

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINERS UPON THE PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING OF PRE-SERVICE MOTHER TONGUE TEACHERS

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Abstract

The aim of our study consists in developing a unitary model of pedagogical competencies of pre-service mother tongue teachers. There are presented the results of the exploratory research that consisted in the administration of a semi-structured interview to 58 language teachers' trainers from pre-university and university education. The aim of the research is to explore the conceptions of language teachers' trainers referring to the development of pedagogical competencies in initial training programs. The product of this study's effort in identifying the pedagogical competencies for preparing the future mother tongue educators represents a challenge for the effectiveness of teacher education.

Key words: initial training, mother tongue language, pedagogical competencies, semi-structured interview, trainers

1. Introduction

The concern in the direction of establishing a unitary set of pedagogical standards in initial training programs of language teachers is a necessary prerequisite for ensuring the quality of education both at the individual level as well as at the institutional level. Such a preoccupation with creating a professional canon in such programs for training language teachers, in general, or mother tongue language teachers, in particular is motivated by the need to provide future teachers with the best initial training in educational institutions, and also with the possibility of delineating a series of principles in continuous training programs that meet the requirements of current exigencies.

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Recently, more than in the past decades, both researchers and practitioners have recognized the enormous influence of initial training programs on the development of future language teachers. This study is based on several premises. The fundamental one, dictating our approach, involves the development of the reference framework of pedagogical standards as a basis for teacher education (Pantic and Wubbels, 2010). Another premise is related to the integrative and interdisciplinary perspective that supports the undertaking for formulating these standards for mother tongue language teachers. The third premises lying at the basis of our study uses the exploratory, qualitative research as the main method of investigation and revaluing of the trainers' views regarding the formulation of the pedagogical standards for mother tongue language teachers within the programs of initial training. The three premises constitute the main starting points of our study on which we build the entire enterprise of analysing and researching the possibilities for creating such a "kit" of professional standards for the preparation of future mother tongue language teachers.

2. The foundations of pedagogical standards for pre-service language teachers

The concept of pedagogical competencies has a complex meaning, because it includes a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, all of them partaking of a high degree of quality. The conceptual framework is based on two aspects: to define the main concepts in a holistic perspective and to analyse the most representative approaches and studies focused on the development of pedagogical competencies in the general context of language education and in the particular context of mother tongue education. The theoretical approach of this study is based on a holistic perspective that integrates two components specific to corresponding areas: pedagogical competencies in the initial training of teachers (educational sciences) and mother tongue language (sciences of language). Each element is defined in strong correlation with others, ultimately outlining the interdisciplinary and specific context of creating and implementing the pedagogical competencies (Figure 1).

In the first part, we define the main concepts and in the second section we identify and analyse the most representative approaches and studies focused on the development of pedagogical competencies in the general context of language education and in the particular context of mother tongue education.

