

Multilingualism – A New Approach to the Competences of Small Children

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of training language skills, including multilingual competences in Early School Education. The Common European Space favours the development of multilingualism in children of the youngest age.

Keywords: Education, children, competence, multilingualism

Introduction

The Early School Education in the Republic of Moldova, at the current stage, is oriented towards the training and development of children’s competencies. This phenomenon is a natural one, it emphasizes the early school age, in which of course the emphasis is placed on all the physiological and cognitive processes to be developed. Of course, the teaching and managerial staff in Early School Education are realistic, we understand that the results will be evident much later, and the children’s successes (academic successes, socialization successes and social adaptation of the children) will also be observable later. However, this does not mean that teachers will not put in effort, all their strength and skills to ensure a quality educational process today, and in the near future.

As stated in the educational policy documents, in the Early Education Curriculum (EEC 2019), [3] the child’s competence is an integrated system of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired/formed and developed through learning, the mobilization of which allows the identification and solving of different problems in different contexts, and life situations (EEC, 2019).

In our article, however, we want to address the problem of preschool children’s communication competences, or rather, communication competences in foreign languages, because Moldova is a multi-ethnic, multinational state, preschool children very often get in contact with people, who also communicate in languages other than their mother tongue. This fact - multilingualism [3,8,9], bilingualism, is connected to the transversal competences of Early Childhood Education.

Within this context communication competences, along with the following competences include the following:

- Social, civic competences
- Personal, interpersonal competences

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- Cultural, intercultural competences
- Entrepreneurial competences
- To learn to learn throughout life competences.

So, we can mention that multilingualism can be approached and achieved from an early age, and as a result, it represents the systems of knowledge, skills and values that (eventually) will be developed during Early Childhood Education.

If we are to draw a small parallel between the communication competences in the child's mother tongue and multilingualism, [6] then we will mention:

- Formation of communication skills,
- Formation of psychosocial, emotional communication behaviour,
- Experiencing oral messages,
- Demonstrating a coherent verbal behaviour appropriate to the situations,
- Demonstrating non-verbal behaviour in various contexts,
- Description of objects and phenomena,
- Application of certain criteria and aspects of description, etc.

Navigating the stages of early education

Since the Republic of Moldova is a part of the European family, practically all Educational Policy Documents are connected to European values and standards, linguistic competences are essential for the creation and development of a European space of Education, in which multilingualism would be a gateway to cooperation, mobility, collaboration without borders. Multilingualism comes to realize the values of the EU, namely- to be united by diversity, to respect diversity, and to make an effort to understand and appreciate diversity. Bearing in mind that today's children are already other generations, that represent openness and change, digitization and communication, it is natural to focus on the formation of language competences and the development of multilingualism from preschool age. Multilingualism has several advantages that can be mentioned:

For citizens- [4, 9]

- New educational, personal, professional, and political perspectives,

For society-

- Cultural awareness and collaboration, linguistic, social cohesion, social adaptation, future employment without difficulties, career advancement, overcoming isolation, opening the paths to success and achievement, offering inclusive perspectives for all languages of communication, applying modern and innovative strategies of knowledge- studying languages, creating linguistic thinking, which focuses on rapid adaptation and social cohesion.

Researcher Sergiu Ostaf, in the article on promoting European Policies of Bilingual and Multilingual Education in the Republic of Moldova, [9] draws a parallel between multilingualism and bilingualism, which is based on training. S. Ostaf [9] advocates that studying two or more languages simultaneously, in the educational setting (kindergarten, pre-school institutions) from the earliest ages is crucial. On the other hand, researchers in Pedagogy - L. Mocanu, and L. Armaşu mention the impact of language acquisition within the educational framework as well as in everyday life, within kindergarten setting - here we mean routines,

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walks during the day and games, health procedures, achieving cultural-hygienic skills, etc. As for society, then children (preschool students), who are forced to migrate with their parents, sooner or later will feel the need to study a second (third) language of communication, because just as adults integrate into the professional space, so children undergo adjustments following their studies when are institutionalized in kindergartens and schools. At the social and educational level, we can mention some advantages of multilingualism [7]:

- Increasing the degree of tolerance between educational and social actors,
- Increasing mutual respect,
- Increasing interethnic respect,
- The integration of minorities in the educational and professional space (kids, adults, parents),
- Development of minority diasporas,
- Cultivating tolerance and social loyalty,
- Consolidation of social, cultural, religious relations, etc.

Like any process, cultural or educational, multilingualism needs support and investments. Often the investments in the beginning are of a financial and economic nature [10]. We consider that from the perspective of multilingualism, perhaps, we should start with human resources - quality teaching staff, who is close to the principles of multilingualism – teachers who speak several languages, with corresponding cultures, who can demonstrate an acceptance and tolerance of diversity, and can honestly promote respect for diversity.

