

## The Communication Component in the Training of Future Mother-tongue Teachers

### Abstract

The paper deals with professionalisation of teacher training with a focus on future mother-tongue teachers, i.e. teachers of the Czech language and literature, with a view to the new National Curriculum and its sections, namely the subject group Language and Linguistic Communication. The authors also stress comprehensiveness and inseparability of language teaching and language education and point to the communicative approach based on the dialogic nature of effective teaching communication. The interconnection of teacher – content of education – pupil is seen through the naturalness of speech contact, respecting the aim of mother-tongue teaching defined as cultivation of the linguistic code in pupils with a teacher characterized as a model for speech.

**Key words:** *professionalisation of teacher training; mother-tongue teachers; dialogic nature of communication in the modern world; dialogic nature of teaching communication; literary text as a specific contribution to communication; models for communication (speech); communicative approach to mother-tongue teaching; cultivation of the linguistic code; influence of standard and non-standard language; principle of comprehensiveness; inseparability of language teaching and language education; applicability of texts and literary excerpts in communication; relations between subjects and within subjects*

1. An important concept in current pedagogical research dealing with the overall modernisation of teacher training is that of its **professionalisation**. This term refers to a **concept of teacher training clearly focusing on the student, i.e. a shift in emphasis towards students and their path to the profession**. Professionalisation also affects future mother-tongue teachers – in the Czech context, teach-

ers of the Czech language and literature. Its aim is to enable future teachers to learn how to support pupils' development and learning processes, to create suitable conditions for achieving this goal, to manage and direct learning processes, to uncover and respect the personal qualities of individuals, and to lead pupils to achieve their personal best, without teachers imposing their own view of the world around us on pupils. **Mother-tongue teachers** should particularly concentrate on enabling pupils to orient themselves independently **in the world, as it is perceived with the assistance of and through the medium of language**, both via direct linguistic communication and also via artistic communication mediated through literary texts.

**1.1.** The permanent presence of dialogue in communication, especially communication taking place in the school environment, underlines the need to take into account this dialogic nature of communication in all components of mother-tongue teaching at schools. Future mother-tongue teachers should work on the basis that in dialogic communication, one participant listens while the other participant speaks. Language use (speech) is a basic activity enabling subject matter to be transmitted between teachers and pupils, in other words, it is an activity enabling pedagogical interaction to take place in the classroom. The roles of participants alternate, but it is not essential for this alternation to be symmetrical or for participants' contributions to be of a similar extent. In a paper published ten years ago, O. Müllerová stated that "One of the most important features of communication in today's world is its dialogic nature. Problems in communication are mainly problems of dialogue. Therefore it is essential to teach dialogue in schools and to accept and implement dialogue as a method of effective teaching." (cf. Müllerová, O., 1996, p. 102).

In the same way, it is also possible to see the activity of reading written (printed) texts as a specific type of contribution to dialogue; thus in this sense, reading can be considered to be an internal dialogue between the reader and the text. Like any form of dialogue, internal dialogue with a literary text must be learned. For this reason it is absolutely essential to verbalise this dialogue in teaching, i.e. to externalise internal dialogue through speech. An ideal teaching situation for developing these skills is one in which the teacher holds a discussion on pupils' experiences and opinions on their reading, guiding pupils to analyse the text and to attempt at an interpretation of the text using a repertoire of literary terms that is gradually built up and extended. We fully agree with the view of M. Germušková that it is absolutely essential for the teaching of literature to be dialogic in order to create a positive, vital relationship between pupils and literature – or indeed between pupils and art in general. We also share the author's view that when holding dia-

logues about literary texts, teachers should give preference to divergent types of questions and tasks in order to reduce pupils' frequent reliance on brief, mechanical replies – which are “a real consequence of a mostly uncreative, encyclopedic approach to literature, a result of a deep-rooted culture of explication in the subject in question.” (cf. Germušková, M., 2003, p. 43) When interpreting literary texts, it is by no means always necessary to attempt to lead all pupils to hold one single view of the text; the teacher should respect each individual recipient's right to perceive a work of literature in his/her own way. V. Vařejková (cf. Vařejková, V., 1998, p. 19) emphasises that literary education brings with it an entirely specific reception situation, since contact with the work of literature takes place in a group of recipients; the members of the group can influence each other and thus enrich their reception of the work. For this reason, the dialogue should not take place only at the level of teacher-pupil, but also at that of pupil-pupil.

