

CONVERSATION AND STELLAR EXPLOSION – INTERACTIVE METHODS FOR BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN PRE- PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The formative impact of interactive methods has been increasingly lying at the centre of methodological arguments among teachers in the last 10 years. For pre-school education, rediscovering, adjusting and using interactive methods, classic as well as modern, has been a real challenge. From this perspective, this study aims at analyzing and illustrating the way in which the methods of conversation and stellar explosion may be exploited in the intellectual education of preschoolers. Concretely, we shall look at their contribution to developing preschoolers' communication skills through activities of “Language education”, conducted systematically within the experiential field of “Language and communication”.

Key words: communication skills, conversation, stellar explosion, pre-primary education

1. Contemporary directions regarding the importance of reevaluation of interactive methods in preschool teaching

In our contemporary society there is a rapid process of changing which attracts the fact that all social classes need to be up-to-date with the evolution of society, including education. In complete agreement with the modernization of teaching, projects of promoting national modern strategies were initiated in order to answer the needs of the Romanian society. The contemporary preschool teaching aims at developing a quality early education through an integral approach to children's behaviour, formative approaches with an integrated character and active involvement of the family and community in the whole educational process.

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The road to the formation and development of a child is mainly determined by the method used. The methods are “levers available to the educator, the knowledge of which ensures the efficiency of educational work” (Cojocariu, 2008b, p.36). The use of interactive group methods triggers the capacity to operate the exchange of ideas and experiences, work together and negotiate, skills students will need during the educational process and also in real life.

A teaching method can be defined as a “path or manner of working used by the two partners (educated-educator) to achieve the aims of the instructive-educational process” (Cucoş, 2005, p.143). The knowing and using of methods in kindergarten does not necessarily demand a rigorous classification, but rather an analysis of the way in which they are applied. A characteristic of the methods used in kindergarten is the fact that they have to be adapted to the child’s level of development, in order to target their personality and ensure the complete achievement of the inter-subjective educator-student interaction.

The main methods used for the preschool age are: games, story-telling, conversation, demonstration, observation, exercise, explanation. The methods reevaluated in a kindergarten group will be carefully chosen, according to the other components of didactic strategies (ways of teaching, forms of organization) and will be associated as to avoid monotony. Methods should be selected according to the didactic task, this opening opportunities for the adequacy of methods. On the different ages of preschool teaching process, educators need to use and combine different methods or procedures, in complete agreement with the children’s needs, their wishes or abilities.

2. Interactive methods and ways of reevaluating them in kindergarten

The interactive methods are “those methods which promote interactive learning, are oriented towards the enhancement of interaction and inter-relating within the students’ group; they lead, in an organized way, either in the group, class of students, small groups or pairs, to the construction of interactivity, being the ones that encourage free exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences, opinion and arguments, in order to reach a shared construction of opinions, problem elucidation and solving” (Cerghit, 2006, p. 75).

Conversation is an oral communication method, interrogative or conversational, based on a set of questions and answers between the teacher and children, with the purpose of leading to the achievement and evaluation of knowledge. Regarding language development, conversation is a type of mediated learning, through which the child acquires new knowledge by using previous information and experiences (E. Voiculescu, 2003).

In our opinion, there are two fundamental types of conversation which can be analyzed (Cojocariu, 2008b, p.43-48):

a) *heuristic conversation (Socratic, maieutic)* – is the type of conversation whose purpose is identifying (discovering) a set of truths by the students, as a result of a search effort. The main work instrument of this method is the *question*.

b) *catechetical conversation (examining)* is the type of conversation whose function is to establish the level of knowledge the student has at a certain point in time.

In a kindergarten group, conversation can be inserted in all types of activities, experimental areas and also in games, chosen activities and personal development ones. The modern development of didactic methodology has led to types of strongly interactive conversation, which can combine the heuristic and catechetical characteristics (according to the context and didactic task) and can magnify the attractive and motivating character of the teaching process. The stellar explosion is one of these methods.

