

OPTIMISATION OF CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION – AN INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH

Mihaela Aurelia ȘTEFAN¹

Abstract

Classroom communication, analyzed from a psycho-pedagogical point of view, appears to be an interactive model, the teacher and the student playing the role of both sender and receiver, engaging in a relationship underpinning exchange of ideas, corrections and additions. The way information is transmitted, the message itself, enthusiasm, active involvement, power of persuasion, safety, attitude and posture are elements that ensure the efficiency of the communication.

In order to improve classroom communication we consider it necessary to know the students' perceptions and representations regarding this process.

The current paper presents the data deriving from an investigation of students' representations in relation to the different aspects of classroom communicative competence.

Based on this investigation, the data collected and analyzed have led to the following findings: the emotional-affective dimension determines the effectiveness of the communication relationship to a large extent; the investigated subjects particularly appreciate the climate of communication, and the emotional connection established between teachers and students.

Key words: *Classroom communication; Competence; Efficiency; Emotional-affective climate.*

1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, "to communicate" means "to impart information", "to make somebody aware of something" or "to convey or share ideas and feelings". Mainstream literature is replete with definitions of the concept of "communication" from a multisided perspective.

The definition provided by Roberts, Hunt (1991, p. 225) lays emphasis on the value of information: communication refers to "acquiring, transmitting and attaching a meaning to information". Without a genuine exchange of meaning, "in a world shaken by multi-media communication (...) everything happens as if we didn't transmit the main point" (Pantanella, 1996, p. 10).

"Communicating is synonymous with being, and communicating about communication means talking about being, about the myriad hypostases of existence

¹Associate Professor, PhD, University of Craiova, Romania, email address stefan.mihaela25@yahoo.com.

- personal - and about the chance to share the conclusions" (Georgescu, 2007, p. 10, our translation).

Human communication can take place on several distinct levels (Graur, 2001):

a) *Intrapersonal communication* - communication within and to oneself; every human being knows and judges oneself, asks questions and provides answers so that this communication with the inner self becomes a source of psychological and emotional balance;

b) *Interpersonal communication* - communication between people; the objectives of this communication are extremely numerous and complex: to get to know the ones around us, to build and maintaining human bonds, to manipulate the hearer, to recognise personal value, to meet affective, control and domination needs, etc.;

c) *Group communication* - it is carried out within the boundaries of human communities; the exchanges of ideas and emotions is secured at this level, experiences are shared, problem-solving situations arise, decisions are made, and conflicts are settled;

d) *Public communication* - it aims not only at transmitting information, but also at changing the public opinions and actions, at influencing people feelings; another level at which human communication can take place is:

e) *Mass Communication* - it refers to "producing and disseminating written, spoken, visual or audiovisual messages by an institutionalized media system to a diverse and numerous audience" (Prutianu, 2000, p. 36, our translation).

Irrespective of the level of communication, efficient communication implies "moments of togetherness, of non-conflictual experiencing of a non-confusing form of affective and cognitive communion" (Georgescu, 2007, p. 140, our translation).

According to the *theory of communicative action* endorsed by Jurgen Habermas (cited in Dobrescu, 2007), communicative competence is determined by "linguistic competence" and "pragmatic universals". According to the same author, the linguistic competence of each individual represents his/her ability to communicate his/her ideas to his peers, using words that have a spectrum of meanings, and "pragmatic universals" are proposals for the systematization of speech acts, the most often used words in ordinary or scientific language.

Teaching competence is an equally complex structure - at the crossroads of the verbs to know, to know how to do, to know how to be, to know how to become a teacher (Chiş, 2005) and to include potential achievement - and *dynamics*, its efficient manifestation being a function of the assimilated experience.

Classroom communication is a specific form of human communication. Among its basic characteristics, we enumerate (Ilie, 2007, p. 129): reciprocal nature; multipurpose deployment; coexistence of semantic and ectosemantic components; the message is selected and presented in a logical manner; benefitting from regulation and self-regulation; triggering the student's active involvement, etc.

Classroom communication is instrumental (oriented towards instructional and educational purposes) and it focuses on feedback, teachers and students displaying their power of persuasion (Frăşineanu, 2014, p. 112); this not only involves the

exchange of information, but also psycho-social interaction, building an affective-emotional environment.

The teacher's communicative competence presupposes acquiring knowledge and skills in several fields (<http://www.asociatia-profesorilor.ro/comunicarea-didactica.html>):

- awareness of the influence of the context of communication on the content and form of communication, as well as adjustment of the communicative behaviour to it (accommodation work);
- knowledge of the communication rules and the impact of paralinguistic and nonverbal communication within classroom communication;
- knowledge of human and teaching-related psychology, the ability to interact with students;
- knowledge of the culture of the participants to communication, because nonverbal language differs from one culture to another, and what is considered efficient in communication within a culture can be inefficient in another.

