ESTABLISHING THE LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES OF STUDENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE ACCORDING TO THEIR TEACHERS

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Abstract: The article examines the level of development of sociolinguistic competence among students in the early stage of primary education, as perceived by their teachers. Sociolinguistic competence is conceptualised as a key component of communicative language competence, encompassing students' ability to use language appropriately in relation to social context, communicative purpose, and cultural norms. Against this theoretical background, the study aims to identify teachers' professional assessments of students' sociolinguistic skills in the context of Bulgarian language and literature education. The research is based on an empirical survey conducted among 150 primary school teachers from different educational settings, including metropolitan, urban, and rural schools. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising three sections: an introductory part, a set of Likert-scale items assessing students' sociolinguistic competencies, and a demographic profile of the respondents. The survey focuses on teachers' observations of students' abilities related to language use in literary communication, sentence construction, lexical choice, stylistic awareness, and participation in communicative situations. The findings reveal that teachers recognise purposeful efforts within primary education to support the development of sociolinguistic competence through literary instruction, creative interaction with texts, and communicative classroom practices. At the same time, the results indicate persistent difficulties in students' ability to adapt linguistic forms to specific communicative contexts, particularly in relation to sentence structure, lexical precision, and pragmatic appropriateness. The study highlights the decisive role of the teacher as a mediator between literary texts, authors, and students, emphasising the importance of authentic communication and pedagogically guided interaction for the formation of sociolinguistic competence. The article contributes empirical evidence to current discussions on communicative and sociolinguistic competence in primary education and offers pedagogical insights relevant to language teaching practices aimed at fostering context-sensitive and meaningful language use among young learners.

Keywords: *sociolinguistic competences, primary school teachers, pupils, survey.*

Introduction

The formation of communicative language competencies is a prolonged process that begins as early as childhood and is determined by various communicative factors, and later by the different social roles that a person plays [1]. Communication is increasingly understood in contemporary European linguistics as a socially situated practice, in which language use is inseparable from cultural norms, institutional roles, and contextual expectations. This shift marks a departure from structural approaches to language and highlights the importance of communicative appropriateness in educational contexts [2]; [3]. Sociolinguistic competence represents a scientific integration between linguistic and social competence. Regarding the nature of sociolinguistic competence, there are several opinions that can be grouped as follows:

1. Sociolinguistic competence is an intermediary competence arising from the scientific integration between linguistic and social competence, in order to examine intermediate phenomena such as the sociology of language;

2. Sociolinguistics is an autonomous scientific discipline with its own subject, methods, and problems;

3. Sociolinguistics is a linguistic discipline that reflects the linguistic reality more adequately, as it overcomes the view of language as an invariant carried by an ideal speaker and perceived by an ideal listener [4]. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the speaker's ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts. This includes understanding the individual social norms, rules, and expectations that govern the use of language, as well as the ability to use it in a way that is most suitable for the respective context. In educational settings, sociolinguistic competence plays a crucial role in students' ability to participate meaningfully in classroom interaction, to interpret literary texts, and to

adapt their language use to formal and informal communicative situations [5].

Communication with the teacher is extremely important and contributes to the comprehensive formation of sociolinguistic competencies in children, because it is through this, the educator, as an intermediary between the authors of literary works and them - the young readers, that students gradually enrich their language and vocabulary, improve their ability to think with verbal-artistic images, develop their skills to appropriately use various linguistic and non-linguistic means in different communicative situations, and broaden their life horizons. Recent pedagogical research emphasises that sociolinguistic competence in primary education develops most effectively when language learning is embedded in meaningful social interaction and guided pedagogical mediation, where the teacher consciously structures communicative situations rather than merely transmits linguistic knowledge [6]. Against this theoretical background, the present study seeks to explore how sociolinguistic competence is manifested and developed in the context of primary education, as perceived by practicing teachers. In order to examine this issue empirically, a survey-based study was conducted among primary school teachers, focusing on their professional observations and assessments of students' sociolinguistic competencies in classroom and literary communication. The methodological design of the study and the structure of the research instrument are presented in the following section.

