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Positive Politeness and Negative Politeness in Didactic Communication – Landmarks in Teaching Methodology

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Abstract

Didactic communication involves the usage of positive and negative politeness at all levels (verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal) concerning the interaction teacher – student. This reality is reflected in the present paper by the answers provided by a group of teachers and students from "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania, at an interview focused on the topic of communication with pre-school/primary school students. Therefore, I propose the analysis of the main forms of manifesting positive and negative politeness in this particular framework of didactic communication (as part of teaching methodology) – at a pre-school and primary school level.

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Keywords: teaching methodology; didactic communication; interaction; positive politeness; negative politeness

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1. Introduction

In the teaching methodology, special attention is paid to different aspects of didactic communication and implicitly, to the relationship teacher-student, no matter the level of learning. Getting out of the topic – outdated, after all – of the unidirectional communication teacher – pupil and focusing on the dynamics involved by the interaction of the people involved and the tendency towards the symmetrization of communication among the individuals involved in the educational act, I propose in the present paper the analysis of the topic of teaching communication inside the teaching methodology and, in particular, regarding positive politeness and negative politeness at a pre-school and primary-school level.

In this context, the objectives of this study are: (a) to report the communicational teaching activity to the theories concerning the usage of positive and negative politeness in communication, in general, and in didactic communication, in particular; (b) the identification of the main forms of manifestation of positive politeness in the communication (future) teacher – pre-school pupil, respectively (future) teacher – pupil from primary school; (c) the identification of the main manifestations of negative politeness in the relationship (future) teacher – pre-school pupil, respectively (future) teacher – pupil from primary school; (d) the identification of updated dominant strategic directions, regarding politeness, in teaching communication at a pre-school and primary school level.

In the present paper, I will search for answers for the questions that previous objectives imply, capitalizing the analysis of my teaching experience and that from pedagogical practicum for pre-school and primary school education (mentors) and of 2nd and 3rd year students from the specialization “The Pedagogy of Pre-school and Primary School Education” inside “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania. This experience was synthesized in the information collected after questioning these subjects on the topic of teaching communication, in general, and that of the problematic of teaching communication, in general and of updating positive/ negative politeness, especially. Therefore, the conclusions will reflect a particular context, but having opening towards future development and verification actions.

2. Theoretical Premises

The teaching methodology involves the reporting to a series of finality of the projected endeavour, the approach of specific contents by capitalizing features such as didactic strategies etc. Being part of this methodological field, didactic communication underlines the premises of the relational, affective, motivational dimensions of the didactic act, this is important for theoretical delimitations and for the practical opening supposed by the communicative act, with its particular aspects at the level of the relationship teacher – student.

From the large topic of communication, in general, and of didactic communication, in particular, I will focus in the present paper on the idea of communication as interaction, the Goffman’s theory of faces, the field of politeness – that will have as a starting point the theory of Brown and Levinson and some references to specialized literature dedicated to the analysis of particular examples of communicative acts.

2.1. *Communication as interaction*

Communication as interaction involves the relationship, report and permanent adaptation to the other, of the actants in a specific communication situation. The analysis perspectives in this direction are multiple, in specialized literature; the interaction supposes, on the one hand, the update of “self representation” (that we are again going to find below connected to the theory of faces), of the representation about the other” and of “the representation of task or of the context” [1] and, on the other hand, the coordination of statements: “the two speakers [...] transmit messages depending on the attitude of the partner and they immediately perceive the effect of their words on the other” [2], given the conditions in which “during interaction, a constant process of

inventory and emotional regulation take place, being strongly connected to the other exchanges which are oriented towards the cognitive side” [3]. Thus, interacting, speakers will try to find out as many pieces of information as they can in a specific communication situation and they will present each other so that they achieve the desired impression [4] and they receive the expected answer [5].

In particular, classroom interaction actually involves “a lively discourse-in-interaction that calls for immediate, contingent and communicative acts from the teacher” [6], discourse-in-interaction that I will study by taking into account the analysis of ways of showing positive/ negative politeness.

