Abstract

The problem statement of this study is: what is the role of communication, in general, and of discursive strategies, in particular, in the theoretical and practical training of pre-school and primary school teachers? I sought the answer to this question in a particular context, i.e. the education system of Romania: on the one hand, in the current curricula and syllabi pertaining to courses in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary School Education (as taught in Romanian universities) and on the other in the opinions of students and mentors involved in this initial training process.

Keywords: communication; discursive strategies; initial teacher training; curriculum; teaching practice.

1. Introduction

The issue of communication, in general, and of discursive strategies, in particular, is highly topical. Specialist theoretical literature reflects themes such as the process of communication in different contexts, elements of discourse analysis, communicative strategies, aspects related to conversation, the markers of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and contextualisation in various communication situations, etc. Another category of studies deals, on one hand, with issues related to the practical training of students for teaching various subjects at different levels of education, the theory-practice relationship, the student-mentor communication relationship, etc., and, on the other hand, with aspects of the practice of novice or experienced teachers and with inter- and intra-communication elements – within the framework of so-called reflective practice. As the theme is vast and multifaceted, in this paper I have settled on identifying the role occupied by the particular dimensions of communication and discursive strategies in the initial training of pre-school and primary school teachers in Romania.

In exploring this problem, I aim to: (a) pinpoint the role occupied by communication, in general, and by discursive strategies, in particular, in the curricula and course syllabi pertaining to the initial training of pre-school and primary school teachers; (b) analyse the ways in which teaching practice tutors, on the one hand, and students engaged in practical training, on the other, relate to the issue of communicating with children of pre-school and primary school age; (c) identify avenues for improvement in order to optimise the relationship between theory and practice in the
area of communication and of the actualisation of discursive strategies in activities conducted in kindergarten and primary school.

For these purposes, on the one hand, I intend to review the curricula and syllabi of university-level training of preschool and primary school teachers in Romania and on the other to analyse the students’ and mentors’ answers to the structured interviews I conducted at Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences part of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi, Romania; the interviews were undertaken as part of the pedagogic practice activity of second and third-year students specialising in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education, carried out in kindergartens and primary schools in the city of Iasi, Romania, under the supervision of the interviewed mentors.

The key elements of the analysis – found both in the data under review here and elsewhere in specialist literature – will subsequently be distinguished as follows: (1) the theory-practice relationship in the training of teachers, in general, and on the level of the communication between student/ mentor – preschoolers/ young schoolchildren, in particular; (2) classroom communication – classroom discourse; and, following a general-to-specific approach, (3) discursive strategies and (4) messages actualised in communication with preschoolers/ young schoolchildren.

2. Theoretical approaches – links to the study

The themes that I aim explore have been dealt with extensively and intensively in specialist literature; among them, I will focus below – following a general-to-specific approach – on the expert views on the following dimensions of research: theory-practice – classroom communication/ discourse – discursive strategies – message.

2.1. Theory and practice in teacher training

The present paper follows the path of the actualisation, in activities led by students in the kindergarten and primary education system, of the essential links between theory, practice (Caires & Almeida, 2005; White, 2009 etc.) and experience (Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009), links that may help to solve the problems identified by students and mentors and reflected in the literature in the field by the so-called “gap” between theory (university courses, theoretical training, in general) and practice (Nilsson, 2008; Cheng et al., 2010 etc.).

Considering that experience characterises teachers who already teach, the aspect considered here is the relationship between theory and practice in the training of future teachers. Specialist literature provides ample and relevant perspectives and examples in this respect. Both predominantly theoretical studies and those dealing with issues identified in concrete training situations, in various education systems, lay emphasis on the need for the bijective relationship of the two realities, theory and practice.