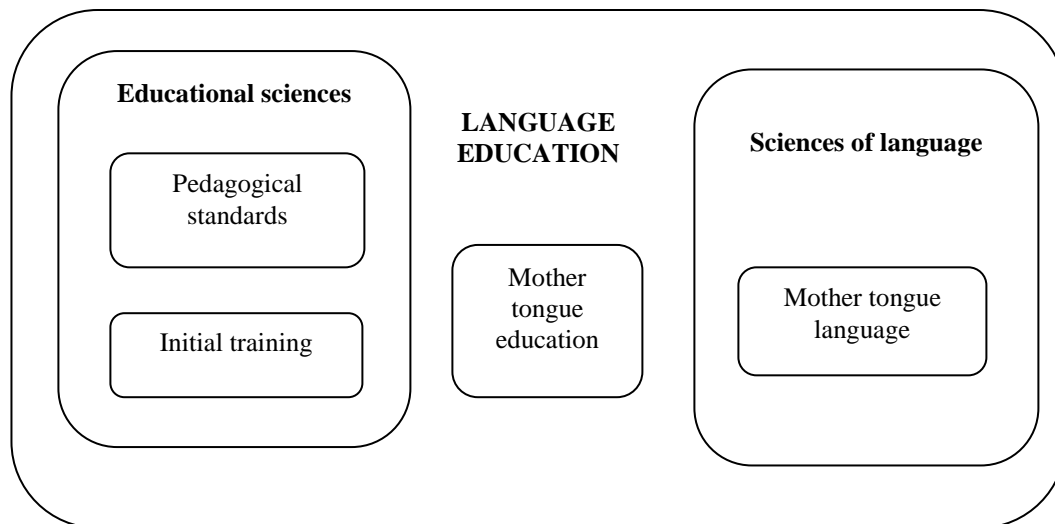


Figure 1. *The integrative perspective upon language education*

2.1. Conceptual delimitations

2.1.1. Pedagogical competencies

While the general educational professional standards include an ensemble of explicit requirements, the pedagogical standards integrate a set of pedagogical knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours a teacher has to possess in order to work with students to accomplish the professional duties at a qualitative level accepted by society. The concept of pedagogical standards is often assimilated with the concept of pedagogical competence, which tends to be used with the meaning of minimum professional standard (Gliga, 2002), often specified by law, which should raise a person in fulfilling a particular role of the teaching profession. Although some authors have defined pedagogical competence as an ability (Madhavaram and Laverie, 2010; Ryegård, 2010), it is important to emphasize that the term refers to a set of skills.

From the perspective of grouping pedagogical standards, there are different views regarding their classification: joint productive activity; developing language and literacy across the curriculum; making meaning: connecting school to students' lives; teaching complex thinking: cognitive challenge; teaching through instructional conversation (Dalton and Tharp, 2002); individualization, learning environment, family participation, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, planning and assessment, professional development, social inclusion (*ISSA Pedagogical Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades*, 2005); content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, instructional practice, the learner and learning, equity (*CAEP Commission on*

Standards and Performance Reporting, 2010); proficiency, English language curriculum, learner, methodology, management, assessment (Wha, 2012).

After analysing different views upon classifying pedagogical standards, we extract the following obvious characteristics: *the gradual character* because they are formulated for different grades/levels (preschool, primary, secondary, university education); *the specific character*, by adapting the standards to the specificity of different disciplines (language, mathematics, music etc.); *the particular character*, following the differences between the various conceptions upon the classification of pedagogical standards. There is not a unitary perspective regarding the structure of these standards, either in terms of components, or in terms of division of sub-components. The categories of pedagogical standards differ from one approach to another, without providing a clear vision and set of criteria that contributes to their understanding. Additionally, a frequently encountered problem is the framing of other relevant categories of standards such as managerial, psychological in the structure of pedagogical standards. Therefore, it is furthermore necessary to define the criteria of classification of standards in the pedagogical context and in relation to the areas of initial teacher training.

2.1.2. Language teacher education (LTE)

Language education represents a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach supported by a wide range of theories behind different teaching approaches. Multiple connections and determination relations are identified and established between educational sciences and language teaching. Language education is defined at the intersection of language components and educational aspects (Gagné et al., 1989). In this context, there is the need for efficient cooperation between language departments and teacher education units, on the one hand, and theoretical knowledge from ever-evolving disciplines and practice on the other hand (Kelly et al., 2004; Kleinhenz et al., 2007; Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009). However, the lack of communication and cooperation between language departments and educational departments responsible for language teacher education continues to persist (Schulz, 2000). Moreover, the data concerning state-of-the-art language teacher education programmes remains insufficient in current approaches and studies in the field (Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Velez-Rendon, 2002). One of the solutions to improve the access to and the quality of preparation for language teachers consists in using professional standards as a basis to improve assessment of pre-service and graduate teachers.

2.2. Approaches to LTE based on developing pedagogical competencies

The concerns of researchers to develop a common framework in the field of language teacher education based on standards are increasingly ardent. There are identified specific approaches concentrated on elaborating a set of standards for preparation of different categories of teachers: second language teaching (*International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR)* proposed by Wylie and Ingram, 1995/99, De Jong and Harper, 2005; *Profiling Grid for Language Teachers* developed by North, 2009), foreign languages teaching (*A Texas Framework for Languages Other Than English*, 1997; *World languages other than English: Standards for teachers of students ages 3-18+*, 2001; *ACTFL/ NCATE Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers*, 2002; *the European Profile for Language Teacher Education* elaborated by Kelly et al., 2004; *Professional Standards for accomplished teaching of languages and cultures*, 2005), mother tongue/ first/ native language teaching. The pedagogical competencies constitute a main component in the general structure of general standards and their representation is specific according to the approach.