2.2. The positive face and the negative face of the Ego

The positive face/ the field of the social manifestation of the Ego and the negative face of the Ego (from the theory developed by P. Brown and S. Levinson, 1987, based on E. Goffman) are updated in communication both by the speaker and the interlocutor, so that the dynamics of interaction increases in intensity, given the conditions in which the four variables (the positive face of the speaker, the negative face of the speaker, the positive face of the interlocutor and the negative face of the interlocutor) can be “threatened” in the act of communication (in this respect, for examples, see [7]). This is the reason why we need the update of politeness strategies in order to counteract/ redress the acts which can be menacing for one or more of the faces of the speaker/ the interlocutor.

From the point of view of the interaction in the field of communication (involving the intimate Ego and the public Ego [8], respectively the positive face and the negative face of each speaker), specialized literature insists on the necessity of a protective double-directed endeavour: both towards one’s person and to the interlocutor’s [9].

2.3. The theory of positive/ negative politeness

The theory of positive/ negative politeness, in its established form (Brown & Levinson, 1987), was completed, in specialized literature, by interactional, socio-pragmatic, discursive studies etc. [10]. Based on the theory of Brown & Levinson, in the present paper, the action will fall (for the analysis of particular features of politeness in didactic communication) on the idea of responsibility for triggering specific faces of the speaker and of the interlocutor, so that, by the usage of specific strategies of politeness, the threat addressed to a specific face is avoided or minimized [11]. Thus, depending on the “social distance” between the speaker and the interlocutor, on the “relative power” of the participants to the communication act and on the “ranking” (the risk level) of a menacing act for a face in a specific culture [12], one can choose, in a communicational situation, the most appropriate strategy in the dynamics of the interaction speaker – interlocutor.

Among the possible strategies connected to Brown & Levinson [13], I will particularly envisage only those of positive and negative politeness, both are to be detected in didactic communication, given the conditions in which: “positive politeness strategies address the other’s positive face wants, whereas negative politeness strategies address their negative face by showing distance and impersonality” [14]; positive politeness means communication/ community, solidarity, familiarity, symmetry/ balance/ the horizontal feature of communication, “a highly sociable environment” etc. [15], while negative politeness means respect, the distance speaker – interlocutor, the avoidance of suppositions connected to the interlocutor, impersonalization, avoidance behaviour or that of redressing a difficult situation etc. [16], “the decrease of one’s personality simultaneously with the exaggeration of the other’s value” [17].

2.4. The principles/ the maximum of politeness

The principles/ the maximum of politeness reflect, in specialized literature, the same preoccupation for the dynamics of the relationship locutor – interlocutor, envisaging “constraints” such as: “generosity/ tact”,

“approbation/ modesty”, “agreement”, “sympathy”, “obligation”, “opinion-reticence” and “feeling-reticence” (Leech, apud [18]), respectively rules such as “Don’t impose”, “Give options”, “Make a good impression – be friendly” (Lakoff, apud [19]).

2.5. Updates of the theoretical premises in the field of didactic communication

Updates of these theoretical premises are numberless in the field of didactic communication, the landmarks from specialised literature being as varied as possible; in the context of the present analysis, the following deserve to be mentioned:

(a) the reflection of the specificity of the dynamics of classroom interaction – with connections to what a teacher does in the first, in the second and in the third turn of the communicative act, supposing the teacher listens actively, knows the features of one’s students, their problems, the assessment of what they know and what they would need to know more, the effort of interpretation and the investigation of “alternative interactional trajectories in the course of action” [20];

(b) the differentiation and exemplifying of “distancing strategies” (marks of the asymmetry of the relationship teacher – student) and of “approximation strategies” (focused on the adjustment/ decrease of the social distance between the teacher and the student, on the creation of a pleasant atmosphere and of the feeling of affiliation to the same group), underlining the necessity of balancing social distance, of reaching solidarity and empathy between the parties involved in a didactic communication situation [21];

(c) the association of the theory of politeness with the motivational area of the relationship teacher – student and the offering of suggestions in this direction, given the conditions in which the teacher “may use positive politeness for promoting the student’s positive face (e.g. his desire to be recognized as a successful learner), and negative politeness for supporting the student’s negative face (e.g. his desire to make his own choices)” [22];