An important aspect of mother-tongue teaching is the fact that the language used in classroom dialogue is perceived by pupils as a prototype of official spoken communication, and thus has a long-term effect on pupils as a model for self-expression. In literary education, it is the literary text that becomes the primary material for the recipient, and in getting to know the material, the recipient may either identify with it, or confront and reject it. This is one of the ways in which the unique identity of school-age individuals is formed.

1.2. A welcome recent development in mother-tongue teaching at schools in many European countries has been a marked shift towards communicative methods of teaching and the use of communicative approaches to subject matter. The interconnection of the three poles of education (**teacher – content of education – pupil**) in a communicative spirit can be seen above all in the naturalness of speech contact and in the unforced influence of the teacher as a model for speech, an influence that becomes gradually weaker as pupils grow older. Research findings have shown that the teacher is seen as a model for communication (speech) most markedly and clearly by the youngest pupils.<sup>1</sup> From the very start, mother-tongue

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<sup>1</sup> Significant insight is also provided by research into the speech models of young people, their perception of standard language and fluctuations in its prestige in speech. The results of two surveys carried out in the Ostrava region (in 1996 and 2003) confirmed that school is still a source of spoken standard language. Respondents chose one or more options from a list of possible answers to the introductory question “In which environment do you hear people speaking standard Czech?”. The 2003 data show school to be a key environment for the maintenance of the spoken standard language; teachers of Czech also make a significant contribution, although in the 2003 survey the answer “in school in most subjects” gained slightly more answers than “in school only in Czech lessons.” Overall, school was cited as a source of the

teaching should steer clear of encyclopedic formality, without compromising (under the guise of a communicative approach) the necessary teaching of grammar and the system of the language. The youngest schoolchildren are relatively competent in the practical use of the basic components of the linguistic code of their mother tongue, however it is necessary to gradually lay the foundations for them to deepen their understanding of abstract linguistic categories, not only cultivating their self-realisation through communication but also, at the same time, allowing them naturally to access language as a code which must be learned in order for us to be able to use it better and more effectively. The aim of such teaching is not the formal, mechanical repetition of theoretical precepts about language, nor is it the transient evaluation and grading of achievement that can sometimes still be seen in schools; instead, it is a gradual, managed transition, guided by the linguistic theory, from initial pupil communication A to the ensuing, enriched, “informed” communication B.

1.3. The aim of mother-tongue teaching in schools can be characterised as the **cultivation of the linguistic code** in pupils by the teacher, who has a better command of the code both in terms of quality and quantity; this cultivation takes place through the speech and communication in which the code is realised. Modern linguistics, with its current focus on research into communication, should eventually lead to a more precise definition and modelling of the linguistic code. As M. Ligoš has pointed out (cf. e.g. Ligoš, M., 2003b), the “communicative turn” in linguistics, emphasising *parole* and applying speech act theory, has brought with it a deeper interest in the culture of language as well as in adherence to certain limits of communication in relation to standard or non-standard forms of language. The school environment – in which **standard language** used to be the exclusive (or almost exclusive) norm – is now attempting to come to terms with and incorporate non-standard influences, and to elucidate the aspects which govern non-standard language, most frequently in spoken communication. In the light of current linguistic developments in pragmatics, it is no longer possible to maintain previous approaches which tended to be based mainly on written texts and emphasised spelling practice, approaches which remained common not just in Czechoslovakia but also in other European countries up to the 1960s and early 1970s. The

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standard language in almost 29% of the answers in the 2003 survey. A good example of self-critical evaluation by pupils when describing the difficulty of using the spoken standard language is the grades which they assigned to their own speech in the 2003 survey; the average grade was 2.56, i.e. four tenths of a grade worse than the grades they awarded themselves for their use of the written standard language (2.17). Expressed in school terms, pupils on average rated themselves with a low “2” grade for writing and with a grade closer to “3” for speaking.

approach to written and spoken language in Czech schools is still marked by the deep-rooted opinion of some mother-tongue teachers that preference should be given to formal language, even in spoken communication. Teachers' imprecise understanding of the triad usage-norm-codification leads in turn to a lack of understanding on the part of their pupils. The norm of the standard language, however, cannot be seen merely as a set of generally accepted linguistic means which are rooted in the current usage of those who use the standard language; in fact – in the words of B. Havránek – usage is not and has never been solely responsible for the formation of the norms of standard languages. The author emphasised (cf. Havránek, B., Weingart, M., 1932) that the norm of the standard language is shaped and formed as a result of necessary theoretical interventions and is more precise, more conscious and more authoritative than the norm of the vernacular. Such a norm, monitored and “tended” by linguists, would certainly be a useful tool for codifiers of language at all levels, as well as providing an interesting basis for observing language change in school mother-tongue lessons.