The effectiveness of communication depends, among other things, on the choice of the correct type of listening, in accordance with the specific situation/context.

There are several types of listening (<https://comunicareeficienta.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/E-book-Dezvoltarea-abilitatilor-de-comunicare.pdf>):

- a) *Active listening* - it involves keeping focused, understanding the message, understanding the speaker based on empathy, asking open-ended questions in order to encourage the speaker to continue;
- b) *Passive listening* - the listener perceives the speaker's words as a sort of background, and though s/he hears, s/he does not actually listen, being concerned with his/her own thoughts that come to his/her mind, only paying attention to certain statements and words;
- c) *Careful listening* - the receiver focuses on the message, without interfering in communication; it can be sustained by eye contact, mimic, body language;
- d) *Interactive listening* - the speaker expects the listener to get involved (verbally or non-verbally) and contribute.

2. An investigative approach to efficient classroom communication

Starting from the theoretical aspects presented above, the current investigation aims at the following:

2.1. Objectives:

- a) Identification of students' perceptions and representations regarding classroom communication;
- b) Data collection, processing and interpretation.

2.2. Research methodology combining the data gathered following the administration of the questionnaire with those of the focus group interview.

2.3. Sampling - the target population was made up of 82 students of the Faculty of Law and Faculty of Social Sciences, enrolled in the 1st year of the Teacher Training programme (Cycle I), developed and run by the Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova.

2.4. Analysis and presentation of collected data

In order to identify the students' perceptions and representations of classroom communicative competence, we designed and administered a *Student opinion questionnaire on the communication between teacher and student*; the recorded data were fully rounded by those obtained by applying a focus group interview. In what follows, we shall present a selection of the recorded data.

Regarding the nature of the data that we collected through the questionnaire, we employed two categories:

- a) *factual data indicators* of official nature: biographical data (age of the subjects, institutional affiliation, specialisation, year of study);
- b) *opinion indicators* focusing on opinions, assessments, views of the participants belonging to this micro-research target population, with reference to the teacher-student communication as a basic competence of the teaching profession, namely: the characteristics of the successful teacher, the features of effective classroom communication, students' perception of their communication with teachers, etc.

Student opinions and assessments were requested as follows:

- a) in the form of Yes/No questions;
- b) by using a rating system;
- c) by choosing the correct variant (M/C);
- d) in the form of open-ended questions, with no pre-defined answers.

One of the questionnaire items addresses the characteristics of the successful teacher, according to the students. Analyzing the results obtained from the descriptive processing, we found out that the participants highly rated the following characteristics: relaxed attitude (17.07 %), supportive attitude (14.63 %), boosting students' motivation (13.41 %), showing confidence in students (13.41 %).

Knowledge of the subject matter, teacher training, empathy, self-confidence were other characteristics of the successful teacher identified by the students. The results are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1 below:

Table no. 1. The successful teacher's characteristics, according to students

The successful teacher's characteristics	No. of answers	%
Relaxed attitude	14	17.07
Supportive attitude	12	14.63
Boosting students' motivation	11	13.41
Showing confidence in students	11	13.41
Knowledge of the subject matter	9	10.97
Teacher training	9	10.97
Empathy	8	9.76
Self-confidence	8	9.76