Methodological Framework of the Study

The methodological design of the study is structured as a sequential process consisting of three interrelated stages, each serving a distinct analytical function.

Figure 1. Methodological stages of the research design
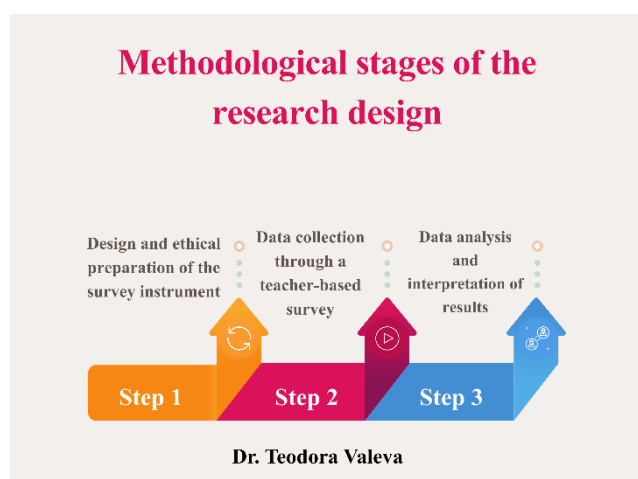
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The first stage involves the conceptual and ethical preparation of the research instrument, ensuring clarity of purpose, voluntary participation, and anonymity of the respondents. The second stage focuses on the empirical data collection through a structured survey administered to primary school teachers, aimed at capturing their professional assessments of students' sociolinguistic competencies in educational and literary contexts. The third stage encompasses the systematisation, quantitative processing, and interpretative analysis of the collected data, allowing for the identification of key tendencies, difficulties, and

pedagogical factors influencing the development of sociolinguistic competence in primary school students. Within this methodological framework, the second stage of the study was operationalised through the administration of a structured survey. The research was conducted during the months of November and December 2024, with a total of 200 surveys distributed among teachers, and responses were received from 150 of them. The survey form can be conditionally divided into three parts.

The first part is introductory and contains a greeting to the respondents, a description of the purpose of the study, information about the anonymity of the responses, and an expression of gratitude for their assistance. The second part of the survey includes questions aimed at assessing the level of development of sociolinguistic competencies in primary school students. Teachers were asked to evaluate a series of statements using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "I disagree", 2 "I mostly disagree", 3 "I cannot evaluate", 4 "I mostly agree", and 5 "I completely agree".

The third part of the survey collects background information about the respondent teachers, including demographic and professional characteristics such as place of residence, age, gender, grade level taught, and the number of students in their assigned class. These data serve to contextualise the teachers' responses and to support a more nuanced interpretation of the empirical findings. The study was conducted among teachers working in different educational settings across several municipalities, including Sofia (137th Secondary School "Angel Kanchev"), Burgas (School "Dimcho Debelyanov", School "Dobri Chintulov", Primary School "Bratya Miladinovi", Primary School "Alexander Georgiev – Kodzhakafaliya", Primary School "Elin Pelin"), the village of Marinka in the Burgas region (School "Ivan Vazov"), Svishtov (School "Nikolay Katrankov"), and Pomorie (School "Ivan Vazov"). This distribution allows for the inclusion of both metropolitan and non-metropolitan educational contexts.

