become a key skill for the individual (Tomori, 2021). "It is considered the most comprehensive, inherited and learned hierarchical psychic component system of personality, which, with its system of motives and knowledge, is the internal psychic condition system for the activation of personality." (Nagy J. 2007: 29) *József Nagy* distinguishes two types of competences. The existential competence of the whole personality, and the key competence of the basic system of personality. (Nagy 2007: 30) He classifies the personal and social competence areas as competences representing the existential function, since these competence areas are related to the information processing of the existential functions. The eight key competences of the European Union (2018 EU Recommendation) include the personal, social and learning to learn competences. Their interconnectedness is illustrated by the fact that they are grouped under one category, a key competence. When describing the competences, the EU document underlines that an understanding of the rules of communication is essential for effective interpersonal relationships. It further states that the competence area is based on lifelong learning and on positive attitudes, cooperation, confidence and integrity. For example, *the 2019 EU Training in Action Review* states that the most important focus for the next decade in education, beyond

improving learning outcomes, is the involvement of adults in training. The analysis highlights that 15-year-olds from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to perform well in core subjects (literacy, mathematics, science) and thus have lower chances of continuing their education, making it very difficult for them to easily reflect technological change and retain their place in the labour market later in life. In the light of these considerations, it is therefore essential to have an understanding of the basic system of personality. The functions of personal competence are also highlighted because of their existential nature. They include the functions of self-protection, self-sufficiency, self-awareness and self-development. (*Nagy 2007: 33*) As *József Nagy* writes in his work on the competences and operating system of the personality (*2010/7-8*), the effect of the current institutionalised culture is that individuals spend a significant part of their time away from the family environment, within the walls of school and workplace, and thus institutional education plays a much greater role in the socialisation process of the child. Schools also have a crucial role to play in the development of personal competences. Development in the secondary socialisation arena, including in schools, is governed by basic documents (the Act on National Public Education, the National Curriculum, the Framework Curricula), which lay down standards and requirements for teachers and pupils. I therefore believe that education must place a strong emphasis on the development of personal communication skills, among other things, in order to enable the next generation to keep pace with the changing world and to be able to innovate.

2. 2. Research questions

Table 1
Research questions (own work)

Identifier	Research question	Research method	Unit of analysis
Q1	Where and with what coverage is the Communication Competence Component Set in the NAT?	Document analysis	NAT 2012, NAT 2020
Q2	Where and with what coverage does the communication competence component set appear in the Framework Curricula?	Document analysis	Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020
Q3	Where and how is the personal communication competence component set reflected in the different prescriptive-	Content analysis	NAT 2012, NAT 2020, Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020

	regulatory documents		
Q4	In the field of arts literacy, to what extent do the subjects develop personal communication competences according to the prescriptive regulatory documents?	Content analysis	NAT 2012, NAT 2020, Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020
Q5	With regard to the examined literacy areas, where is the teaching and development of information, digital and media literacy reflected in the secondary school regulatory documents?	Content analysis	NAT 2012, NAT 2020, Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020
Q6	Where and in what proportions are the information literacy components present in the prescriptive and regulatory documents examined?	Content analysis	Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020
Q7	Which forms of work and methods are preferred in the secondary school regulatory documents?	content analysis	NAT 2012, NAT 2020, Framework Curriculum 2012, Framework Curriculum 2020
Q8	How do teachers perceive the communication culture of secondary school students?	Questionnaire oral and written	Questionnaire materials
Q9	What methods and good practices do teachers use to develop students'	Questionnaire oral and written	Questionnaire materials

	communication competence in secondary schools?		
Q10	In all these respects, how do pupils in grades 10-11 perform in tasks measuring personal communication competence?	Ability test	Test developed on the components of personal communication competence

2.3. Research methods

- Document analysis

The component set of communication competence in the 2012 and 2020 versions of the NAT and their respective framework curricula was searched for by a priori coding.

- Content analysis

In the 2012 and 2020 versions of the NAT and their respective framework curricula, the research looked for the set of components of communication competence by a priori coding, but also looked at teaching methods and forms of work.

- Questioning methodology (oral and written)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, part of the interviews were conducted in contact form (pre-research) and part online in the Teams system, and the strong closed nature of the institutions justified the development of a Google Forms version of the interview questions. The questionnaire asked about the practice of developing personal communication competences in secondary schools.

- Observation

The pilot research made use of the observation method in order to complement the interview data corpus. This research method became unavailable due to the pandemic in the field research, so testing was prioritised.