Thus, on the one hand, the theory-practice injective relation consists in the fact that theory assimilated in courses/ seminars can provide students with the support needed to address the challenges they will encounter in the classroom (Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009) and offer them pedagogical knowledge and subject matter knowledge (Zeidler, 2002; Nilsson, 2008), which are necessary for them to plan and pursue an instructional-educational undertaking and to relate to it retrospectively, analytically and critically; it is paramount that students are able to translate “required knowledge into effective classroom practice” (Nilsson, 2008, p. 92) and in order to achieve this, students need contextual knowledge (Zeidler, 2002; Nilsson, 2008), which they acquire over time, in addition to the support of practicum mentors who ought “to help the student teachers put their learning from the teacher education programme into practice” (Cheng et al., 2010, p. 91). This points us to the importance of the quality of the mentors – along the lines of slogans such as “Teach as you preach” and “Walk your talk”, mentors must themselves be “good models of the kind of teaching they are trying to promote, in order to support their student teachers’ learning. […] Teacher educators should not confine themselves to (1) modelling, but should also (2) explain the choices they make while teaching (meta-commentary), and (3) link those choices to relevant theory” (Swennen et al., 2008, p. 531). These last elements are also in focus in the present paper: (1) modelling: students attend activities led by teachers and other student teachers – their peers during practicum – and answer the interview questions, based on these experiences; (2) meta-commentary: in discussions following demonstration activities, students will explain some of their options regarding communication with preschoolers or young school children; (3) linking practice and theory: in discussions between the tutor and the student and during university courses and seminars – an aspect considered in reviewing the curricula and syllabi in addition to certain answers of the interviewees.

On the other hand, the injective relationship between practice and theory enables the selection of the most appropriate theoretical directions and even their reconfiguration, based on the particular data of each educational context and on teaching experiences. Just as in communication usage makes/ changes the norm, at the level of
activities conducted in school, practice can reshape theory (indeed, the history of pedagogy, of specialised teaching approaches, etc. are evidence of this fact).

2.2. Classroom communication – classroom discourse

“A conversational theory of learning” (presented from multiple perspectives in specialist studies over the years) involves – at the level of training future teachers – interrelated processes such as: “interactivity”, “adaptivity”, “discursiveness” and “reflectivity” (White, 2009, p. 126). These processes and in particular the difficulties that students will encounter, in practice, as they attempt to apply them, justify the major focus given to the problem of communication and discourse in the classroom – as highlighted in this paper and in the investigative undertaking which I propose.

Given that linguistics, pragmatics, etc. studies focused on concepts such as communication, discourse, dialogue, conversation, discussion etc. (with the nuances each of these entail) are not the object of this study, I will deal in these concise theoretical distinctions only with certain elements which set apart classroom communication and classroom discourse and with the necessary contextualisation which they entail both for teachers and future teachers.

Studies in the field reflect, overall, the concern for optimising the process of teacher-pupil, teacher-parent, teacher-teacher, etc. communication and for distinct aspects pertaining to content specific to particular disciplines or areas of the curricula (for instance, studies on classroom communication in the fields of sciences, arts, physical education, foreign languages, etc.). Beyond such particularisations, the key notion is optimisation, which is why in this presentation I refer to suggestions and examples which are generally valid in classroom communication and, consequently, to those dimensions of classroom discourse that can be actualised in communication with preschoolers/ young school children (the object of the analysis intended for this paper).

Optimal classroom communication requires to “create an environment in which student comments and opinions are valued; create an environment in which students feel safe and comfortable in terms of expressing themselves; establish ground rules for classroom discourse, including respect for one another and no personal attacks; expect student contributions to classroom discourse; provide ample opportunities for students to practice argumentation skills” etc. (Sadler, 2006, p. 330-331); to challenge pupils to communicate both with reference to the scientific contents conveyed and with their own experiences, associated to a given learning situation (Dickson, 2005). Indeed, communication in general involves both the relation of both the speaker and the interlocutor (viewed not only as individual, but also as a group) to social and interactional contexts and to personal context (Rymes, 2008).

It has been acknowledged that “a conversation is an ongoing construction of interrelated agreements and understandings, of claims and presuppositions” (Bilmes, 2011, p. 123); moreover, by dint of his/ her communicative behaviour, the teacher determines “the type of student talk that occurred in the classroom” (Dickson, 2005, p. 119), an idea that has been reinforced by the more recent NLP [Neurolinguistic Programming] perspective on teachers’ discourse (see, for example, the concept of “teacher-learner congruence” – Millrood, 2004); in this context, the teacher’s responsibility is all the more important within the instructional-educational undertaking and beyond.

Many studies in the field have analysed the effectiveness of the classical triad Initiation – Response – Feedback/ Follow-up (IRF) in general or particular contexts (Pontefract & Hardman, 2005; Lin, 2008 etc.); beyond the claims or the counterclaims of the actualisation of this exchange sequence in the classroom communication, beyond the prevalence of dialogic or monologic, democratic or authoritarian, etc. discourse, there remains the reality of the use of this construct in school practice – obviously with various valencies, on a case by case basis.

