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Development of teacher communication competence

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Abstract

Communication competence, as a system of knowledge, skills, abilities, motivational disposition, attitudes and properties, is the essential competence of teachers. In the last twenty years teacher communication competence has been one of the most important content of teacher training programmes. However, the effects of teacher communication education have not been investigated systematically; there is not specific comparison of the effects of these programmes between student-teachers and active teachers. Teachers' and student-teachers' communication skills were investigated from 2006 to 2011. The sample consists of student-prospective teachers, prospective subject teachers, and active teachers in Serbia who participated in communication training in the last 5 years. There are differences in some socio-communication skills between the examined groups. In the process of communication education teacher communication competence is increased, its specific competencies emphasized (social sensitiveness, non-violent verbal communication, integrative style of conflict management, interaction involvement).

Keywords: Teacher, student-teacher, communication competence, communication training

1.Introduction

How can we describe a competent teacher? Teachers' professional competence is the system of knowledge, skills, abilities and motivational dispositions which provide the effective realization of professional teaching activities. According to the model of "the European teachers", Ogienko and Rolyak (2009) recognized three domains of teacher competencies: key competences, basic competences and special competences. Teachers' communication competence is the part of both key and primary/basic teachers' competence.

In other approaches, the authors operationalise competence considering the domains of teachers' professional action (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2006; Pantić & Wubbels, 2009). Teacher competence includes three groups of fundamental professional competencies: educational competencies, course content competencies (the system of knowledge and skills derived from the course content) and communication competence. Communication competence, as a system of knowledge, skills, abilities, motivational disposition, attitudes and properties in teaching communication and social interaction, is the essential competence of teachers. In the last twenty years teacher communication competence has been one of the most important content of teacher training programmes.

Both in the traditional and modern-organized school the quality of educational and teaching process is determined by the quality of communication as the most obvious part of the teacher-student social interaction.

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Teacher communication skills are viewed as the necessary skills for improving student learning (O'Hair & Wright, 1990). In the research "Enhancing Professional Development of Education Practitioners and Teaching/Learning practices in SEE countries" (Zgaga, 2005), the teachers from Southeast Europe countries assessed that development of communication skills is very important (the fourth place of 10 thematic blocks). According to the faculties and high schools of teacher education, these competencies and skills very rarely became the part of teacher professional improvement programmes (at the end of the list of 10 themes in improvement programmes). The teachers with developed communication competencies are more effective in all segments of the teaching process. They have skills to model and manage teaching communication (to regulate the interaction and control social situations, define and change the aims of communication and teaching conversation, etc.).

Specific psychological theories define interpersonal communication skills, intergroup communication skills, social skills and other relevant skills (Whaley & Samter, 2007). Simultaneously, considering the practical issues whose goal is to model teacher education process, the most general concept accepted for the set of competencies in social interaction is the concept of communication competence.

In some researches the relational model of communication competence (Wiemann et al., 1997) is applied to explain teachers' communication competence. It is based on theoretical principles of relationships; it integrates the important components as a dynamic process and incorporates a vast amount of variables existing in communication context. Although the definitions of communication competence vary widely and the task of defining communication competence is difficult, some definitions are constructed in terms of control over the environment through effective interactions (O'Hair & Wright, 1990). Communication competence is considered as a person's ability to choose communication behaviour which is suitable to achieve the aim of the social relation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Communication competence integrates two dimensions, cognitive and behavioural (Reardon, 1998), and the basic communication skills (cognitive skills and behavioural skills). Reardon (1998: 76) considers the cognitive dimension of communication competence as a broad concept. Cognitive dimension consists of the awareness process and cognitive processing of information (interpersonal awareness, social perspectives, capturing, cognitive constructs, self-monitoring, empathy, etc.). Behavioural dimension indicates different manifestations of communication competence (interaction involvement, behaviour flexibility, listening, communication style, and other behaviour components).

Development of communication competence occurs as a part of socialization, whether it is spontaneous socialization influenced by the life itself in a specific social context or by educational procedures as the segments of goal-directed socialization. Teaching process does not enhance spontaneous socialization of communication competence at the communication level formative to more effective teaching interaction. It is necessary to teach teachers' communication skills both at the initial education level for the teaching profession and continually in the professional domain. In the research of Fenton and O'Leary (1991) the impact of the teachers' communication skills training program on the instructional improvement and academic achievement improvement is analysed. Their findings indicate that the programme of teacher communication skills improvement failed to show significant increase in academic achievement of minority of students and low achievers; however, most of the teachers and approximately half of the principals reported the changed instructional behaviours and improved student attitudes and achievement. The discrepant outcomes indicate that the programme underlying concept of instructional communication is problematic because of the lack of a relational orientation. Observations are made on the interaction between various communication behaviours and the recommendation is made for development of the relational model of instructional communication that focuses on teacher-student characteristics and behaviours, the educational context, goals, and outcomes.

According to the analysis of the communication curricula/courses at different universities around the world (Barton & Beck, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 1999), the most frequent contents in these curricula are the following: models of communication, characteristics of messages in teaching, channels of teaching communication, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, active listening, conversation, interpersonal communication, communication in a small group and class, teacher communication styles and styles of teaching management, boundaries of communication, rules of communication, assertiveness, and empathy.

In teacher university education and school staff university education in different countries, the contents of communication, which is relevant to teacher professional activities, are studied in the following ways: (a) as autonomous courses, (b) as a part of some psychological disciplines, (c) as a part of the disciplines of education science (pedagogy), (d) as a part of the other science systems and disciplines (for example Rhetoric, Sociology of education).