The need to investigate pedagogical standards in the area of mother-tongue language teaching should be recognized by many researchers both in mainstream and language education. The identification of a reference framework of pedagogical competencies for future mother-tongue language teachers demonstrates the way the nature of teacher knowledge and teacher development is understood. There are identified both general studies in the domain of pedagogical standards for language teachers (Wha, 2012; Isanović, 2012; Mățã, et al., 2013) and specific research in the field of mother tongue education (Herrlitz et al., 1984, Delnoy et al., 1988; Delnoy et al., 1995). Following the analyses of these various contributions, we observe a lack of update of research in the past 18 years that implies the need to achieve new studies based on exploring the pedagogical standards for mother tongue language teachers. The implications derived from this literature review are presented below in the form of a proposal for a reflective approach that suggests the application of specific pedagogical standards for mother tongue teacher education. In this study there are designed the stages of configuring the pedagogical standards for mother-tongue teachers in agreement with the recent approaches.

3. An exploratory study on identifying the pedagogical standards for pre-service mother tongue teachers

In this section, there are presented the results of the exploratory research that consisted in the administration of a semi-structured interview to 58 language teachers' trainers from Romanian pre-university and university education.

3.1. Aim

The general aim of this research is to explore the conceptions of language teachers' trainers referring to the development of pedagogical competencies in initial training programs. The objectives that support the aim are: a) identifying the views of language teachers' trainers related to the research theme; b) analysing the main themes of the interview and establishing the thematic categories; c) performing the general and specific structure of the pedagogical standards model according to the conceptions of language teachers' trainers.

3.2. Research methodology

A qualitative methodology employing semi-structured interviews was used to allow flexibility in the exploration of the conceptions of language teachers' trainers on a variety of issues and innovations and to capture rich, detailed answers of the participants' views (Bryman, 2008).

3.2.1. *Participants*

58 trainers of mother tongue language teachers from Romanian education were involved in this study (43 from pre-university education and 15 from university education).

3.2.2. *Method*

The *semi-structured interview* consists of a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, through which we attempt to obtain relevant information for a particular topic of research (De Singley et al., 1998). The semi-structured interview contains both open questions, which allow the subject a broader argumentation and circumstantial interventions of the one performing the interview, and closed questions enabling the collection of quantitative data. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009), semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and understand thoroughly the answers provided. The choice of this method was determined by the fact that it allows the subject to build an entire discourse as an answer to a question, which can lead to the identification of the reasons behind the answer. The semi-structured interview is also an adequate method for the exploration of the subjects' perception regarding various aspects from the educational field (Pathak and Intrat, 2012). The interviews

were recorded with a video camera, which involved complying with the following rules: the obtaining of the subjects' agreement of being recorded; the placing of a video camera in a position that would not disturb but would allow catching the sounds. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment where seats were carefully arranged and where there was suitable décor (Whiting, 2008). After performing the interviews, we have transcribed and coded them, and analysed and interpreted the data.

The open questions for the interview guide aimed at the following aspects:

- What are the pedagogical competencies developed at pre-service mother tongue language teachers?
- What are the main components and categories of pedagogical competencies?

In order to ensure the content validity and reliability of the questions, the items of the interview guide were analysed with 12 experts from the Romanian education system with the specialization Educational sciences.