1.4. The emergence of communication-focused didactic principles, which began to have a positive influence on changing methods of Czech teaching in Czechoslovakia during the mid-1970s, brought with it an emphasis on the necessity for integrity in language teaching, a focus on stylistic considerations, and an awareness of the need to devote increased attention to spoken language in school lessons. As a result of long-term observation of and research into classroom dialogue, four key criteria were formulated for mother-tongue teaching, seen as a linguistic task. These criteria are generally valid from the very beginning of Czech language teaching in schools, when children are acquainted with their mother tongue. The criteria are based on practical demands and current linguistic knowledge, and they affect both mother-tongue teaching and the creation of textbooks based on communicative principles. The four criteria are the principle of comprehensiveness, the communicative approach, pupil-focus, and the implementation of up-to-date linguistic knowledge. (cf. Svobodová, J., 2000) Over the years, without denying the usefulness of these original criteria, we have developed a broader notion of the key **principle of comprehensiveness**, which should be implemented to form the basis of at least the initial phase of mother-tongue teaching, if not all mother-tongue teaching at all levels of the education system. In simple terms, our conception of the principle represents the broadest possible framework, incorporating **mutually connected and organically interlinked components within the school subject** and also comprising internal topical cogency, interdependencies of text and communication, constant interlinking of elements, and coherent interrelationships between teaching, textbooks and teachers' approaches. One factor in

the Czech environment which allows us to see the principle of comprehensiveness as a universally valid criterion is the current set of goals as specified in the new National Curriculum for the subject group *Language and Linguistic Communication*, despite the fact that the new Curriculum mainly emphasises interconnections between subjects and disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

2. Here we should expand on the above-mentioned point to emphasise that the current situation in mother-tongue teaching in the Czech Republic is influenced by the forthcoming transformation of teaching in all subjects as part of the new **National Curriculum**, partial versions of which have been trialled by pilot schools. In the section dealing with the conception and goals of primary education, the Curriculum states in general terms that primary education should help pupils to acquire and gradually master key competencies, as well as provide a reliable basic general education focused on situations that are of use in practical life. First among the competencies mentioned is communication, which is defined in the section dealing with the subject group *Language and Linguistic Communication*. The document deals in general terms with the attempt to guide pupils to universal and effective communication, and goes on to specify that language and linguistic communication occupy a key position in the education process because an appropriate education in the mother tongue, foreign languages and the culture of language is one of the fundamental markers of a high overall level of cultural development and maturity in pupils on completion of their primary education. Language teaching equips pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills enabling them to adequately perceive and understand various linguistic utterances, to express themselves appropriately, and to effectively apply and implement the results of their learning. The wording used in the Curriculum is grand, intangible and uncontroversial; the question, though, is: how successfully will the theory actually fit into everyday practice – primary school pupils, after all, have their limitations. The effectiveness of the newly conceived curricular documents – the eventual definitive version of the **National Curriculum for Primary Education** and the individual school curricula that will be derived from it – will only become clear with time. In the light of the fact that the National Curriculum “allows educational content to be interconnected at the level of topics, topic groups or subjects”, schools may in practice

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<sup>2</sup> There is no mention of comprehensiveness in the glossary attached to the text of the National Curriculum for Primary Education, and the significance of the term is thus diminished. It is only in the notes to Part 7.2 in item 2 of the section on *Language and Linguistic Communication* that the document states explicitly that the content of the subject *Czech Language and Literature* “is comprehensive in nature, and for easier orientation it is divided into specific components (Writing and Communication, Language Education, Literary Education).”