The sequence of responses and the alternating roles in the classroom communication/ discourse presuppose, on the one hand, proper knowledge of the specific elements of communication in the educational context and, on the other, the opening up to communication of all the parties involved. Literature in the field draws attention, for instance, to the importance of listening to the interlocutor (Browne, 2007) – laying emphasis on the role of listener of both the pupil and the teacher (cautioning against any authoritarian drift in the style of the latter). The various roles assumed by the teacher have been highlighted in a “Dance Metaphor for Discourse Moves” (a metaphor adopted by Krussel, Edwards and Springer from Ruth Heaton): “Teacher as Choreographer – writes the script (plan, outline) for a sequence of discourse moves. […] Teacher as Director – structures the scene (classroom setting) and determines the rules and roles of the players (students). […] Teacher as Dancer – participates in the improvisational performance (the discourse). Improvisational dancing requires careful attention to the moves made by the other participants and responding with moves that “make sense,” as well as provide opportunities for further moves from the other participants” (Krussel, Edwards, & Springer, 2004, p. 310).

In this “dance” of communication, both verbal (involving the paraverbal) and nonverbal forms of discourse are actualised. At a more particular level, the verbal form of a teacher’s discourse move may consist of: “challenge
2.3. Discursive strategies

The need to grasp varied discourse forms and to actualise different discursive strategies (“such as focused questioning, using analogy, and telling ‘explanatory stories’” – D. P. Newton & L. D. Newton, 2000, p. 609), customised for each educational context, has been emphasised both in specialist literature and in the ideas put forward by the respondents.

Classroom communication involves a range of central issues such as: learning, relating to the others and to certain contents, participation. Hence the references, in the literature in the field, to:

(a) IRF exchange structure and capitalising on “participative strategies” and “teacher feedback strategies” (Pontefract & Hardman, 2005, p. 93, 97); linked with these – a series of “typical adjacency pairs” which, when internalised over time by the persons involved in communication, lend a certain degree of predictability to classroom communication: “Greeting/ Greeting; Question/ Answer; Invitation/ Acceptance; Assessment/ Disagreement; Apology/ Acceptance; Summons/ Acknowledgement” (Rymes, 2008, p. 55);

(b) the association between learning and “exploratory talk” (McVittie, 2004, p. 502);

(c) the prevalence of certain discourse strategies relevant for “the construction of role identity”, strategies which emerge as “ways in which speakers use language to situate themselves in relation to others: reported speech, mimicked speech, pronoun shifts, oppositional portraits, inference of others’ beliefs, and prescriptive language” (Cohen, 2008, p. 84);

(d) communicative actions presupposed by teacher talk in classroom discourse, i.e. communicative acts such as: “provides direct instruction”; “interrogative (asks questions)”; “responsive (answers questions)”; “encourages (gives praise/ compliments)”; “reminds (reminds students of rules/ procedures/ tasks)”; “invites student to participate/ share/ make connections”; “repeats information (to clarify or reteach)” ; “conferences with students”; “tutors or conferences with students”; “addresses off-task behaviour”; “summarizes (text or student statements)” ; “shares personal experiences/ anecdotes” ; “casual conversation with students (laughing/ joking with students)” ; “lectures”; “reads aloud” (Dickson, 2005, p. 115, table 9.2.);

(e) NLP techniques (actualised during a workshop presented by Millrood, 2004) which can be utilised in teacher-pupil communication: “establishing a rapport between the teacher and learner/s (building an interpersonal contact with the learner through support, interaction, and empathy); modelling the learner (offering strategies for the learners to achieve better results); creating a learner filter (monitoring ‘correct’/’incorrect’ knowledge or behaviour); pacing with the learner (achieving harmony of teaching and learning in rate, style, and production); leading the learner (introducing a cognitive challenge for the learner); elicitation with learner (guiding the learner to an output); calibration of the learner (recognizing individual differences in learners); re-framing the approach” etc. (Millrood, 2004, p. 30).