Empirical Results

Characteristics of the Teacher Sample

The teachers who participated in the study work in the early stages of primary education. Specifically, 2.6% (4) teach in the 1st grade, 30% (45) in the 2nd grade, 50.6% (76) in the 3rd grade, and 16.6% (25) in the 4th grade. With regard to class size, the largest proportion of respondents teach classes comprising 19–25 students, accounting for 55.3% (83). This is followed by classes with 26–30 students at 20% (30), classes with up to 18 students at 17.3% (26), and classes with more than 30 students at 7.3% (11). The age of the respondents ranges from 25 to 60 years, with no participants under the age of 25. Teachers aged between 25 and 35 years represent 14% (21) of the sample, those aged 35–45 years constitute the largest group at 52% (78), followed by respondents aged 45–55 years at 32% (48), and those over 55 years at 2% (3). The predominance of teachers in the 35–45 age group suggests a cohort with substantial pedagogical experience, which is a positive indicator for the quality of primary education. In terms of place of residence, the largest proportion of respondents work in a large regional city, accounting for 57.3% (86), followed by those teaching in small towns at 30.6% (46). Teachers from the capital represent 9.3% (14) of the sample, while those from villages account for 2.6% (4). Regarding gender distribution, the sample is predominantly female, with women constituting 97% (146) of respondents and men 3% (4). This distribution reflects the

prevailing gender structure in primary education, where teaching is largely undertaken by women due to the specific nature of the work, which combines instructional responsibilities with sustained care and attention to young students.

Teachers' Perspectives on Students' Sociolinguistic Competence

In response to the first survey question concerning the most effective ways to stimulate students' interest in literary fiction, the majority of teachers (58.6%, 88) identified the organisation of creative meetings with authors of children's literature as the most preferred approach. This was followed by the celebration of reading-related events, such as Reading Week and International Children's Book Day, reported by 30.6% (46) of respondents. Organising contests, quizzes, and competitions related to literary works was selected by 10% (15), while involving parents in discussions of literary texts was indicated by only 0.6% (1) of the teachers. When asked about the greatest difficulties students encounter when reading books from both recommended and non-recommended lists, teachers most frequently pointed to difficulties in understanding the language and style of the author, reported by 52.6% (79) of respondents. This was followed by a perceived mismatch between the content of the books and students' age characteristics, interests, and preferences, indicated by 36.6% (55). A further 10% (15) noted that translated works, perceived as distant from national cultural and psychological contexts, pose particular challenges, while only one respondent was unable to assess this issue. Teachers' responses regarding how they assess students' comprehension of literary texts reveal a clear preference for expressive and creative forms of response. The most common method identified was the illustration of a favourite episode from the text, selected by 58% (87) of respondents. Discussion and debate were mentioned by 22% (33), while 13.3% (20) indicated dramatizations, scenes, or short sketches based on the literary content. Detailed oral or written retelling was least frequently cited, at 6.6% (10). These findings correspond with the developmental characteristics of students in the initial stage of primary education, where visual-imaginative thinking predominates and verbal-artistic thinking develops gradually through accumulated emotional, experiential, and reading experiences.

In relation to motivating students to read additional works of fiction, teachers again highlighted creative meetings and discussions with authors as the most effective strategy, reported by 47.3% (71) of respondents. Organising quizzes, competitions, and celebratory events was selected by 30.6% (46), while events specifically dedicated to books were mentioned by 16% (24). A smaller proportion of teachers, 6%, indicated the use of game-based methods in Bulgarian language and literature lessons. Notably, none of the respondents mentioned the use of digital tools, online resources, or presentations, suggesting a strong preference for direct, face-to-face forms of literary communication. This finding points to a perceived need for authentic interpersonal interaction between authors and readers as a foundation for meaningful engagement with literary texts.

With regard to the influence of family and social environment on students' reading choices, 46.6% (70) of teachers responded affirmatively, while 27.3% (41) selected "rather yes". In contrast, 9.3% (14) answered "rather no", 8.6% (13) responded "no", and 8% (12) indicated that they could not assess. These responses underscore the importance attributed to the family

environment as an initial and formative context shaping students' reading habits and broader cultural development. Similarly, when asked whether issues related to independent reading should be discussed with parents, the majority of respondents expressed agreement. Specifically, 57.3% (86) answered "yes" and 26.6% (40) selected "rather yes", while smaller proportions expressed reservations or disagreement. This pattern indicates that teachers value sustained communication with parents and recognise the family's role in supporting the development of students' communicative, linguistic, and literary competencies. In terms of specific practices used to support the formation of sociolinguistic competence, the most frequently reported activity was the writing of greeting cards, letters, or invitations for particular events or holidays, indicated by 45.3% (68) of respondents. Conducting various forms of dialogue was reported by 28% (42), while 19.3% (29) mentioned writing tasks based on visual prompts, descriptions, personal experiences, or verbal support. Less frequently cited practices included writing under dictation according to spelling rules (3.3%, 5), editing one's own or another's text (2%, 3), and other unspecified methods (2%, 3). These findings suggest that teachers possess a practical understanding of sociolinguistic competence and are able to apply appropriate linguistic resources in context-sensitive communicative situations.