Teacher education is important part of the education system in Serbia. Most of teaching or educational communication courses in teacher university in-service education are autonomous courses; but the contents of communication and activities of communication competencies development are involved in the curricula of teacher education at all teacher education departments. Some of the autonomous courses in primary class teacher education are: Communication, Mass communication, Communicology. The teachers of the subject education attend the courses: Communicology, Communication skills in teaching, Socio-interpersonal skills, Psychology of communication, Micropedagogy. The development of active teachers' communication competence is significant in in-service teacher education. The programmes, which improve communication competence of nowadays teachers in Serbia, are represented as programmes of teacher in-service education which are accredited by Ministry of Education and adequate institutions and published in the Catalogue (Catalogue 2002/2003 – 2011/2013). In the first year (2002) of the accreditation of teacher in-service education courses, there were 25% courses focused on communication competence as the main objective (12% courses of basic communication skills) or focused on communication competence as one of the objectives (13%). After ten years, the status of the courses focused on communication competence is similar – there are 23% courses focused on communication competence but only 4% focused on basic communication skills, and 19% focused on communication skills integrated in teaching and education process. The number of these courses reflects the education authorities' awareness as well as teaching programme realizators' awareness of the importance of communication competence for the realization of various teacher roles and for the efficiency of the school as a whole. Systematic observation of the effects of these courses during undergraduate studies and in-service period still has not been established as a system, but single researches have been carried out.

1. Research method

In this paper a part of the project on development of teacher communication competence is presented.

The research questions involve the following: the development of specific components of teacher communication competence; the effects of spontaneous socialization and the effects of specific training programmes on teacher communication competence; potential differences in the effects of communication training between pre-service education and in-service education (the effects on the student-teacher and active teacher).

The goals include the review of the researches considering the comparison between development of teachers' communication competence by spontaneous socialization and development of teachers' communication competence by education, and between pre-service and in-service communication education.

The following variables are used:
1. Teachers' communication competence investigated by the following components: interaction involvement (Cegala et al., 1982); social skills (Riggio, 2003); communication conflict management styles (Rahim, 2005);
2. Types of teachers' education curricula: pre-service education programmes and in-service education programmes.

This comparative study is based on secondary data resources. Teachers' and student-teachers' communication skills are investigated. We presented the results of the comparison of the measured communication competencies between the students-teachers involved in communication training, students-teachers not involved in communication training, active teachers involved in communication training and active teacher not involved in communication training. The sample includes the data from the researches of teacher communication competence realized in Serbia (from 2006 to 2011) and published in periodical publications and conference proceedings in the period from 2006 to 2012 (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2006; Bjekić et al., 2007; Bjekić et al., 2010; Zlatić et al., 2011; Zlatić & Bjekić, 2012).

2. Results and discussion

Specific training and/or educational programmes of teacher communication competence have been often implemented in the last 5 years. The comparison of communication competence between four teacher categories and a group of higher-educated non-teachers, measured in some of the previously mentioned researches, is presented (Table 1). Since the scales and subscales have different number of items, all the results are adapted for the scale values ranging from 1-5.

Table 1. Teachers' communication competence

Communication competence	Student-prospective teacher included in communication training (M)	Student-prospective teacher not included in communication training (M)	Active teacher included in communication training (M)	Active teacher not included in communication training (M)	Non-teachers (parallel professional field as active teachers) not included in communication training (M)
Interaction involvement	4.36	4.41	/	3.71	3.82
Attentiveness	4.44	4.42	/	3.81	3.81
Perceptiveness	4.58	4.43	/	3.66	3.91
Responsiveness	4.17	4.40	/	3.67	3.77
Social skills	3.38	3.35	/	/	/
Emotional expressivity	3.13	3.23	/	/	/
Emotional sensitivity	3.73	3.70	/	/	/
Emotional control	2.79	2.68	/	/	/
Social expressivity	3.50	3.47	/	/	/
Social sensitivity	3.56	3.47	/	/	/
Social control	3.54	3.54	/	/	/
Conflict management style					
Integration	4.43	4.15	4.28	4.08	4.21
Domination	2.83	2.82	2.68	2.74	3.09
Avoiding	3.08	3.24	3.84	3.16	3.19
Obliging	3.05	3.19	3.50	3.22	2.07

There are no significant differences between student-teachers included in communication training and student-teachers not included in communication training, with the exception of integration as conflict management style and responsiveness as component of interaction involvement: communication training increased responsiveness ($F=5.442$, $p<0.01$) and preference of integration as conflict management style ($F=4.200$, $p<0.05$).

Generally, there are no significant differences between teachers and non-teachers (within the same professional fields) considering the degree of the examined indicators of communication competence, except for the domination style preferred by non-teachers ($F=4.121$, $p<0.05$).

There are significant differences between the teachers included in communication training and all other examined groups considering conflict management styles – the former preferring avoiding and obliging conflict management styles ($F=4.283$, $p<0.01$)

There are similarities and differences between teachers and students of teacher's training/education institutions: students-prospective teachers are being prepared for teaching, teachers are practically realizing professional tasks. Student-teachers are more flexible and prone to change their behaviour. They are in the period that is formative for structuring the whole systems of professional behaviour. The programmes may be primarily directed towards establishing, but not correcting, behaviour. The effects (the knowledge acquired) are accepted more eagerly in the beginning of professional development. Therefore, it is necessary to model specific curricula to improve communication competencies of teachers and specific curricula for teacher-students.

3. Conclusion

The research suggested that teachers' general communication competence measured by the assessment and self-assessment did not develop to the expected level (the level formative to teachers' professional effectiveness).

Teaching process does not initiate spontaneous socialisation of communication competence at the communication level formative to more effective teaching interaction.

The communication competence of teachers (prospective and active teachers) is increased in the process of communication education; teacher interest to participate in communication training is increased, too.

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