2.4. Message

The main challenge faced by students during teaching practice and by novice teachers is the appropriate formulation of tasks and questions; these must be tailored to the age-group and individual characteristics of children/pupils and must match the didactic and discursive strategy type optimal in a given moment of the instructional-educational undertaking. Hence the emphasis, in this part of my study, on the issue of questions – as it has been reflected in specialist studies.

Contextualising questions presupposes choosing the appropriate question, optimally directing it, customising it if needed, etc., all of which are crucial aspects of classroom interaction; as a matter of fact, “there are a variety of ways to use questions. Some are used to glean unknown information while others are used to check student knowledge. Pseudo questions, for example, are used to determine if students understand concepts or know certain facts. […] Questions may also serve as directives. A misbehaving student may be asked a question to get him or her back on task” (R. G. Powell & L. Powell, 2010, p. 217); furthermore, “some teacher questions are not inviting a spoken
response but are rhetorical in that they require no answer (e.g., ‘Shall we begin?’), or illocutionary in that they generate an action (e.g., ‘Will you get your pens out, please?’) – Myhill, 2006, p. 25.

Along the same lines of analysis, R. G. Powell and L. Powell (2010) refer to the three levels of questions identified by Cunningham, which can all be observed (obviously, to different degrees) in classroom discourse: factual recall questions (involving, on the part of the student, actions such as naming, identifying, distinguishing, etc.), conceptualization questions (convergent and divergent questions) and evaluative questions (which cause the students to put forward value judgements, to formulate questions, to make a case for their claims etc.).

An interesting summary of the form and function of questions can be found in the study conducted by Myhill (2006). Question forms are illustrated by questions with predetermined answer, open-ended questions (see, in this respect, the emphasis of the importance of open-ended questions in other studies in the field; e.g., Dickson, 2005 – which points to the fact that it is not enough to tell children/ pupils to talk, write, read, calculate, etc., but that one must encourage students to express their ideas and find their own solutions: “the teacher modelled inquiry, discussion, and interpersonal skills” – Dickson, 2005, p. 112), procedural questions (pertaining to the management of the lesson), process questions (referring to what the pupils have understood). The function of questions is exemplified in the cited study by elements such as: class management, factual elicitation, cued elicitation, building on content, building on thinking, recapping, practising skills, checking prior knowledge, developing vocabulary, checking understanding, developing reflection; it must be noted that in Myhill’s study, “over 60% of all questions asked are factual […] children are most likely to be engaged in interactions where they are required to supply an answer to a question to which the teacher already knows the acceptable response” (Myhill, 2006, p. 26-27).

The students and mentors I interviewed were well aware of this fact; at least for students, it is easier to capitalise on such questions during pedagogic practice; however, rather frequently, there are cases when the level of the answers supplied by the children/ pupils is not as expected, and student teachers are confounded (the projected sequence of questions does not match the actual communication in the classroom and more often than not gridlocks can arise).

3. Method, data and analysis

The study draws on the qualitative analysis of the following elements: (1) the current curricula and syllabi pertaining to courses in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary School Education (as taught in Romanian universities); (2) data gathered by interviewing teaching practice tutors and 2nd and 3rd-year students – majors in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary School Education (enrolled at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi, Romania).

For the purposes of the first direction of analysis (3.1.), I referred to the curricula and syllabi of disciplines required for specialising in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary School, at 9 universities in Romania: “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi; “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad; “I Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia; “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati; “Stefan cel Mare” University of Suceava; “Transilvania” University of Brasov; University of Pitesti; “Valahia” University of Targoviste and West University of Timisoara.

The second direction of my study (3.2.) consists in assessing the answers given in the structured interviews which I conducted with pedagogic practice mentors with whom I have collaborated over the past 5 years and with a number of students from the faculty classes for which I was in charge of pedagogic practice during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Participants: the study included 18 Romanian preschool and primary school teachers (10 preschool and 8 primary school teachers, of which 14 are graduates of the Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education specialisation, Iasi) and 20 students enrolled in the second and in the third year of the undergraduate programme in the Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education, at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences part of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi, Romania (10 2nd-year students and 10 3rd-year students) who volunteered to participate.

Structure of the interview: in my study, the interview was constructed using the basic interview structure, with questions focusing on four major dimensions: (a) the role of communication in training students and the actualisation of communication within pedagogic practice in classroom communication; (b) the discursive strategies known and capitalised upon in communicating with preschoolers/ young school children; (c) the various valencies of the messages actualised in classroom discourse; (d) certain suggestions/ potential avenues for improving student training in order to optimise communication with preschoolers/ young school children.