choose to integrate e.g. literary education with selected topics, topic groups or subjects belonging to the subject group *People and Society* (History) or *Art and Culture* (Music and Art Education). This type of integration is a real possibility, because it enables schools to fulfil the requirement to “respect the logical structure of individual subjects” (cf. National Curriculum for Primary Education, p. 10) and to design teaching subjects in order to take account of the structure and qualifications of the teaching staff at each school. Only practical school experience will show to what extent it is justified to fear a reduction of internal comprehensiveness in mother-tongue teaching if an integrated conception of teaching subjects is put into practice; on the other hand, closer contact between literary education and other subjects based on communication with works of art (Music and Art Education) may actually bring surprising new benefits. In addition to the strengthening of external connections between subjects – a process which is given considerable prominence at various points in the National Curriculum – it would certainly do no harm to also **reinforce the internal coherence and comprehensiveness of the subject Czech Language and Literature by carefully interlinking its individual components: grammar and spelling, writing and communication, and literature.**

2.1. The nature of mother-tongue teaching at primary schools (including that at infant school level), along with the mother-tongue textbooks used, is of great significance from the point of view of higher year groups; teaching of these higher year groups should follow on coherently from previous teaching and should not differ from earlier teaching in terms of content, approach or structure. In our view, teachers should not only focus on comprehensiveness in their mother-tongue lessons, but also should take into account the **comprehensiveness** of the function of textbooks as the basic type of written text used in teaching. Language textbooks should respect the inseparability of **language teaching** (which aims at a knowledge of the linguistic code and its hierarchy) and **language education** (which aims at the application of linguistic knowledge in both spoken and written communication). Literature textbooks too should be designed with a communicative approach, and should not merely comprise texts and lists of factual information.

2.1.1. It should be noted that the debate on the teaching of the Czech language and literature does not affect only primary education, but secondary schools as well. One important stimulus for the debate has been the planning of standardised national school-leaving examinations and the trial rollout of the new system in the late 1990s in the form of mock school-leaving examinations. Experience gained at these trials showed that the formerly dominant conception of teaching – giving

marked preference to the teaching of literature but often biased towards an overly factual approach without searching for connections, and in some cases leading to a complete absence of language and writing practice – was untenable, partially because it often brought students only minimal levels of satisfaction from learning.<sup>3</sup>

The attempt to transform secondary school teaching of the subject *Czech Language and Literature* has led to a number of ideas, among which the most radical one is that of Jiří Kostečka, a secondary school teacher and author of secondary school textbooks. Kostečka's proposal, which evidently involves an element of deliberate provocation, was that the existing single secondary school subject *Czech Language and Literature* should be divided into two subjects: *Language and Writing* and *Literary Education*. Opponents of this proposal pointed out the necessity for comprehensiveness and the interlinking of the components of teaching, however they failed to answer the question of how this comprehensiveness can be achieved when language and writing practice is either reduced to a minimum or even entirely absent – as is unfortunately still the case at some Czech secondary schools.<sup>4</sup>

2.1.2. According to sociocognitive theories, culture is seen as “a complex of mutually interlinked rules on the basis of which individuals form their behaviour in order to adapt to specific situations”, or as “an implicit and indefinite knowledge of the world, on the basis of which individuals give direction to their behaviour.” (cf. Bertrand, Y., 1998, p. 120) Many sociocognitive theories of social learning emphasise the fact that we often learn by choosing other people as models. In mother-tongue teaching, pupils often imitate models for self-expression and communication although they need not necessarily be aware of the models or may even verbally reject them, claiming that they wish to retain their individuality. Research

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. at a vocational secondary school where one of the authors worked, students often evaluated their revision for their school-leaving examination in Czech Language and Literature as equivalent to learning a telephone directory. They considered this subject to be the most difficult of all, preferring technical subjects at the school-leaving examination in which they were able to make full use of logical thinking and to infer knowledge on the basis of understanding a given problem.