- The test

The instrument used in the live research to measure students' personal communication competence. The test was used to corroborate the interview data.

2.4. Sampling

In order to talk about sampling, we need to define the population. "The population includes the persons for whom we want to draw conclusions." (*Falus–Ollé, 2008: 25*) At the beginning of this research, this was the case for vocational education and training in the Northern Great Plain region. Within that, it referred to any teacher and student. With the onset of the pandemic, this population was defined as *any teacher teaching in a four-grade secondary school in Hungary and students in grades 10–11*. The population size expectations were very modest at the beginning of the research, in line with the research methods. For example, *Kvale (2005)* defines an appropriate size for interview research as 15 ± 10 people, taking into account that human resources (i.e. a researcher can conduct research without compromising on time), material resources and time are not necessarily unlimited. The same sample is considered less effective in a written survey, given the different nature of the methodology. So the size of the sample

involved in the research is determined by a number of factors. In other words, "The sample is nothing more than the set of participants in the study; the part of the population that is included in the research." (*Bortz–Döring, 2003; Cserné, 1999; Falus, 2000; Falus–Ollé, 2008; Horváth, 2004; Szokolszky, 2004, Sántha, 2006; refer to: Sántha, 2009: 87*) As is typical for qualitative research, a kind of circular research process is (are) carried out from the beginning of the research. The implication is that the sampling method may change as the researcher progresses in the research process, as problems may arise that were not encountered at the beginning of the process, or the sample may need to change in line with the changing situation in order to investigate cases that meet the research objectives. (*Sántha, 2006*) When the first sampling procedure was determined, the sample would have included institutions performing differently according to the results of the National Competency Measurement (hereinafter: NQM), and the pilot research also included an institution with a medium performance in its category (vocational school). Any teacher who was willing to participate in the research could have been included in the sample per institution, and in the inclusion of the observation diaries, the final year classes were excluded because of the structure of the training (final year classes do not have general education, only vocational training, so it would have been rare for the 11th grade to be included in the sample, given the transversal aspect). This type of stratified sampling and the change in research methods were unfortunate because of the inefficiency of access to the sample in later years. In redesigning the research and determining the methods that could be used, the population was selected to include teachers in the remotely accessible four-form high school and students in grades 10–11 in this course. For teachers, the criterion was that they had to teach in this type of institution, and other criteria were taken into account when selecting the sample of students. The 9th grade high school students could have filled in a test, but their knowledge and competences from primary school would have dominated, i.e. if they had been included in the sample, the results would have been highly biased, as they still have three years of development ahead of them, which will have a strong positive impact on them, in the best case. The exclusion of the seniors proved to be a logical decision because the priorities in a high school are oriented towards the graduation items, admission interviews, faculties and language exams, i.e. it is difficult to devote time to other activities, and, on the other hand, precisely because of the importance of the graduation and admission results, a significant majority of the heads of the institutions have indicated that they will not provide the fillers in the senior years. In addition to the definition of the base population, the stratified sampling again ensured the possibility of inclusion in the sample, since out of the 856 high schools available in Hungary, every tenth, i.e. 51 institutions out of 507 institutions with active status in the database of the Education Office (OH - 2021 data) were included in the sample. They were sent an online test for students and an invitation to teacher candidates to participate in an online interview. The process ran into repeated problems, with some heads of institutions indicating that they could not pass on my request to colleagues because of the pandemic, and that they could not overburden students and colleagues during this already chaotic period. We then decided to convert the oral questioning into an online written questioning. This resulted in the re-sending of the data collection material to the heads of the institutions and a re-invitation to participate in the survey. At this stage, although representativeness is not the objective of a survey with open questions, the number of students sampled, i.e. who responded, is $N=435$, while the number of teachers is $N=187$ (89.9038% of the total respondents - 208 - since 10.0962% of the total respondents to the written survey had to be excluded, who, although they gave a written answer, teach, for example, in the primary or vocational classes of the institution.).

2.5. Coding and data analysis

The first driver for data analysis is the appropriate coding, the consideration of the coding scheme. *The MaxQda software*, a fortunate choice, provides the possibility for the researcher to feed a high number of documents and a high number of codes into the system within a new project that has been created. Thus, *the inductive+deductive coding logic* was well suited for coding, i.e. the a priori codes could be extended with newer codes specific to the content during content analysis. During the data analysis, the codes are well separated by the software (colours, selections). In addition, there are several advantages to instant note taking option, which ensures that as little as possible is missed by the researcher. For example, when transcribing the interviews (from audio to document), distractions (internet disconnection) or the teacher's state of mind, willingness to respond, etc., which could have affected the content, were repeatedly noted. The deductive part of the coding was related to the set of components of communicative competence, to the characteristic features of information literacy and to the methodologies. The content analyses resulted in the addition of new codes or the merging of codes already in the coding system in each area.