Taking into account the fact that there were two categories of respondents (student teachers and mentors), I adapted this basic structure to the features of each category. Two types of interviews emerged: (1) an eleven-
question interview targeting 2nd and 3rd-year undergraduates, dealing with how they relate, on the one hand, to the theoretical contents acquired during the university courses/seminars and on the other with the positive and negative aspects they identified during teaching practice, in terms of the communication (their own and that of their colleagues whose activities they attended) with preschoolers/young school children; and (2) a twelve-question interview aimed at preschool and primary school teachers who served as mentors for the students during practicum.

The questions focused on how the mentors related to the role of communication in the university-based training of students, what they noticed—in terms of communication and discursive strategies—in the activities led by students during pedagogic practice and what they observed—from the same perspective—in their own activities conducted over time. Both sets of questions also aimed to elicit suggestions for improving the students' training in the area of communication with preschoolers/young school children.

To facilitate the processing of the data, I numbered the interview transcriptions according to the category of respondents: preschool teachers (Tp) – from 1 to 10 (Tp/1, Tp/2, ..., Tp/10); primary school teachers (Ts) – from 1 to 8 (Ts/1, Ts/2, ..., Ts/8); for 2nd-year students (S2) – from 1 to 10 (S2/1, S2/2, S2/3, ..., S2/10); and similarly for 3rd-year students (S3) – S3/1, S3/2, ..., S3/10.

3.1. Document analysis. The role of communication in the curricula and syllabi for the Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education din Romania

The review of the 9 curricula and associated syllabi (at the 9 Romanian universities included in this study) shows that the issue of communication, in general, and of communication with preschoolers/young school children, in particular, is dealt with, in the initial training of preschool and primary school teachers, through:

(a) compulsory subjects: Romanian language (studies for 1 semester at the universities of Iasi, Alba Iulia, Arad, Brasov, Galati and Timisoara; 2 semesters at the University of Targoviste; 4 semesters at the universities of Pitesti and Suceava); Romanian literature and children’s literature (studied for 1 semester at the universities of Iasi, Alba Iulia, Arad, Brasov, Galati and Targoviste; 2 semesters at the University of Suceava; 3 semesters at the universities of Pitesti and Timisoara); Didactics/methodology of language education activities or the Didactics of the experience-based field Language and communication (studied for 1 semester at the universities of Iasi, Alba Iulia, Arad, Brasov, Galati, Pitesti, Targoviste and Timisoara; 2 semesters at the University of Suceava); Didactics/teaching methodology of Romanian language and literature for primary education (with the same distribution in the curricula as in the previous subject); generally, the specialised teaching didactics involving communication with preschoolers/young school children by way of reference to contents from mathematics, arts education, musical education, history, geography, etc. (all provided with one semester in the curricula under review);

(b) various optional subjects: (1) subjects which focus on particular elements in the sphere of communication: (Elements of) Logopedics, Elements of speech therapy, Children’s speech therapy, Communication and education/Educational communication, Psycho-pedagogy of communication, The text-image-play interaction in children’s education, Argumentation and writing techniques, Elements of composition and style, Multimedia in education, Management of disruptive behaviour in the educational group (subjects taught at the universities of Iasi, Alba Iulia, Arad, Brasov, Galati, Pitesti, Suceava and Timisoara); (2) subjects dealing with particular elements pertaining to the Romanian language: Dynamics of the contemporary Romanian language/Current trends in the Romanian language, Issues in normative grammar, Theory and practice of grammatical analytical, Phraseology of the Romanian language, Functional styles in the Romanian language (subjects taught at the universities of Galati and Pitesti); (3) subjects which explore particular elements in the sphere of literature: Movement of models in children’s literature, Children’s folklore, Literary analysis techniques, Ethnology and folklore, World literature—children’s literature, Teenage literature (subjects studied at the universities of Galati, Pitesti, Suceava and Targoviste); (4) subjects which deal with particular elements in the area of communication: Didactics of the curriculum area I Language and Communication, Psycho-pedagogy of metaphor and drama (subjects taught at the universities of Galati and Brasov); (5) subjects related to native language and its didactics: Elements of native literature for children (Hungarian, German, Roma) and Teaching methodology for native languages (Hungarian, German, Roma) taught at the university of Arad.