<sup>4</sup> One of Kostečka's opponents was P. Janoušek. He expressed a fear – probably stemming from a lack of knowledge or insufficient communication between subject-specific didactic experts and university lecturers in literary disciplines – that the teaching of literature would merely “develop pupils' ability to read primary texts and communicate spontaneously about them.” He sees “spontaneous communication” in the real environment of secondary schools as being an entirely free discussion among students, “based on nothing but momentary thoughts and the desire to talk about anything.”: cf. Janoušek, P., 2005.



has proved that this attitude strengthens as pupils grow older (cf. Vařejková, V., 1998, p. 19). Textbooks could work with models for self-expression, illuminating their actual function and real meaning with a view to the growing influence of the media – especially television, since radio has now been pushed into the background. In the last two decades, on the other hand, the role of schools in inculcating models for self-expression and communication has been growing. In the late 1960s A. Stich was still able to claim that the most useful models for the culture of standard language were “... school teaching and the indirect effect of language as used in the mass media” (cf. Stich, A., 1969, p. 83), however nowadays it would not be possible to make such a claim with the same degree of certainty. The emergence of commercial media and their communication strategies, with their exclusive emphasis on economic factors, no longer corresponds with previous expectations of the possible future development of the culture of language. In the 1960s the family, schools and the media all exercised a roughly equal influence on children’s development. Since that time, however, the media have gained such a strong position in society that they have become the key determinant not only for children, but for the family and schools as well. As the role of schools in this process has become increasingly complicated, their task has proportionally grown in importance, and for this reason it is essential to devote particular attention to developing carefully formulated curricular documents for schools.

2.2. Mother-tongue textbooks should include a close interconnection between the individual components of the subject: grammar and spelling, writing and communication, and literary education. Each of these components brings different types of stimuli to the subject: the presence of a literary element in grammar and writing lessons can be provided by primary texts and other excerpts from literature, including texts of various types but always with both content and form that are stimulating, attractive, and suitable for the age group in question (e.g. rhythmic texts such as poems and nursery rhymes for the youngest children). Teaching grammar and spelling by means of excerpts from literary works (in the case of prose, usually slightly modified to better meet the needs of the school and the age of the pupils) is not a particularly new idea; however, it must be emphasised that its success depends on the nature of the text and the motivational role which it plays. Some literary texts – especially those that are old-fashioned, pompous, boring or far removed from the worldview and concerns of pupils – are of little use and tend to have a negative effect. Teachers should use stimulating contemporary texts which suggest or present issues to discuss or solve, problems to deal with, or tasks to address, develop or complete. It is this type of text that induces and facilitates communication with pupils in language teaching and stimulates them

to think about the wording, the meaning of the text, and its formal linguistic elements. Practical experience has confirmed that the use of appropriately chosen excerpts in mother-tongue textbooks can reinforce and fuel pupils' interest in reading.

Both the primary texts used as a basis for discussion and the accompanying exercises should be able to be applied in communication. The benchmark of quality in mother-tongue textbooks using a communicative approach is the thematic interconnection of texts, exercises and entire lessons as described above, provided that the textbook can be designed in such a thematically integrated way. Textbooks should no longer include hotchpotch of sentences with entirely unrelated content, "cobbled together" purely for the sake of the exercise and unified by nothing more than the presence of a particular detail of grammar or spelling. An essential feature of textbooks for younger schoolchildren should be a playful approach, a range of inventive tasks, and problem-solving exercises which engage pupils' attention and require untraditional, non-schematic approaches. Textbooks for all ages should integrate their exercises in order to provide a choice of several different ways of looking at the same text, in other words, different ways of viewing language and communication against the background of the same primary text. (In a way, this approach is really a modernised, communication-focused, enriched and de-schematised version of a general linguistic analysis.)

3. The training and education of future mother-tongue teachers in the communicative spirit described here cannot be limited solely to undergraduate university studies. Research carried out in the Ostrava region in recent years has shown that many practising teachers would welcome further education which addressed these issues. In 2002 teacher-respondents at primary schools in the wider Ostrava area expressed their degree of agreement with the following four views:

1. Current Czech language curricula fully correspond with the abilities and needs of pupils.
2. Writing lessons are well interlinked with the other teaching material.
3. There is a need for a new, modern version of curricula (applying a comprehensive view).
4. There is no point in thinking up innovations; the best approach is the traditional one.

The greatest degree of agreement was with the third view (almost 90%), while the last, conservative view was expressed by only 14% of the respondents. We see this as a useful signal that the large majority of teachers do not wish to remain in a comfortable traditional rut. This view should prove to be a very good basis for

the creation of high-quality, well-thought-out and useful school curricula which will ensure that the teaching of mother-tongue Czech in the subject group *Language and Linguistic Communication* will demonstrate true comprehensiveness not just between subjects, but also within the subject itself.

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