(d) particular contexts of usage of the strategies of politeness – for example, in Greek high school classrooms, “teachers [...] seem to care less for their students’ negative face and put a greater emphasis on the positive face wants of their students” and that “the classroom interaction [...] is characterized by minimal politeness investments, especially on the students’ part” [23]; other examples focused on specific features of the strategies of politeness: the usage of “if” vs. “when”: If you finish your homework, you are allowed to play outside (conditional clause, unclear expectation – positive or negative) vs. When you finish your homework, you are allowed to play outside (temporal clause, positive expectation, stimulation effect) [24]; silence as a form of manifestation of strategies for positive and negative politeness [25]; marks of politeness at a nonverbal and paraverbal level – the smile, the look, the distance from the interlocutor, the tone of one’s voice etc. [26]; the meanings of “no” in the economy of the communicative act [27]; the connection criticism – irony – strategy of politeness: see, for example, a reply such as: “Mother (on entering her child’s untidy room): I love children who keep their rooms clean” [28] etc.

3. Method, data and analysis

In the present paper, my focus was on the accomplishment of the objectives announced in “Introduction” by the analysis of the answers received at the structured interviews conducted on the following subjects (they voluntarily accepted to take part in this study): (a) 20 students of the 2nd and 3rd year from the specialization “Pedagogy of Pre-school and Primary School Education” inside “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania (10 students from the 2nd year and 10 of the 3rd year); (b) 10 teachers for pre-school education and 8 teachers from the primary school education of Iasi, as mentors of the pedagogical practicum of the students previously introduced. The transcriptions of the interviews were numbered, for a better usage of the informative material, thus: S2/1 ... S2/10 (for 2nd year students), S3/1 ... S3/10 (for 3rd year students), P-sT/1 ... P-sT/10 (for pre-school teachers) and PT/1 ... PT/8 (for primary school teachers).

The interviews had, mainly, the same structure, containing questions both for teachers and students and being centred on the communication with pre-school/ primary school students, especially on: the update of specific addressing formulas/ of specific replies both by student/ teacher (with a positive/ negative impact on the children); the remembering of nonverbal ways of transmitting messages towards pre-school children/ pupils, respectively of the most important components of actualized paraverbal components (which may be effective or not) in the classroom; expressing the option for replies belonging to positive or negative politeness *versus* replies which could be considered a threat for one of the faces of the pre-school/ primary school interlocutors. The difference between the interviews offered by the students and those provided by teachers consisted in the educational experience and the activities done during the pedagogical practicum of students *versus* their experience accumulated strictly during pedagogical practicum.

3.1. The communicational reality in the classroom compared to theoretical premises

In its optimum, efficient and interactive version, didactic communication supposes the bi-/ tridirectional character of the relationship teacher – student, student – teacher, student – student (*versus* the unidirectional character teacher – student, associated to the significant social distance and to the power of the teacher, by the assumed/ recognised authority on the student). Moreover, specialised literature draws the attention on “meaningful learning in education”, involving: “the contact with the problems” (a student will be more interested in a course if one will find solutions for the faced problems), “the real character of the teacher” (as a real person, not as an authority, adequate in the relations with students), “acceptance and understanding” (by the teacher, of the ideas and feelings of the students), “the provision of resources” (the accent falls on the idea of usability/ the possibility of usage of some resources such as books, maps, recordings, personal experiences etc., not on imposing them), “the main reason” (the creation of a learning frame which is favourable to the manifestation of students’ tendencies/ options) etc. [29]. Such elements are reflected in the answers received from students and teachers by the update of addressing formulas used in communicating with pre-school children/ primary school pupils (“*The most important thing when addressing children was the fact that I knew their first names: Amalia, Ioana... For them, it mattered whether the practitioners or any other guest knew their names. A fourth grader boy, at the second class of pedagogical practice, when I called him, he asked me, being pleasantly surprised: «How come you know my name, did you learn it as easy as that?» (given the context of 30 pupils in the class.) [...] I would still have used the first name or any other form of delicate addressing: dear children, my dear, my darling children, because I was very upset on the teacher of geography for calling my name. Though, it is my name and I am not ashamed of it, I did not like it when he called my name, for I believe that he established a certain distance and coldness*” – S3/6), by showing empathy (“*I understand your anger, but...*” – PT/2), of the overture towards the children’s opinions (“*We would be delighted to hear your opinion*” – P-sT/3), by updating specific codes (verbal or nonverbal: saying hello by using the name of the group – “*Good morning, lady beetles!*” – P-sT/5; “*putting one’s hands to the ears – as a sign they talk too loud; looking in the mirror – let’s find the... quiet one; opening the door – to throw away noise and pranks; eyes wide open – as a sign that one should be attentive to the answer one is expected to provide*” – P-sT/7 etc.) among the members of the group (preschool children/ primary school children – teacher), by indicating efficient ways of creating a favourable environment for learning (“*I very much appreciated a colleague who, in order to keep her pupils active and to stir their interest, she prepared a short riddle for the moments when children were more agitated. When this thing happened, she told the riddle only once. The students had to write down all the answers on a piece of paper and at the end of the class, they were gathered*” – S3/6), by offering appropriate feedback, according to Lee [30], feedback which is adapted to the type of interlocutor (to some children/ pupils who are motivated mostly by a positive feedback, the others – by spotting the mistakes from the previous answer) etc.