Both the subjects included in the curricula and the contents proposed in the syllabi illustrate the predominantly theoretical orientation of students’ training in the field of communication; as regards the discursive strategies, they do not feature separately as a course, instead they emerge—sporadically—as themes approached in courses/seminars in Romanian language, Educational communication, Didactics of language education activities and Didactics of Romanian language and literature.
3.2. Pedagogic practice assessment. Theory and practice at the level of communication and discursive strategies – the perspective of the interviewed students and mentors

The common thread of my study (developed in the second part of this paper, through references to specialist works) follows the path: theory-practice – classroom communication/ discourse – discursive strategies – message. Retracing this path, at this stage I aimed to analyse the answers supplied by the 2nd and 3rd year students and by the mentors whom I interviewed (all of whom were involved in the ongoing pedagogic practice programme at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania), dealing with four major directions: (1) classroom communication; (2) discursive strategies; (3) message; and (4) improving the training for communication with preschoolers/ young school children of students enrolled in the Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education programme. All of the above fall within the scope of the reflection on the relationship between theory and practice in the training of future teachers.

3.2.1. Classroom communication

I considered this component of my study by analysing the answers to the questions dealing with:

(a) how students relate to the issues surrounding communication with preschoolers/ young school children: students argue that the relationship is of a more theoretical nature, yet are aware of the importance of correlating theory and practice: e.g. “I believe that, for the purposes of effective communication, the two directions – both the theoretical and the practical – should be combined” (S2/3); “although initially I tried to strictly follow the theoretical frameworks, as a result of practice I have concluded that nothing is set in stone and that you must always adjust to the needs of the particular group and situation” (S3/1); the views of students are shared by the mentors who, in addition to emphasising the students’ predominantly theoretical approach to communication, denounce the shallowness of such an approach and the insufficient time allocated by students to getting to know preschoolers/ young school children and to interacting with them in various contexts (during breaks, during trips, etc.), not only during activities/ taught lessons;

(b) approaching the issue of communication in the current initial training programmes for preschool and primary school teachers: students’ and mentors’ answers (the 14 mentors holding BA degrees in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education and are, therefore, familiar with these programmes) are divided between asserting the prevalence of the theoretical approach and referencing the link between theory and practice (owing to the Pedagogic practice subject in particular); there was a unanimous agreement on the need to extend the field of communication (especially its practical component) in student training; I found two of the opinions to be illustrative in this respect: “I consider that an independent course on communication is a must” (S2/2) and “in theoretical terms, greater emphasis should be placed on the age-related characteristics of language […] and, on the practical level, it is highly necessary to emphasise/ extend the time allocated to practising one’s communication skills in an actual educational context” (Tp/6); further to the conclusions of the analysis of the curricula and syllabi (at the 9 universities considered for the purposes of this research), the students’ answers indicate that references were also made to communication with preschoolers/ young school children in subjects such as: Psychology of education, Developmental psychology, Foundations of pedagogy, Foundations of psychology, Pedagogy of preschool and primary education, Classroom management, Theory and methodology of training;

(c) students’ awareness of the characteristics of preschoolers/ young school children: according to the students, these characteristics were studied appropriately during courses such as Developmental psychology, Foundations of psychology, Psychology of education, yet adequate knowledge is predominantly confined to the level of theory; only two female students, who are also parents, declared that they have an excellent grasp of these characteristics, both in view of their theoretical training in university and, in particular, considering the day-to-day interaction with their own children; the mentors’ opinions reinforces this idea: they argue that student teachers have a more limited grasp of these characteristics and deplore the gap between theoretical training (through subjects studied in the first year in particular) and pedagogic practice undertaken in kindergartens and schools (where students conduct activities only beginning in the second year); as a matter of fact, during observation practice in the first year of studies, students do not possess sufficient data to be able know what they should pay attention to.

