

# COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN WITH MENTAL DISABILITY

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**Abstract:** The subject of the lecture is to define basic terminology and to introduce the results of the research oriented on determination the level of differentiation of partial abilities of pupils in chosen spheres of communicative competence. This was done in comparison with expected outcomes for pre-school education. On the basis of the analysis of the results the article contains specific suggestions and measures in special-pedagogical support for pupils with mild mental disability in primary education.

**Keywords:** pupil with mild mental disability, key competences, communicative competence, partial abilities, special-pedagogical support, supportive measures, curriculum documents for primary education.

## 1 Introduction

School integration of pupils with health disability can also be seen as an important means of positive influence of attitudes of majority society towards people with health disabilities. Existing experience points to the fact that school integration of pupils with health disability is a difficult process mainly because it requires significant change in the current organisation and style of education in our schools. From these requirements arise higher demands for professional competences of teachers. The development of universal, effective and open communication is thus a principal goal of primary education. The process of education is in our educational system based on adequately developed language and communication abilities and skills in spoken and written form, on the achieved level of communicative competence corresponding to the content of education in given fields. The school integration of pupils with mental handicap appears to be one of the most difficult ones, since deviation in communication is always a symptom of mental disability, where direct proportionality is valid – the higher the degree of mental disability, the more severe speech disorders. Only on the basis of realization of the nature, rules and mechanisms of psychomotor development of pupils with mental handicap we can select and apply appropriate educational and special educational means in order to develop language and language competence of pupils in order to develop the communicative competence.

## 2 The analysis of communicative competence of pupils with mental disability in primary education

### The Aims and Methods of the Research

In the conception of the planned research we started with the presumption that reaching the aims of primary education is conditioned by the abilities to perceive and listen to the content of educational offer, to understand the communicated and subsequently to reproduce one's own pieces of knowledge in written or spoken language. The aim of the research was to analyse pupils with mild mental disability in primary education from the perspective of the acquired level in selected areas of communicative competence in comparison with the expected outcomes in selected areas of preschool education<sup>1</sup>. (Table 1) On the basis of obtained results it aims to characterise specific performances of pupils in the area of acquisition of communicative competence and deduce possible risks related to fulfilling educational goals (expected outcomes) in primary education.

<sup>1</sup> Educational aims in primary education are logically linked to the educational goals of preschool education, therefore observed partial capabilities result from The Frame Educational Programme for Preschool Education, educational area Child and their psyche – subareas Language and Speech, whose content greatly corresponds to the expected outcomes in the area of communicative competence for preschool education and it corresponds to the determined goals of the research.

Areas of Communicative Competence	Item No.	Selected Partial Capabilities
Controlling Speech, Formulating Thoughts Adequately	1	To name most of the things surrounding them
	2	To ask many questions
	3	To formulate sentences in a suitable and grammatically correct way
	4	To use complex sentences in speech
	5	To use simple sets of complex sentences
	6	To use all kinds of words
	7	To follow a story
	8	To tell a story, to describe a real situation
	9	To create simple rhymes
	10	To follow natural intonation, loudness and pace of the speech
	11	To pronounce most phones correctly
	12	To articulate clearly
Sharing Feelings and Moods	13	To be emotionally stable
	14	To express current emotional expressions naturally
Communicating Through Gestures and Words	15	To use words expressing aesthetical sense, to express positive aesthetical experiences
	16	To react to modulating tones of speech (colour, strength and pitch of the voice, stress, intonation)
	17	To be able to express mood via facial expressions (smile, crying, anger, sorrow)
	18	To understand word wit and humour
	19	To use semantic words
	20	To understand heard communication
	21	To differentiate some graphical symbols, e.g. pictographs
Communication with Children and Adults	22	To be able to imitate various ways of behaviour
	23	To use speech to regulate events around them
	24	To communicate adequately to the given situation (to know what is appropriate)
	25	To apply the habits of social behaviour (to greet, to say please, to thank, to listen to information, to follow instructions...)
	26	To improve regulatory function of speech
	27	To comment on their experiences, activities
	28	To speak autonomously on a given topic
	29	To accept compromises, to be able to solve conflicts by an agreement
Mastering the Abilities Preceding Reading and Writing	30	To show interest in books, magazines
	31	To follow text using eyes from left to right
	32	To acquire graphical form of speech without larger difficulties
Widening Vocabulary	33	To learn new words easily
	34	To ask about words they do not understand
	35	To be able to repeat plot in correct sentences
	36	To capture the main idea of a plot
	37	To be able to reproduce a short text by heart (rhyme, song, dramatic task...)
	38	To comment on the result of their creative activities (e.g. constructive, artistic, physical...)
Using Information and Communication Means	39	To show interest in books
	40	To focus on listening to reading
	41	To focus on listening to music
	42	To focus on watching a film
	43	To focus on watching a theatre performance
	44	To manage basic television operations
	45	To manage basic computer operations
Communication in Foreign Languages	46	To manage basic telephone operations
	47	To be able to learn foreign language