Classroom interaction also means, especially during pedagogical practice, the usage of some replies of the 2nd or 3rd year students placed in the negative field of the relation teacher – student, these replies are, in fact, threats

[31] to one of the faces (positive or negative) of the child interlocutor; for example: “If you did not understand, ask your colleagues who have been more attentive” (S2/1); “A child that did not understand how to solve a task asks for help and addresses the teacher with «Madam!», and the teacher, having a high tone, answers: «No madam!!!»” (S2/9); “Sit quietly in your desks!” (S3/8); “You did not know anything!” (PT/1), “raising one’s tone in order to criticise, to comment” (P-sT/1) etc. or even threats directed to the faces of the teacher interlocutor: “I am not good at these things” (PT/3), “I have no idea...” (PT/1) etc.

By connecting oneself to the subjects’ experience as teachers, the usage of distance and closeness strategies [32], being materialized, for example, in the usage of the second person plural and of the forms of the politeness pronoun while pupils from primary school education address their teacher or the usage of the second person singular and the appellatives containing the first name (even the diminutives) as far as pre-school children’s way of addressing is concerned (“Good morning, Miss Lenuș!” – S2/9; “We love you, Mister Sebi, because you allow us to go outside!” – P-sT/4); just like specialized studies recommend, one can notice the tendency of balancing these two types of strategies: “Even the less pleasant things are differently perceived if they are told in the appropriate way. The person should not feel attacked, aggressed, condemned, for that individual will have a self-defence attitude of opposition” (P-sT/3) – regarding the maximum of politeness presented above.

3.2. Positive politeness in the communication (future) teacher – preschool/ primary school student

The main ways of manifestation of positive politeness in the communication (future) teacher – preschool child/ primary school pupil refer both to verbal and non-/ paraverbal communication. The examples provided by the interviewed subjects are connected to the strategies of positive politeness presented by Brown and Levinson [33] and of the nuances which appeared later, including specialised Romanian literature [34]; among these strategies, I will focus only on the below mentioned components of positive politeness that were found in the subjects’ examples:

(a) direct statements, explicitly expressing one’s interest, respectively the empathy towards the interlocutor: “These shoes are so great! Do you feel well wearing them?”, “This little green dress reminds me of spring! Who bought it for you? That person definitely knew that you will be extremely pretty!” (P-sT/3); “You are so happy today...” (S3/10);

(b) the exaggeration/ hyperbolisation of the positive feedback for the interlocutor: “You did a good job!” (S3/3); “Today you worked beautifully!” (S2/2); “Great, you answered perfectly!”, “Great job!” (P-sT/7) – in the last case, by placing the hyperbolic adjective in front of the noun;

(c) marking the identity of the group – by the usage of the appellatives that refer to pre-school children/ primary school pupils or of the first person plural: “Lady beetles (according to the name of the group that represents us)” (P-sT/5); “Little princesses and princes (from the name of the group)” (S2/4); “The 4th graders!” (PT/3); “The historians/ the painters (according to the name of the groups formed during the lesson)” (PT/8); “Together we will create...” (S2/3); by the usage of specific coded gestures (P-sT/4), of badges (PT/7);