3.2.3. Procedure

The interview was prepared and organized in the period September-November 2013. Firstly, the interview guide was analysed with experts in September 2013. Secondly, the participants to the interview were selected in collaboration with the County School Inspectorate. Thirdly, the interview with mother tongue language teachers was organized in November 2013 in three series with 18-20 participants. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

4. Results and discussions

The thematic analysis (King 2004) was used in order to distinguish among the representative themes and the specific categories of interview. There was elaborated a list of codes (template) representing themes identified in the textual data. In order to analyse the results, the *thematic content analysis* was used. The thematic analysis allows the transversal analysis of the individual interviews and the observation of the common structures of the discourse or themes (De Singley et al., 1998). The main stages of the content thematic analysis were (Gall et al., 2007): establishing the categories, analysing them, identifying the unit analysis, standardizing the coding procedure, coding the entire material, quantifying the unit analysis, producing the results, interpreting and explaining the results.

The content analysis of the research interview revealed that the development of pedagogical standards in initial training programs for mother tongue language teachers focuses on three themes: a) the concrete structure of pedagogical standards; b) the procedure of their development; c) the correlation of pedagogical standards from initial training programs. Other themes identified refer to the different issues encountered by language teachers' trainers in educational practice.

4.1. The concrete structure of pedagogical standards

The main concern of language teachers' trainers was concentrated on formulating concrete examples for the six dimensions of pedagogical standards. At the level of each dimension, there were established the most relevant sub-dimensions for the initial training of future language teachers. The main concept of pedagogical competencies was developed in six categories (Figure 2).