Table 1: The Overview of the Areas of Communicative Competences and Assessed Partial Capabilities

## 3 The relaxation of the research

The research was of quantitative character with the use of the method of asking questions, which was realised by the application of research means of *observation record sheets*. By using the record sheets of observation we investigated the indicators of the reached level of selected partial capabilities of communicative competence in pupils with mild mental disability based on long-term observation. Through a simple sheet filled in by a pupil we assessed the level of selected language and communicative capabilities of the individual pupil. Teachers quantified the level of their judgement by determining it on a numerical scale using given instructions (see the example):

	Never	Rather No	Rather Yes	Always
Speaks Autonomously	0	1	2	3

Instructions:

- If you think that the pupil always speaks autonomously, circle 3.
- If you think that the pupil never speaks autonomously, circle 0.
- Based on how often they speak autonomously, circle either 1 or 2.
- If you were wrong, cross out the answer and circle the correct one.

The primary task of collecting empirical data in relationship to the respondents and fulfilling the research was to address as many respondents as possible so that the validity of the answers to the questions in the *observation record sheets*.

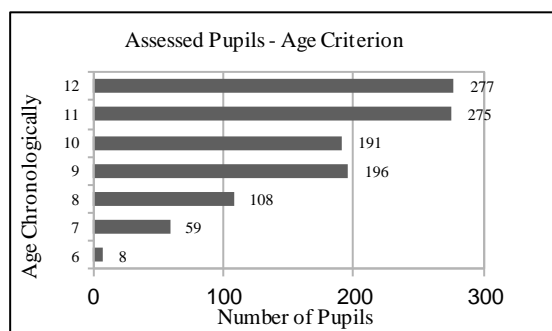
The research project was carried out at primary schools educating pupils with mild mental disability. We addressed teachers taking part in the education of pupils with mild mental disability in primary education from the whole Czech Republic. The actual collecting of empirical data for quantitative research depends on the participation of the teachers involved in the research related to their willingness to carry out orientational assessment of selected partial capabilities of pupils.

The basic set of the research was formed by pupils with mild mental disability in primary education. The selected set of the research was formed by pupils with mild mental disability fulfilling the following criteria:

- they are pupils of primary education (with no respect to the form of special education<sup>2</sup>);
- their mother tongue is Czech language;
- the teachers are in contact with them for at least one school year;
- in pupils it is possible to orientationally assess, based on long-term observation, the acquired level in selected partial capabilities of communicative competence.

Altogether 249 schools in the Czech Republic were addressed. The research was supported by 119 schools, among which schools from all Czech regions participated. Finally, 414 respondents took part in the research by filling in 1114 questionnaires.

During the research altogether 1114 pupils were assessed in partial capabilities of communicative competence. Out of these 0,7 % (8) were 6-year-old, 5,3 % (59) 7-year-old, 9,7 % (108) 8-year-old, 17,6 % (196) 9-year-old, 17,2 % (191) 10-year-old, 24,7 % (275) 11-year-old, 24,8 % (277) 12-year-old pupils. (Graph 1)



Graph 1: Assessed Pupils Based on the Age Criterion

### The way of analysis of the collected data

The evaluation of empirical research was done by statistic method via procedures of basic descriptive statistics. The aim

was to graphically and numerically summarize the results and to describe the situation in the research area. The higher levels of analysis were used in specific cases of verifying stated research hypotheses. For verifying the hypotheses we used chi-square goodness of fit test. The determined p-value of test criterion was compared with the level of importance 0,05.

*Average level of selected partial capabilities* in all pupils was determined by arithmetic mean (quotient of the sum of all points in the scale by the number of pupils).

*Acquired level of pupils in defined areas of communicative competence* was determined via score calculated for each pupil by adding the points on the scale in *n* chosen partial capabilities (in relation to the observed area). By calculating the frequencies in all pupils the following levels were determined:

0 to <i>n</i>	points	low level
<i>n</i> + 1 to 2 <i>n</i>	points	medium level
2 <i>n</i> + 1 to 3 <i>n</i>	points	high level

### 4 The evaluation of the research

The results of the research show the level of partial capabilities of communicative competence in pupils with mild mental disability. They confirm uneven differentiation of partial brain functions and also their limited level.

By the analysis of the results of the research we found out that:

- In primary education pupils with mild mental disability do not reach high level in comparison to the expected outcomes of preschool education in any of the observed areas;
- In primary education pupils with mild mental disability reach medium level in comparison to the expected outcomes of preschool education in selected areas:
  - Controlling speech, appropriate formulation of thoughts
  - Communicating feelings and moods
  - Communication through gestures and words (expected low level was not confirmed)
  - Communication with children and adults (expected low level was not confirmed)
  - Managing abilities preceding reading and writing (expected low level was not confirmed)
  - Widening vocabulary
  - Using information and communication means (expected low level was not confirmed);
- In primary education pupils with mild mental disability reach low level in comparison to the expected outcomes of preschool education in the area:
  - Preconditions for communication in foreign languages.