III. Results of the research

Q1 Where and with what coverage is the set of communicative competence components in the NAT?

Although significantly fewer units have been coded in the "new NAT", a comparison of the two documents yielded very similar results in relative terms. Although the quantitative indicators for the codes show that the coverage of communication competence in the "new NAT" is only 60% compared to the 2012 document, this may be due to, for example, compression, the apparent reduction in the length of the document. A striking change is the large positive change in the set of communication competence components in the field of foreign language. When comparing the Framework Curricula, I consider it worthwhile to compare the subjects of Hungarian language and literature, Arts and IT more closely.

Q2 Where and with what coverage is the set of communication competence components in the Framework Curricula?

In terms of the data from the documentary analyses, it is the literacy areas of Hungarian language and literature, IT/Technology and Arts that will be analysed in more Details below. On the one hand, I consider it important to examine the large data shift that has occurred in the documentary analyses, but on the other hand, by focusing on the possibilities and methodological aspects of developing communicative competence, it is worth highlighting subjects that are among the extreme cases. In the fields of Hungarian language and literature and the arts, codes appeared in high proportions in the document analyses, so I conclude that there are some things to be found in the methodological culture and the way of development that are forward-looking in the context of more detailed cognition. Furthermore, the analysis of the IT/technology literacy area could be interesting, since on the one hand there were a minimal number of codes in the documents (thus an extreme case), but at the same time it is worth projecting that this subject should be one of the most prominent curricular units in 21st century schools. The subject of IT or digital culture can also show the extent to which the narrower field of communication competence, digital communication competence, is preparing 21st century schools to equip their students with the knowledge needed for modern 'life'.

Q3 Where and how is the personal communication competence component set reflected in the different normative and regulatory documents?

I assume that the set of components prepared by *Enikő Szőke-Milinte* was primarily deductively based on the 2012 NAT material, so I consider it relevant to minimally change and expand the code system due to the different wording and the technological and methodological developments of the last decade, if only because of the development of digital communication and pedagogy. Moreover, in terms of the results of the study, I aim to examine the arts literacy area by subject in the next step of the investigation, as it is important to find out which subject(s) are the ones that pay special attention to the development of personal communication competence according to the standards. Future fieldwork could be supported by answering this question.

Q4 In the arts, which subjects develop personal communication competences according to the regulatory documents?

The examination of the set of components of personal communication competence showed that drama is the subject that develops most, in addition to verbal communication, self-awareness and non-verbal communication. The other units analysed did not provide opportunities for the development of non-verbal communication and allowed for minimal development of self-awareness. Personal communication competence is not exclusively based on the development of verbal communication, therefore I emphasize the relevance of the drama subject for the rest of the research and I also emphasize the method of drama pedagogy.

Q5 In the literacy areas under study, where in the secondary school prescriptive-regulatory documents does the development of information, digital and media literacy appear?

Overall, it can be concluded that media literacy can be developed primarily within the framework of the related subject, but that visual culture also contributes to media literacy through the use of a wide range of images and visual material in 21st century communication. All three literacy areas surveyed contribute to the development of information and digital literacy in similar proportions, but within the arts literacy area, visual culture will contribute in 2012, while in 2020 it will be more in the area of cinematic and media literacy. It is worth noting that the subjects of drama and dance/drama and theatre and singing and music do not have a significant impact on development in relation to their tasks as defined in the regulatory documents.

Q6 Where and in what proportions are the information literacy components reflected in the prescriptive-regulatory documents examined?

Based on aggregate data, although the coding rate of the arts literacy domain was prominent, the breakdown by different types of curricula and subjects led us to conclude that information literacy is most developed in the IT/Digital Culture subject, not only because it was prominent among the subjects in terms of coding frequency, but also because it can be considered as a real development when it is not developed by highlighting one element or skill, but in a complex way.

Q7 Which forms and methods of work are preferred in the secondary school regulatory documents examined?

Although the curricula are not methodological recommendations, they cannot be expected to prescribe the forms of work and methodologies and methodological elements to be used. However, an interesting insight of the analysis is that a number of methods do not appear in the curricula at all, while, for example, individual and group work, or drama pedagogy and project methods, are significantly pervasive in the curriculum guidelines.