Teachers' evaluations of students' linguistic skills reveal a differentiated profile of strengths and challenges. According to 49.3% (74) of respondents, students demonstrate a high level of ability in recognising and identifying parts of speech and their grammatical features. In contrast, the ability to correctly form grammatical forms and use them appropriately was assessed more critically, with 46.6% (70) of teachers indicating disagreement with this statement. Regarding lexical competence, 41.3% (62) of respondents reported that students are generally able to consult a dictionary to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. However, difficulties persist in determining the lexical meaning of words in accordance with specific communicative situations, as 44% (66) of teachers expressed disagreement with this ability. Similarly, 34.6% (52) indicated reservations about students' capacity to use linguistic and non-linguistic means appropriately across different communicative contexts. In contrast, teachers reported more positive assessments regarding students' ability to distinguish between the direct and figurative meanings of words, with 50% (75) expressing full agreement. A generally favourable evaluation was also observed in relation to students' ability to read and comprehend materials from children's magazines, encyclopedias, and accessible online sources, with 54% (81) indicating agreement.

Finally, teachers identified notable difficulties in students' ability to construct sentences with varying purposes and structures in accordance with communicative situations. In this regard, 47.3% (71) of respondents expressed disagreement, highlighting this area as a significant challenge in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical data reveals several key conclusions regarding the development of sociolinguistic competence among students in the early stage of primary education. The findings indicate that instruction in Bulgarian language and literature is purposefully oriented toward the development of coherent oral and written speech, as well as toward fostering students' ability to engage in meaningful communication

related to literary texts. In this context, teachers actively support students' familiarisation with different speech styles through the perception, interpretation, and discussion of artistic and folklore works. This confirms established pedagogical and linguistic perspectives which emphasise literature as a central medium for the development of communicative and sociolinguistic competence in school settings, where language is acquired and refined through socially meaningful use [7]; [1]; [3]. The results further demonstrate that students comprehend and interpret literary works more effectively when they are provided with opportunities for direct and authentic interaction with authors. Such encounters facilitate genuine communicative experiences, strengthen emotional engagement with literature, and contribute to the development of sociolinguistic sensitivity by exposing students to real models of language use in culturally meaningful contexts. This finding aligns with broader European educational frameworks, which highlight the importance of authentic communication and social interaction for language development and intercultural understanding in formal education [8]. At the same time, the study shows that teachers possess a clear conceptual understanding of sociolinguistic competence and are capable of applying appropriate linguistic resources in context-dependent communicative situations. Nevertheless, they consistently report difficulties encountered by students in constructing sentences with varying communicative purposes and structures, as well as in determining the lexical meaning of words in accordance with specific communicative contexts. These difficulties correspond with findings in applied linguistics, which indicate that grammatical knowledge alone does not guarantee communicative adequacy, and that learners require systematic support in linking linguistic forms to social meaning and situational appropriateness [9]. Overall, the results underscore the pivotal role of the teacher in the formation of communicative language competencies, particularly sociolinguistic competence, in primary education. Acting as a mediator between literary authors and young readers, the teacher facilitates students' access to the world of texts, language, and culture, guiding them toward more conscious, context-sensitive, and meaningful language use. In this sense, the teacher emerges not only as an instructor of language norms, but also as a key agent in the social and cultural mediation of language learning during the formative years of schooling, a role consistently emphasised in contemporary pedagogical and sociolinguistic literature [10].

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