3.2.2. Discursive strategies

This area of research was covered by analysing the answers to the questions focusing on:

(a) the students’ level of mastery of discursive strategies: after attending the activities conducted by student teachers during pedagogic practice, the mentors argued that the majority of students had inadequate knowledge of discursive strategies, warning that “often they only repeat a prepared and probably rehearsed speech” (Ts/1); in fact,
the mentors believe that, in general, the students fail to consciously and deliberately capitalise on certain discursive strategies in their communication with preschoolers/ school children: “a large proportion of students do it intuitively, naively, involuntarily” (Ts/2);

(b) capitalising on discursive strategies: using predominantly the specialised language of didactics (an aspect which confirms that the issue of discursive strategies did not represent a separate theme in the courses/ seminars part of the training programme), the students stated that during pedagogic practice they had used conversation, explanation, observation, description, algorithmisation, exposition, story-telling, interactive dialogue, monologue (aloud), information, role play, brainstorming, learning by discovery; another type of answer correlates discursive strategy with the student-teacher relationship and with adapting the message to the characteristics of preschoolers/ young children; e.g. “I spoke to them clearly. I used as few suggestive words as possible to formulate requests. I always tried to ensure that I made myself understood. I always kept eye contact with the interlocutor/interlocutors. I made maximum use of facial expressions. Indirectly, based on my approach, I assured the young ones of my kindness and good intentions for them, inspiring in them a sense of emotional security” (S2/2); “I adapted the presentation of the message/ content to the level of the preschoolers/ young school children to ensure that they understand the message” (S3/5); the mentors’ experience is reflected by the discursive strategies which they declared that they had successfully put into use in their teaching activity: e.g. encouraging children to express their opinions, inductive argumentation, persuasion by emphasising the emotional side (Tp/6), “reading stories and theatres (both strategies played a major role in building a proper emotional core), explanations (required for the adequate structuring of mental schemes) and conversations (with a major role in socialisation), […] enactments, […] debates based on arguments, […] a child presenting a particular point of view in front of the colleagues” (Tp/8);

(c) the students’ tailoring of discursive strategies to the characteristics of the preschoolers/ young school children and to the educational context where communication occurs: students’ answers refer to the valencies of teaching materials (maps, films, scale models etc.) and of certain teaching methods (didactic game, explanation, conversation, exercise, etc.) and respectively to the valencies of nonverbal and paraverbal communication, as a complement of verbal communication; as regards the mentors’ opinion, they laid emphasis on the difficulties faced by the students (some of which could be explained by the insufficient interest in pedagogic practice): “almost all students have the tendency to address preschoolers abruptly, while standing, up, omitting to sit down at the children’s line of sight and failing to engage in personalised communication with each individual child. Most students do not seem able to anticipate the preschoolers’ behaviour in various communication contexts, which confounds students or causes them to panic” (Tp/8); “the children are not invited to verbalise, to explain, and students do not provide additional explanations, therefore communication is confined to what they wrote in their lesson plan. Any deviation from the lesson plan, any additional question from the children (for student teachers who had not foreseen it) inhibit and confound them” (Ts/5).

3.2.3. Message

Out of the multitude of valencies that the message can take on in classroom discourse, I focused on a range of particular aspects such as:

(a) formulating tasks: in their answers, students warned that they had faced problems in formulating questions and tasks targeting children in a certain group/ class – they did not choose words that were easily understood by children, used verbal forms that were too elaborate, they had aimed for a much too large number of tasks considering the children’s abilities, etc.; e.g. “we should be like actors on the scene, playing a role in front of the young ones and not be bogged in useless theories and explanations” (S2/3); the same issues were highlighted by the mentors, who added the gaps between tasks listed in the lesson plan and in the actual classroom (Ts/4), the insufficient knowledge of the contents of the curricula (hence the much too difficult or too simple tasks), inflexibility in the event of a “change of script” compared what had been projected (Ts/3);

(b) customising the messages according to the age-related and personal characteristics of the preschoolers/ young school children: students argue that they were largely able to adapt messages conveyed to the children to their age (yet the analysed answer did not feature references to the individual characteristics of any children), a claim they justify by achieving the proposed goals and by pointing to the help given by the mentors; the difficulty of such adjustment is emphasised by a single student: “with the interaction between myself and the children, I learnt, in practice, what it means to adapt my messages to the characteristics of the children. Thus, although I possessed the theoretical knowledge, at first it was quite difficult for me to customise everything so that the little ones could understand” (S2/7); on this point, the mentors do not share the students’ view, arguing that the student teachers were merely “striving” and “attempting”; the successful adaptation by students of their messages to the characteristics of
the children is linked to observing the mentors’ own recommendations, while failure is penalised by the pupils themselves, who “asked for additional information, clarifications and even translated the message to their colleagues (Ts/4);