Q8 How do teachers perceive the communication culture of secondary school students?

The research has shown that the communication culture of students in four-form high schools ranges widely. Some students are able to use context-appropriate and adequate language as high school students, they understand texts well and formulate them easily and accurately, and their reading skills are striking; while the complete opposite is also the case in other high schools. The research also showed that sometimes young people find it easier to use digital communication tools, but it cannot be said that the whole population is able to use them effectively, because some teachers identify information and digital literacy as an area for development in their questioning. Although not in high numbers, some respondents argue that communication in the digital space should be addressed, but these responses were also characterised by a bad feeling towards the digital world, describing (no verbal respondents) that they perceive the rise of the technological world to the fore as an absolute negative thing.

Q9 What are the methods and good practices used by teachers in secondary schools to develop students' communication skills?

The sampled secondary school teachers consider *drama pedagogy, frontal class discussion, gamification, methods of teaching argumentation, argumentation and refutation, and text creation tasks* as the most appropriate types of practice for developing communicative competence. They consider these methods to be applicable in almost all lessons. However, many do not feel ready to develop digital communication competence, and perceive shortcomings in the training system and in the technical and networking capacities of institutions.

Q10 (In all these respects) How do pupils in grades 10-11 perform in tasks measuring personal communication competences?

The survey showed that the strengths and weaknesses found when teachers were interviewed coincided with the students' results in the test. That is, student performance shows extremes as well as teachers reported. On average, there is a strong positive mean for test scores. The teachers' interviews revealed that not only were the students' shortcomings not the reason for strong positive test scores, but they also pointed to shortcomings such as their own qualifications, methodological knowledge and the ability to use digital and other tools for teaching as background variables. Training to ensure professional and methodological renewal, as well as the provision of adequate infrastructure, could therefore help to find a solution. The outcome of all this will, of course, continue to be strongly influenced by student engagement and motivation to learn.

IV. Summary

The research has answered questions such as whether the curriculum and reality are in line with each other. Although the teachers interviewed are faithful to the curricular requirements when it comes to methodology (they overwhelmingly use drama pedagogy), they have also worked, albeit to a small extent, with solutions not found in the curricula, such as flipped classroom, micro-content, LEGO® tools with learning, bibliotherapy, or coaching. This may be explained by the fact that the curricula do not provide methodological specifications; and by the fact that the shortened, revised version of the 2012 curricula did not incorporate the opportunities offered by the developing world. Although teachers admit that there is little in-service training that provides useful knowledge, there were professionals who repeatedly mentioned these modern methods and found them to be useful for children's development in the classroom. According to the teachers' responses, this knowledge was mostly acquired through self-study, reading and enquiry. Several questions were asked about the knowledge of the methods, in order to screen whether the teachers really knew the methods they mentioned or, more typically, whether the method they were working with was identifiable for them, i.e. whether they could name it. The follow-up question revealed that many colleagues do not know the names of the methods they work with, but work with them regularly. The question of what methods teachers know was thus answered with a wide range of answers. Some - and most of them - work with methods (some of the methods) that are considered to be common (as described in the Didactics book) and some - even if not many - are teachers who place great emphasis on using modern tools and methods for students in the classroom and are constantly looking for innovative alternatives that will make the teaching process more successful. In terms of background factors, there were lengthy responses about mandatory but (except in a few cases) useless in-service training, the lack of digital education, the possibility/impossibility of purchasing equipment and the fact that if purchases are successful, there are no financial resources for maintenance and improvement. The overload, which takes a lot of time away from professional development and from students, and the shortage of teachers, which means that many consolidations do not allow for an ideal development environment, only frontal classroom work. In the context of comparing curricula, it is worth highlighting the fact that the content analysis carried out in the research shows that the possibilities for developing communication competence have not been expanded in the NAT introduced in 2020. However, the two documents cannot be fully compared due to the changes, and therefore the results cannot be quantified in an exact way.

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VI. Publications related to the research

The full list is available on the [MTMT](#) website.

1. Tomori Tímea. Közéiskolai összehasonlító tantervizsgálatok az ajánlott munkaformák és módszertanok tekintetében. In: Mínya Károly; Sebestyén Zsolt; Tomori Tímea (szerk.) Elmélet - módszer - gyakorlat: Tanulmányok a nyelv- és irodalomtudományok köréből. Nyíregyháza: Nyíregyházi Egyetem Nyelv- és Irodalomtudományi Intézet, pp 26-33 (2022)
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