(d) challenging/ asking for the approval of / the feedback of the interlocutor: placing oneself at the same level with pre-school children, on the carpet or on the little chair (P-sT/8; S2/10); “Madam, do you like me today? Haven’t I played nicely with my colleagues?” (the reply of a pre-school child given in P-sT/1); “I understood from Matei that one can see the board very well, even from the last desk” (PT/6);

(e) avoiding/ preventing lack of approval: “Well, I am going to give you 3 more minutes to finish the exercises” (PT/8); “I know that you have much knowledge, but it would be nice to share it with us” (S3/6); “You worked beautifully, but here you could have done...” (S2/3);

(f) affirmation/ confirmation/ the strengthening of common ground: “I believe that we all agree that this cartoon worth seeing” (S2/9); “Why don’t we have a short break?” (PT/4);

(g) encouraging balance, the symmetry of relation/communication: the teacher takes part in the game together with children (S2/7); “I painted with the pupils from the group of painters” (PT/8); “I want the ball, it’s my turn

to answer now! (during a game)” (P-sT/10); even the start of a certain ritual: clapping hands as a greeting (P-sT/1); “Good bye! See you tomorrow!” (P-sT/10); “When going home, in the afternoon, children often use the formula «see you tomorrow»; children become responsible, in this way and the following day, if their mothers do not intend to bring her/him at kindergarten (sometimes for objective reasons), the child protests, one should convince her/him to stay at home” (P-sT/7); the usage of a calm tone, of a voice of medium intensity; looking straight in the eyes (PT/1, S2/8);

(h) supposing or asking for reciprocity: “You are attentive and the Fairy will have a surprise for you at the end” (P-sT/2); “I frequently use proverbs which become principles for some of them: Do not to the others what you do not like to be done to yourself” (PT/4);

(i) asking for or offering rational reasons for doing a specific thing or not: “Why did you colour the lion in dark brown?” (S2/7); “Why don’t you want to be in the same team with Ioana? She is a careful little girl who knows a lot about the topic of your team. I would love to have her in my team, for we would have higher chances of winning.” (P-sT/2);

(j) self-inclusion, manifested only verbally, in the activity of the interlocutor: “Let’s play Lego!” (S2/9);

(k) formulating a promise: “During the summer holiday, we will go in a trip in the places that we have indicated today on the map” (PT/8); “I promise that next time, I will tell you a story which is as beautiful as this one!” (P-sT/5) etc.

3.3. Negative politeness in the communication (future) teacher – preschool/ primary school student

The main ways of manifesting negative politeness in the act of communication between (future) teacher – preschool child/ primary school pupil can be connected to the same theoretical landmarks [35] just like in the case of strategies of positive politeness, this becoming materialized in verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal forms (as substitute or additional methods [36]:

(a) the indirect formulation of replies, in order not to be felt by the interlocutor as imposed actions, threats etc.: “Do you want to tell us what you can see in this representation?” (S2/8); moderate tone (S3/7); eventually, by the usage of verbal forms such as past tense, future or present conditional: “I intended to ask you [I will ask you/ I would ask you] to gather all Lego pieces” (P-sT/9);

(b) the usage of structures which involve apologies, motivations or whose purpose is the pre-encounter of a possible negative reaction of the interlocutor: “Excuse me for interrupting you [during a written test paper], I must draw your attention on...” (PT/8); “Come here to show you...” (P-sT/6); “I know that you do not like dictation very much, but...” (PT/7); “I would not like to disturb your game, but...” (S2/2);

(c) formulating/ transmitting an impersonal/ general (without a direct address) message: “I would like someone to come here and count the small flowers from the crowd” (S3/4); “Let’s listen, let’s be quiet...” (S2/9); “Zip your little mouth, without further explanation, for children already know the meaning of this gesture” (S2, 3); “Children from my group know that when I raise my right hand, I want them to be quiet, for I have something very important to tell them” (P-sT/4); “the pointing finger on your lips” (PT/1); “When the discussion takes longer than it should, I point to the watch. My pupils know that precious time is wasted and they return to the given topic”; “lowering the tone when students become loud” (PT/4);

(d) minimizing critique or a request etc.: “Have you been a little naughty?” (S2/3); “Andrei, your hair has grown and you always sweat. Don’t you want to try Ben 10 haircut?” (S2/7); “If you’re not too tired, give me some examples of...” (PT/7);