(c) types of messages actualised by the students in their communication with preschoolers/ young school children – both students and mentors were asked to choose between the following three types of messages, corresponding to locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: (1) messages which convey certain contents/ information (particular concern for the correctness of the information and one’s own expression); (2) messages serving as advice, request, order, warning, promise, etc.; (3) messages intended to have a particular effect on the children; although they pointed out the importance of perlocutionary acts (the third type of message) and of capitalising on all the types of messages when communicating with preschoolers/ young primary school children, student teachers admitted that during practicum they mainly used locutionary acts; a brief explanation by a third year student is indicative in this respect: “I chose answer (1) [i.e. messages conveying certain contents/ information] as during the lessons I led I strove to comply with the prepared lesson plan (S3/8); the mentors asserted the same idea: students mainly used locutionary acts because of their need for safety (Tp/1, Ts/2, Ts/3 etc.), predictability (hence “falling into the trap of one’s own lesson plan” – Tp/8) and out of lack of experience (Tp/5).

3.2.4. Improving the training of students specialising in Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education in the area of communication with preschoolers/ young primary school children

This component of my study provides a summary of the main suggestions/ avenues for improvement of the training of students, as put forward by the mentors and by the students themselves. Based on their teaching experience, the mentors propose: laying emphasis not only on training discursive skills but also on relational ones; organising as many simulations of teaching activities during seminars; familiarising students with NLP techniques and rhetoric elements; organising seminars featuring teachers who work with children from all social settings (to reduce the gap between what students observe in the elite kindergartens/ primary schools where they undertake teaching practice and the actual classroom reality, in other environments, after graduation); exercising, during seminars, the formulation of questions of various types, pre-empting answers, proposing different tasks adjusted to the individual capacity of children, preparing for the unexpected. As regards the students, they would consider useful the following steps: organising seminars providing models of activities and examples of concrete ways of approaching children on the first days of kindergarten/ school; constant documentation – including with materials describing the most frequent situations arising in kindergarten/school; practising, in courses/ seminars, the formulation of as many tasks as possible, for different age groups. The suggestions put forward by mentors and students share the emphasis on the need to increase the number of hours allocated to pedagogic practice (including by means of integrated intensive practice over the course of a few weeks).

4. Conclusion

The analysis yielded the following findings: the curricula and course syllabi pertaining to the initial training of pre-school and primary school teachers exhibit a predominantly theoretical orientation in actualising the issues related to communication (both in compulsory and in optional subjects). As regards discursive strategies, they do not feature separately as a course; furthermore, when references to such strategies do occur in the fields of language, literature, communication and specialised didactics, they are quite sporadic, unstructured and lack examples.

This reality is reflected by the opinions of teacher trainers and students, who confirm the prevalence of the theoretical level in the training of students for communication with preschoolers/ young school children; at the same time, teacher trainers believe that, during practical activities, discursive strategies are either not consciously actualised by the students or, if actualised, they are not properly adapted to the particular characteristics of children and to the dimensions of the educational context respectively.

As regards the actualisation of different types of messages in classroom discourse, one may notice the emphasis placed on locutionary acts to the detriment of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts that might have a more substantial impact in terms of educating children to enable them to cope with the current realities of communication. Moreover, while students are concerned with adapting the messages conveyed to the individual characteristics of preschoolers/ young school children, they point to difficulties encountered in this area, namely in formulating tasks and questions addressed to children.

In order to optimise the relationship between theory and practice in the area of communication and of actualisation of discursive strategies in activities conducted in kindergarten and in primary school, it is necessary to
focus on the applied component of initial teacher training. This idea was highlighted both by the mentors and by the students interviewed as part of this study and was further confirmed by results yielded following the analysis of the curricula and syllabi of the subjects which form the initial training of preschool and primary school teachers in Romania.

In this respect, potential avenues for subsequent development in this area include: resizing/adjusting certain components of the course syllabi (theoretical and didactic), conducting activities that shift the emphasis from the locutionary to the illocutionary and the perlocutionary, proposing compulsory and/or optional disciplines that would explore and implement discursive strategies in various educational contexts (in teacher-student, teacher-teacher or teacher-parent communication etc.).

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