In addition to quality human resources, we believe that we can list some other conditions for success in the context of multilingualism [4]:

- Free communication, throughout the day in two languages,
- Language development through the presence of trained personnel in the educational institution,
- Experiencing multicultural experiences (holidays, traditions, cultural and social events),
- Ensuring cognitive flexibility (achieving the exchange of contents, methods, etc.),
- Ensuring a competitive environment, where children with developed multilingual competences will have the chance to show themselves as leaders,
- Equal participation in the language learning process,
- Linguistic accessibility - for students, children, teachers, and parents - if applicable,
- Equity in children's access to various educational, technological, and digital resources,
- Availability of educational resources in the institution to be used in multilingual education,
- Time management - we believe that multilingual education if it is oriented towards the formation of skills, needs time to create experiences for children to learn, to repeat, and to practice the spoken language (in different educational contexts created by teachers) as a living language!
- Elaboration of strategies for evaluating children's skills appropriate to the (early) age, appropriate to the particularities of Early Childhood age but also the well-being of preschool children.

As Cristina Straistari-Lungu mentions, in the article on Learning Foreign Languages in Early Education- a problem of Education is today's multilingualism that correlates with the Barcelona objective, which states that a child today is able to study the mother tongue plus

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other two languages. Surely this objective comes to form language competences in children of different ages by ensuring sustainability and long-term effects [6].

So, the Educational Policies in the EU today emphasize the issue of learning languages as early as possible, both native and foreign, starting from the very foundation of the process of communication, respectively - relationship, human collaboration, etc. In the Action Plan for Foreign Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity [2] (Barcelona 2004-2006) it is stipulated: Member States must ensure as a priority that foreign languages are effectively taught from kindergarten and Primary School, stages at which are formed the main behaviours towards other languages and cultures, stages in which the necessary foundations for further learning are laid. Preschool students become aware of their own values and cultural determinations and begin to appreciate otherness, and show more interest in others [2].

The European Commission also attaches great importance to the training and development of children's linguistic competences, but also to multilingualism. Thus, [1] the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages- Learning, Teaching, Assessment and the European Language Portfolio (Guide for teachers, trainers, teaching staff) were developed. These two documents come to update the concept of studying languages (native and foreign), proposing a scale of gradation of knowledge and the process of forming language competences. These documents propose to teachers to carry out an analysis of the language study process in order to reconsider the didactics of teaching, the content units, which are required to be adapted as much as possible to the children, the individual and age specificities, the tests and the methods for evaluating the children's skills, so that joint efforts of the teaching staff- the child- the parents are cooperative, mutual and productive.

The Barcelona Council of March 2002 [2] supported the idea of studying languages from an early age, thus welcoming multilingualism. A council statement states: "Multilingualism is an asset for Europe and a shared commitment".

In what follows, there should be exemplified educational policies and strategies for studying languages from early ages, through the example of some states:

Table 1. Starting point of the language study process (multilingualism) in some states

State	Since the intention is practically realized	Children's age
France	2008-2009	From 4 Through play, musical activities, knowledge of diversity
Spain	1999-2009	From 4 Through communication (child-child), at the request of the children, through joint activities but at the initiative of the children, visits, excursions, with the involvement of the family
Italy	1999-2009	From 3 Knowledge of differences, respect for diversity, interaction with a teacher as a speaker of a foreign language, through literary texts, stories, games
Poland	2009-2011	From 3 Through the child's curiosity towards other cultures, through music, artwork (plastic)
Cyprus	2011	From 5 Through games using literary texts
Germany	2008	From 8 Through daily activities, routine, literary texts
Slovakia	2010	From 8 Through daily activities, routine, trips

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Latvia	2011	From 7 Through daily activities, routine, games, hygiene activities, nutrition, health
United Kingdom	2008	From Through literary texts, poems
Sweden	1009	From 8 Through Children's games, walks and work activities in nature

As we can see, at the methodological level, the appeal is made to those strategies that are suitable for children of early age [3, 4]. If in some states there is success in the development of multilingual competences, then this fact is due to the mastery and professionalism of their education.

Conclusions

Regarding the experience of the Republic of Moldova, through the ANTEM Project, which since 2019 collaborates with several Early Education Institutions, well-known at the level of the country, within the ANTEM-Educational Institutions Agreement, there have been established a series of long-term and short-term actions, and joint activities aimed at facilitating the study of the Romanian language by national minorities and other foreign languages at the parents' decision [10].

Several conclusive points can be brought to attention from Moldovan research and practice:

1. Children in Early Childhood Education must be exposed to multiple languages from an early age because they tend to develop enhanced cognitive abilities, better problem-solving skills and higher creativity skills.
2. Multilingual preschool children are rather to develop a larger cultural awareness and empathy towards those who surround them, understanding the cultural values and norms.
3. Early exposure in Early Childhood Education to two or three languages facilitates easier language acquisition and transfer in both spoken and written forms, leading to better language competences overall.
4. Multilingual preschool children perform better academically, especially in the area of language communication.
5. Multilingualism in Early Childhood Education contributes to a better integration in the social environment, better navigation through different linguistic and cultural frameworks, having a greater sense of adaptability and tolerance.

The cognitive and cultural benefits in Early Childhood Education of multilingualism extend onto Primary, Secondary and high school levels, and into adulthood offering career advantages and increased opportunities for worldwide integration.

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