(e) cultivating a relaxed relationship speaker – interlocutor: “Be nice and fill in the paper with your name” (S3/10);

(f) the usage of forms/ structures which are placed before the negative/ critic component of the message: “I noticed that you were not very attentive at the requests of the test, this is why you made **so many mistakes**” (PT/5); “You have a **small mistake**” (S3/9);

(g) the usage of integrative verbal structures: “*Let’s discuss about Andrada’s situation! (a calm, quiet tone, low intensity of the voice)*” (P-sT/5);

(h) softening: “*Maybe you would like to have more time to think about it ...*”; “*Now you can start to solve the handout!*” (P-sT/3); “*You can provide examples of ...*” (S3/4); “*It seems to me that you have slowed down*” (PT/5) etc.

3.4. Dominant strategic directions updated, in the field of politeness, in didactic communication at a pre-school and primary school level

Dominant strategic directions which are updated, in the field of politeness in didactic communication at a pre-school and primary school level reflects an equilibrium of the usage of the two types of politeness, positive and negative, as the *above* examples show it, at 3.2. and 3.3. The same equilibrium is proved by the clear option formulated by the interviewed subjects for replies which are polite, in opposition with those which could constitute a threat for one of the interlocutor’s faces: low voice *versus* raised voice; direct eye contact *versus* patronizing look; smile *versus* distant mimics; *Do you think that...? How do you think that...? versus Not like this. It is not good. You have made a mistake.; Have you finished colouring? versus Put your pencils/ pens down!; I have noticed something. versus I have a small remark.; It won’t take more than a few minutes, but I have to tell you that... versus I have to tell you that...; Come here to show you...! versus Come here!; It would be good to be able to hear each other. versus Andrei, do not talk without being asked!; Talk a little slower, so that all children can understand you! versus Talk slowly!; Try to make a small effort and colour the last flower!// Try to make a small effort and solve the last exercise on the handout! versus Colour the last flower!// Solve the last exercise!; Be nice and write a little upper on the board! versus Write higher on the board!* etc.

On the one hand, the differences appear between students (from the 2nd and 3rd year) and the teachers from pre-school and primary school educational system regarding choice of a more direct formula by the first in the attempt (perfectly justified in the first activities/ lessons) of thus dominating children, of leading the activity in a safe manner (in the case of the last pair of replies, half of the students chose the second version); this tendency – materialized in raising the tone or the usage of a high intensity of the voice in the moments when pre-school children/ primary school children were not attentive – was also noticed by students’ mentors. On the other hand, the last offered alternative methods of updating politeness strategies: “*We are getting closer to the end.*” (instead of *Put your pencils down!*); “*Our rule is to listen to each other!*” (instead of *Andrei, do not talk without being asked!*) (P-sT/3), “*You worked very well so far and solving even the last exercise will make things better!*” (instead of *Solve the last exercise!*) (PT/8).

4. Conclusions

The teaching methodology also implies, on the direction of choosing the most efficient strategies of communication/ relating to students and motivating them to learn, a series of options in the plan of updated discursive strategies in the classroom and, to be more specific, at the level of strategies of positive/ negative politeness capitalized (in opposition with verbal, paraverbal and/ or nonverbal manifestations which could be felt by the interlocutors as threats addressed to their positive and/ or negative face, meaning their social and/ or personal, intimate face).

The contextualization of these theoretical and methodological landmarks at a pre-school and primary school level allowed (by the analysis of the answers provided at interviews by the students of the specialization “Pedagogy of Pre-school and Primary School Educational System” and by the mentors of pedagogical practicum – kindergarten and primary school teachers): connecting the communicational reality to the theoretical premises envisaged, the identification of the main forms of materializing strategies of positive/negative politeness in the communication (future) teacher – pre-school child/ primary school pupil and also the strengthening of the idea of

the necessary balance in every act of communicating/ relating to students, therefore including it in the plan of positive/ negative politeness.

The analytic endeavour that I proposed brings forward other controversies from the methodological plan of teaching-learning – for example, as far as the style of teacher is concerned, the efficiency of direct formulas for tasks and firmness in addressing, the distance teacher – student, the cultivation of a specific style in the student's way of addressing to the teacher and the other way round etc.; thus, new research directions can be opened and studied further.

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