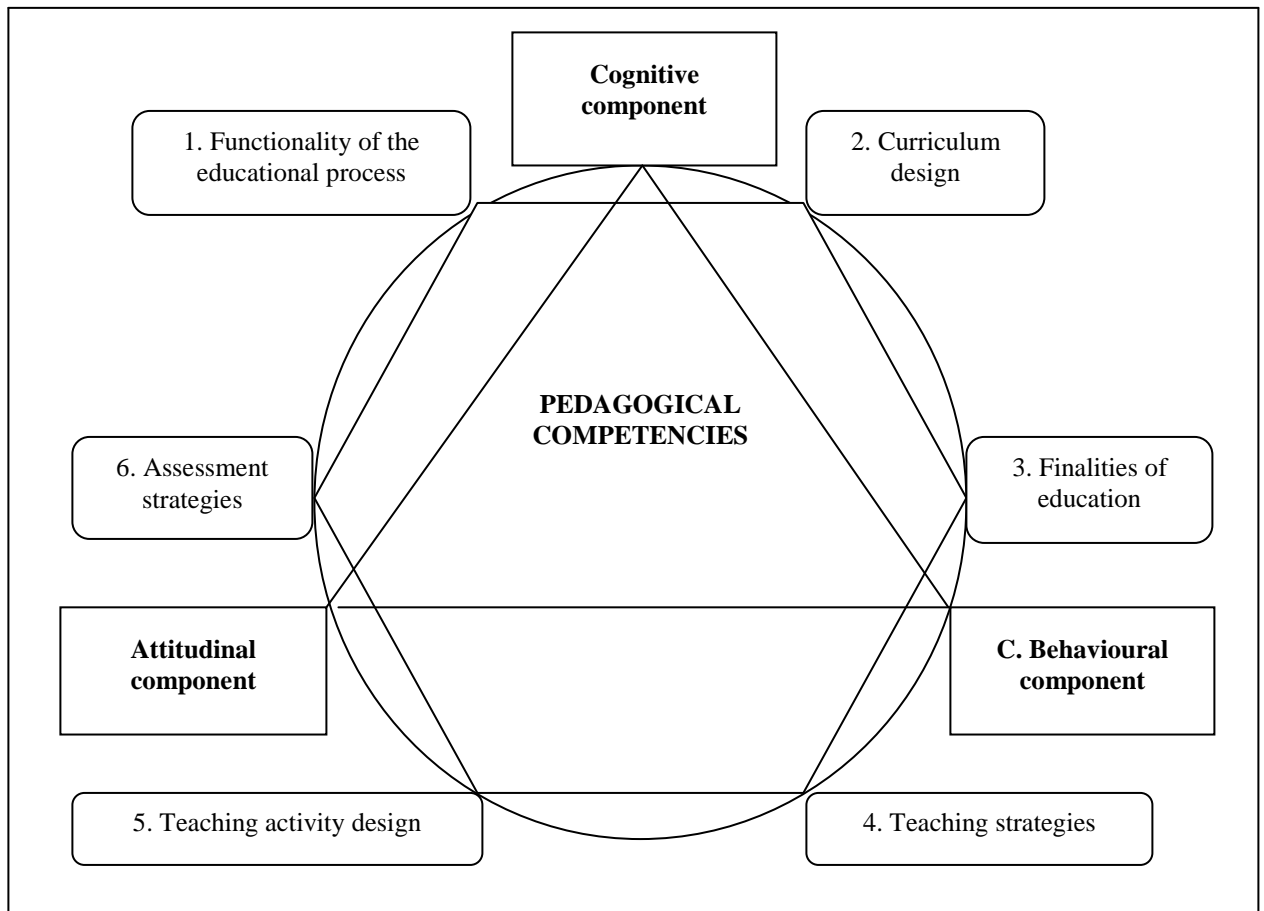


Figure 2. *The dimensions and pillars of pedagogical standards model*

4.2. The procedure of developing pedagogical standards

Three components resulted from the perspective of the view of language teachers' trainers regarding the procedure of developing pedagogical standards: firstly, the theoretical component, with the stress on the acquisition and understanding of standards; secondly, the behavioural component, which consists in practising the standard and thirdly, the attitudinal component, based on the values involved in the transmission and application of standards.

4.3. The correlation of pedagogical standards from initial training programs

The aspects mentioned by language teachers' trainers referring to the correlation of pedagogical standards are the following: formulating the pedagogical standards in initial programs in close connection with future requirements for the teaching career; providing a link between all disciplines and trainers of the initial training programme to offer a unitary vision upon forming and developing pedagogical standards; initiating the steps to build these standards gradually according to the needs of the initial training of language teachers.

In agreement with the research results to the interview and the current approaches in the domain (Kelly et al., 2004, Richards, 2011), the pedagogical standards are structured into three main categories, according to: the cognitive component (Knowledge and Understanding - KU); the behavioural component (Strategies and Skills - SS); the attitudinal component (Attitudes and Values - AV). The innovative model of pedagogical standards that we propose combines both the main dimensions and the components (Figure 2). In the holistic view upon pedagogical standards, we attempt to unite all these perspectives. The structure of the pedagogical competencies model for mother tongue education is presented and described in agreement with the six dimensions and three pillars (Table 1).

What results is a new perspective regarding the development of the professional competencies for mother-tongue teachers. These will be further structured on levels ranging from simple to complex, so that a concrete model of professional standards for mother tongue teachers in secondary education may be created. This classification will constitute the reference framework to develop the operational model of developing pedagogical competencies in mother tongue language teachers.

Table 1. *Language teachers' pedagogical competencies for Mother tongue education*

| Pedagogical competencies | | Cognitive component | Attitudinal component | Behavioural component |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| 1. The functionality of the educational process | 1.1. The component elements of the educational process | demonstrating knowledge of the component elements of the educational process | promoting the variety and diversity of the component elements involved in educational process | Assuring the interaction between the component elements of the educational process (students, teacher, teaching - learning methods, instruments etc.) |
| | 1.2. The didactic principles | identifying the specific of the didactic principles in teaching mother tongue language | promoting the active and conscious learning, the systematic and continuous learning, intuitive learning of the first language | facilitating the compliance of the didactic principles into first language instruction |
| 2. Curriculum design | 2.1. Types of curriculum | recognizing types of curriculum in teaching mother tongue language | promoting the importance of teaching and learning about first language in the discipline, and the specific optional subjects | applying types of curriculum developed at the national level into first language instruction |
| | 2.2. Curricular documents | demonstrating knowledge of curricular documents (school schedule, textbooks, auxiliary) in teaching first language | promoting the openness on the use of various curriculum documents for teaching the mother tongue | selecting relevant curricular documents for first language instruction |
| | 2.3. Educational contents | demonstrating knowledge of the specific educational contents in teaching first language | promoting the importance of teaching and learning about contents of first language and culture | integrating the specific knowledge, capacities, abilities, attitudes, values and behaviours for first language acquisition |
| 3. The finalities of education | 3.1. General and specific competences | demonstrating comprehension of the competences from school syllabus of first language | promoting variety in forming general and specific competences of mother-tongue learning | selecting general and specific competences in the school syllabus of first language |
| | 3.2. The concrete objectives | demonstrating the knowledge of the techniques of elaborating the objectives for a lesson of first language learning | promoting the various ways of achieving the cognitive, affective in first language learning | formulating the concrete objectives for a lesson of mother tongue language |