According to Breben et al. (2002), the *stellar explosion* is a method that stimulates creativity, relaxes children and is based on formulating questions to solve problems and make new discoveries. The method consists in building questions and connections between discovering ideas through interaction and individually, in order to solve a problem. Various material supports may be used: a big star, five small yellow stars, five red arrows, cards. The stages of this method are the following:

- Children seated in a semicircle suggest the problem to be solved. The main idea is written or drawn on the big star.
- On the five stars, the teacher writes a wh-question: WHAT?, WHO?, WHERE?, WHY?, WHEN? and five students from the group choose a question each.

Each student of the five chooses three or four classmates, thus making five groups.

- The groups cooperate in making the questions.
- When the time limit ends, the students go back to the semicircle around the big star and say the questions either to a representative of the group, either individually, according to the group potential.

The students in the other groups answer the questions or make questions for the answers.

- The accent is placed on students making questions, their effort to elaborate them correctly and their way of cooperating and interacting

3. The development of communicative skills at the preschool age as a result of intellectual education through interactive methods

3.1. Intellectual education

Intellectual education is the cognitive dimension of the activities regarding the formation and development of human personality – on a psychological and methodological level – and which are projected/accomplished on a superior and logical level (Cristea, 1998, apud Cojocariu, 2008a). In the education of preschool children, intellectual education takes a very important place, without being considered a fundamental task.

The purpose of intellectual education at the preschool age is the widening of the child's cultural horizon, designed according to the specific age skills, and the stimulation of the intellectual development in each child, according to their own interests and abilities. The objectives of intellectual education in kindergarten include the achievement of new elementary information, needed for adaptation to the natural and social environment, the formation of basic intellectual skills and cognitive training.

The types of activities which contribute to intellectual education belong to the areas of knowledge and to all forms of activity: games and chosen activities, experimental and personal development activities, and mostly activities which are based on developing language, mathematic and environmental skills. The efficient didactic strategies in intellectual education combine active-participative methods, mainly based on communication, discovering reality and practicing cognitive skills.

The contents of intellectual education are chosen according to its contribution to:

- sensorial stimulation (correct perception, rich representations, development of observation skills);
- involvement of thought processes and operations, and language development;
- attention training (mainly voluntary attention);
- building elementary skills in intellectual work.

We consider that intellectual education becomes the main support for an authentic personality. "Teaching children to learn" represents not only an objective of intellectual education, but also an important acquisition for learning and motivation, an aspiration towards knowing and a wish to acquire knowledge in a certain field.

3.2. *The ability to communicate at the preschool age*

Dumitriu (1998) defines *communication* as being a fundamental way of psychological interaction, a continuous exchange of different messages between speakers, meant to build a lasting inter-human relation, in order to influence the maintenance or modification of individual or group behavior. Communication can be classified according to different criteria, mostly based on the way of accomplishment: oral and written communication; the channel used: verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication.

The communicative skill conveys, in the case of the human species, the possibility to interact with others, establish an informational exchange and use signs and symbols whose significance is determined conventionally (Gherghina et al., 2007). The development of communicative skills in kindergarten is one of the major objectives which is accomplished gradually, by widening the verbal relations with the people around us, under the circumstances of the child's curiosity towards the surrounding on one hand, and the interrogative attitude regarding the origin and cause of certain phenomena, on the other hand.

In order to form communicative skills in kindergarten children, the educator needs to have in mind the essential characteristics of language at this age. Among these, there are:

- the increase of expressivity through the content and structure of sentences, through epithets, comparisons;
- the movement from the inner language towards the exterior one – often, while playing, the child has dialogues with himself;
- the development of morphology and syntax in speaking (the ability to pronounce and the grammatical agreement are generally corrected);
- the functions of language and communication, cognitive skills and organizing activities appear simultaneously.

There are several interrelated stages in the process of forming communicative skills: listening to others, reproducing through imitation, building the personal verbal system, consolidating it by daily practice, preventing deficiencies and correcting speaking. Instruction situations which involve communication are diversified according to the ways and methods that the educator can use. In order to support our theoretical analysis and ensure its practical utility, we shall provide an example of how conversation and stellar explosion can be integrated as a methodological structure in the experiential field of “Language and communication”, the activity of “Language education”, in order to form communication skills at the preschool age.