### Possible Risks Related to Fulfilling Educational Goals in Primary Education

We assume that from the perspective of reaching educational goals of primary education the most risky capabilities are those that pupils *do not have or rather do not have differentiated*<sup>3</sup> during primary education. (Table 2)

Communicative Competence	Assessed Partial Capabilities
Controlling Speech, Formulating Thoughts Adequately	Simple rhyming Speaking using more complex sentences Grammatical correctness of sentence formulation
Communication in foreign languages	Preconditions for communication in foreign languages

Table 2: Capabilities that Pupils Do Not Have or Rather Do Not Have Differentiated

In the remaining selected areas of communicative competence (to share feelings and moods, to communicate through gestures and words, to communicate with children and adults, to manage the abilities preceding reading and writing, to widen vocabulary,

<sup>2</sup> Regulation no. 73/2005 Coll., as amended.

<sup>3</sup> These partial capabilities reach level *not* or they significantly tend to level *rather not*

to use information and communication means) the research did not confirm high risks in any of the assessed partial capabilities. On the basis of the analysis of the results we further assume that from the perspective of reaching educational goals of primary education, medium risky are such capabilities that pupils in primary education more often *have differentiated*<sup>4</sup>. (Table 3)

Communicative Competence	Assessed Partial Capabilities
Controlling Speech, Formulating Thoughts Adequately	To use simple sets of complex sentences To use all kinds of words To ask many questions To tell a story, to describe a real situation To follow natural intonation, loudness and pace of speech To articulate clearly To pronounce most phones correctly
Sharing Feelings and Moods	To be emotionally stable To use terms expressing aesthetical sense To express current emotional expressions naturally
Communication Through Gestures and Words	To use semantic words To understand word wit and humour To differentiate some graphic symbols To be able to imitate various ways of behaviour
Communication with Children and Adults	To show interest in books, magazines To acquire graphic form of speech without larger difficulties
Managing the Abilities Preceding Reading and Writing	To capture the main idea of a plot To learn new words easily To ask about the words they do not understand To comment on the result of their own creative activities To reproduce a short text by heart
Widening Vocabulary	To show interest in books, magazines To acquire graphic form of speech without larger difficulties
Using Information and Communication Means	To show interest in books To focus on listening to reading

Table 3: Capabilities that the pupils have rather differentiated

We assume that from the perspective of fulfilling educational goals of primary education the least risky capabilities are those that pupils during primary education *have differentiated*<sup>5</sup>. (Table 4)

Communicative Competence	Assessed Partial Capabilities
Controlling Speech, Formulating Thoughts Adequately	Simple rhyming Speaking using more complex sentences Grammatical correctness of sentence formulation
Communication in foreign languages	Preconditions for communication in foreign languages

Table 4: Capabilities that the pupils have differentiated

## 5 Special pedagogical recommendation for theory and practise

The realised research confirms the presumptions that in the course of primary education pupils with mild mental disability do not have anchored partial capabilities in selected areas of communicative competence in comparison with the expected

outcomes of preschool education. We assume that this finding predicts the decrease in school success and it threatens fulfilling of already modified educational goals (reaching expected outcomes) not only in primary education.

For the pupils with mild mental disability during the 1<sup>st</sup> period (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year) it is necessary to create a *system of Supportive measures for the development of communicative competence* in order to:

- reduce negative impact of partial capabilities, which are not or are rather not differentiated (high risks)
- reduce or eliminate negative impact of partial capabilities, which are rather differentiated (medium risks)
- anchor and automatize those partial capabilities that are differentiated (low risks)

## Suggestion of Supportive Measures for the Development of Communicative Competence:

<sup>4</sup> These partial capabilities do not reach but significantly tend to the level *rather yes*

<sup>5</sup> These partial capabilities reach the levels *rather yes* or they significantly tend to the level "yes"

Update general characteristics of the area of education Language and Language competence:

- In the goals of the area of education:
  - to stress pragmatic goal of education towards communication and practical preparation of pupils for everyday communication with people in various communication situations through language and other language means.
- In the content of the subject matter:
  - to stress the development of auditory differentiation of speech, listening with understanding and reading with understanding.
- To widen the area of education Language and Language Communication by a new (or supplementing) field of study Dramatic Education in order to support the development of communicative competence.
- In the education of communication as well as during the therapy of symptomatic speech disorders in children with mental disability it is necessary to carefully take care of the requirements for language communication (expressive component) being in accordance with the level of language competence (receptive component). If the requirements for the language communication (in spoken or written form) are inadequate, the process of acquisition of communicative competence may be deformed. The primary task of the support of the development of communicative competence in pupils with mild mental disability is the stimulation of the development of internal language capabilities (language competence) and the support of formulation of thoughts. Secondly, we develop the formal aspect of speech, i.e. the articulation of phones or their graphical form.

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