| Pedagogical competencies | | Cognitive component | Attitudinal component | Behavioural component |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| 4. Teaching strategies | 4.1. Teaching and learning methods | demonstrating knowledge of the specific methods of teaching and learning of first language | promoting the interactivity and motivation of students in first language learning | using specific methods of teaching and learning of first language |
| | 4.2. Didactic instruments | demonstrating knowledge of the specific instruments of teaching and learning of first language | promoting variety and novelty in the use of didactic instruments in first language instruction | integrating specific didactic instruments to enable students to use the first language |
| | 4.3. Forms of organization of teaching activity | demonstrating knowledge of the efficient forms of organization of the teaching activity | promoting the actively involved students in learning first language | combining class teaching, pair practice and individual learning in mother-tongue teaching |
| 5. The teaching activity design | 5.1. Structure of annual design | recognizing the structure of the annual and quarterly design | promoting variety and flexibility in educational content structure | elaborating the annual and quarterly design |
| | 5.2. Components of learning unit design | demonstrating knowledge of the structure of learning unit | creating opportunities to use the first language beyond the school setting | elaborating the learning unit design |
| | 5.3. Structure of lesson plan | demonstrating knowledge of lesson plan structure | promoting creativity in elaboration and application of the didactic plan | elaborating the didactic plan for different types of lessons |
| 6. Assessment strategies | 6.1. Traditional assessment methods | demonstrating knowledge of traditional methods to evaluate the specific contents, skills, capacities for mother tongue language | promoting the impartiality in applying the specific instruments of traditional evaluation | preparing the specific instruments of traditional evaluation |
| | 6.2. Assessment test | demonstrating knowledge of categories of evaluation items | promoting objectivity in applying the assessment test | elaborating the structure of assessment test for a learning unit |
| | 6.3. Alternative assessment methods | demonstrating knowledge of alternative assessment methods | promoting the respect of students' interests, specific for alternative methods | preparing the specific instruments of alternative evaluation |

Conclusions

Starting from a general view on the educational professional standards in language teaching and then focusing on the pedagogical competencies in mother tongue language teaching, our research tries to build a canonical educational model which would cover the weaknesses of the sector of language teaching first and foremost by correlating the theories from the sciences of education

with those of the sciences of language and then grouping these standards according to a clear set of criteria and furthermore establishing clear components and sub-components.

The lack of such a model from the literature review is determined by the failure to see the process of teaching languages from an integrative and interdisciplinary perspective combined with the need to clearly group these standards in what should be a unitary model. That is why our study tries to unite the previous theoretical perspectives and then to uphold and combine these theories by a practical inquiry which results from the analysis of a semi-structured interview applied to trainers of language teachers from university and pre-university education. The most relevant themes identified at the level of their conceptions are the concrete structure of pedagogical standards; the procedure of their development; and the need of correlation of pedagogical standards from initial training programmes.

The combined theoretical and practical analysis reveals the possibility and necessity of grouping these standards according to three main components – cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural – all of these stemming from the need of combining three main aspects: the concrete structure of pedagogical standards, the procedure of their development and the correlation of pedagogical standards from initial training programs. It is this combined perspective that leads to the identification of the six dimensions of such a model of professional standards in mother tongue language teaching namely: functionality of the educational process, curriculum design, finalities of education, teaching strategies, teaching activity design and assessment strategies. Only such a combined perspective can lead to the achievement of an effective education with genuine respect towards the general principles of education and the individual's particularities.

The product of this study's effort of identifying the pedagogical standards for preparing the future mother tongue educators represents a challenge for the effectiveness of teacher education in the context of the specificity of programmes from different countries. The effects of a unitary model and perspective upon pedagogical standards offer positive benefits for language teachers and all educational actors involved.

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