Table 1. *Example of integrating the conversation method at “Language and communication” in pre-primary education*

Elements	Example
Title	“Why do we like spring?” – colloquy
Main objective	Consolidation of skills in building declarative, exclamatory, interrogative, simple and complex sentences
Didactic materials	- A basket with cards representing different fruits and vegetables, spring flowers, phenomena specific to spring; - A board with images of different aspects in nature and work field, in spring
Events of the educational activity	The teacher announces the title of the colloquy and introduces the resources needed in making the sentences. The teacher will ask a few general questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What season is it now? - What are the other seasons of the year? - Which are the spring months? - What do people do in this season? - What are the characteristics of spring? - Do you like spring? Why? Helping questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which are the migratory birds that come back to our country in spring? - Which are the first flowers that bloom in spring? - Which are characteristic natural phenomena in spring? - What do children do in spring? The children will make sentences of 2, 3, 4 and 5 words using the cards in the baskets. After each set of questions they will make partial syntheses using pictures, songs, poems. The teacher will ask the children to transform the declarative sentences the teacher or other children have said into interrogative or exclamatory sentences.

Table 2. *Example of integrating the stellar explosion at “Language and communication” in pre-primary education*

Elements	Example
Title	“A geese story”, by George Coşbuc – the teacher reading
Main objective	Practicing the ability to make interrogative sentences
Didactic materials	- silhouettes: geese, a drake; a bridge, huge shoes; stars
Events of the educational activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The children listen to the poem and identify the problem: to find the drake’s shoes. The big star is caught on the huge shoes, made during the practical activities. 2. Game-exercise to make groups – “Geese – children’s friends: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They simulate the dialogue between the geese and the children. - the geese ask the children to choose a star. They make five groups according to the five questions written on the stars. 3. The children take the stars, read the question, discuss it in the group, work together in making questions in order to recover the drake’s shoes, thus helping the geese. 4. When the time is up, on a signal from the geese, the children gather on an imaginary bridge and say the questions they have thought of. Each of the five groups asks other questions to complete those of their classmates. 5. The most interesting questions are chosen, those whose answers suggest possible solutions for recovering the lost shoes. If the ending is a happy one, the children select what they liked most from the poem about the huge shoes or cut out stars which the teacher will stick to the most

	<p>interesting questions. There are formulated the following questions: WHAT? - What did the drake loose?; What was the drake's problem? WHO? - Who helps the drake?; who comes together with the geese? WHEN? - When did the drake loose his shoes?; -When did he notice he had lost them?; - When do you think he will find them? WHERE? - Where was the drake going to?; - Where did he loose his shoes? WHY? - Why was the drake upset?; - Why can't he find them?</p>
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In the examples offered you can notice the application of each method, the specific valences of each one of them and also the possibility of combining them within the same heuristic strategy

5. Conclusions

The interactive methods presented here (conversation and stellar explosion) can be used in kindergarten in different learning activities (reading pictures, memorizing, conversation, didactic games), at any stage of the activity (from the drawing of attention up to the retention and transfer of knowledge), and also in all types of activities (communication, forming skills and abilities, revision/systematization, evaluation). These methods stimulate creativity, develop thinking, language, attention, observation skills etc.

We can most certainly state that interactivity implies dynamism, energy, communication, relationships, cooperation, satisfaction, all of them being made with a lot of pleasure and initiative. Although they have undeniable formative-educative valences, these types of methods also have limitations: not all their content can be addressed in the background they offer (games and entertaining); it is difficult to evaluate the contribution of each participant in solving the task; they are time-consuming and the available school time does not allow their integration at any moment, the directing of the teaching process is difficult, the teacher needs a set of well-developed skills (partner, animator, educator, writer, actor, mediator, consultant).

The presented interactive methods – conversation and stellar explosion (as a combination of classic and modern!), can be used as ways of getting the subjects aware of the teaching process, of making them acquire cognitive experience, of stimulating and creating autonomy in learning. The teacher's status compels us to adapt ourselves to new situations, to become models for our students. Ideally speaking, if each teacher were a trainer for the students, they would feel the satisfaction we get from preparing activities every day and most of all the pleasure of creating diverse, efficient, attractive, different teaching/learning/evaluating activities.

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