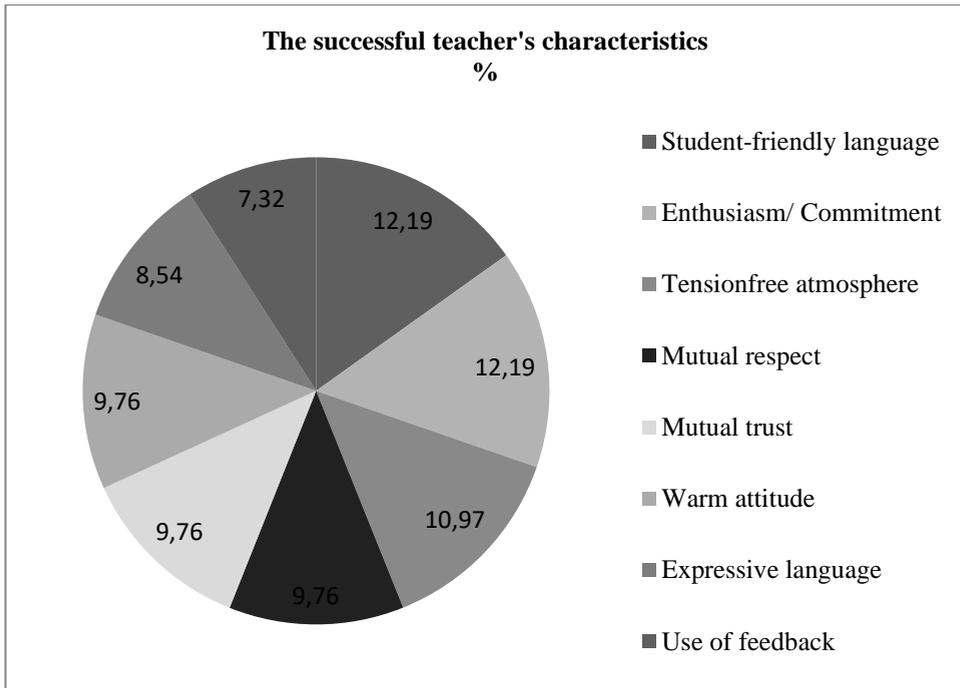


Figure no. 1. The successful teacher's characteristics

Table 2 shows the characteristics of efficient classroom communication, according to the students, in the decreasing order of scores:

Table no. 2. The characteristics of efficient classroom communication

According to students	No. of answers	%
Student-friendly language	10	12.19
Enthusiasm/ Commitment	10	12.19
Tensionfree atmosphere	9	10.97
Mutual respect	8	9.76
Mutual trust	8	9.76
Warm attitude	8	9.76
Expressive language	7	8.54
Use of feedback	6	7.32
Concision	6	7.32
Convergence of communication modes (verbal, non-verbal, paralinguistic)	5	6.10
Unbiased attitude	5	6.10

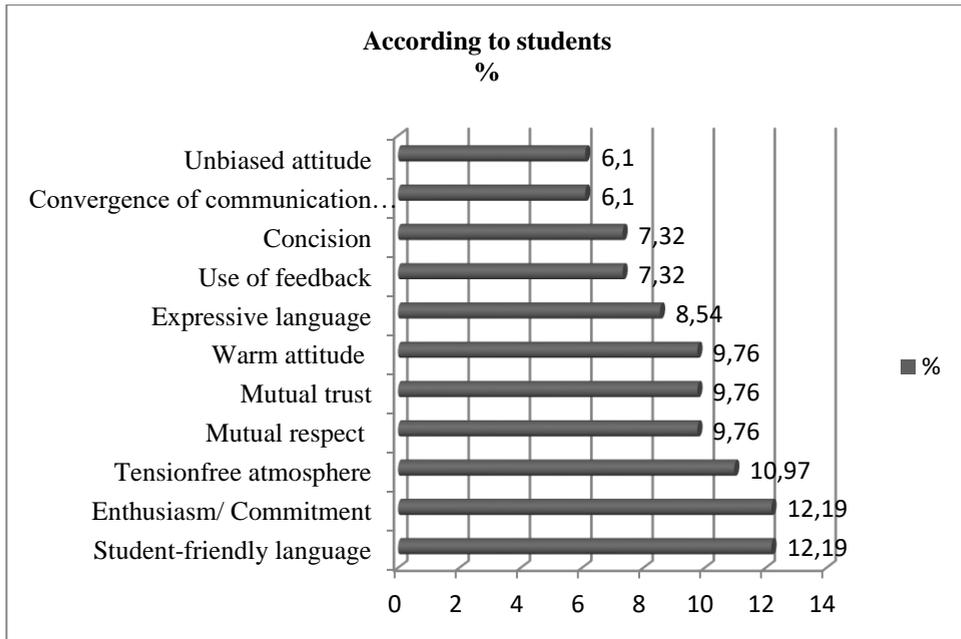


Figure no. 2. The characteristics of efficient classroom communication

The data presented in Table 2 and Figure highlight the focus of the investigated subjects on *student-friendly language* (12.19 %) and on *enthusiasm/commitment* (12.19 %) as the main attributes of efficient communication between teacher and student; the tension free atmosphere ranks the third (10.97 %), mutual respect and mutual trust (with the same percentage of 9.76 %) come the fourth and the fifth, respectively. We note the importance that subjects attach to the affective-emotional aspect of classroom communication.

Another item aims to identify the students' degree of satisfaction regarding their communication with teachers (Table 3, Figure 3): Only 8 % appreciate that the communication with the teacher is *Very high*, and 27 % - *High*; the majority (46 %) choose *Medium* and the rest: *Low* (13 %) and *Very low* (6 %).

Table no. 3. Students' perception of their communication with teachers

Percentage	Students' degree of satisfaction regarding their communication with teachers	Percentage	The extent to which teachers value the emotional aspect of classroom communication
46 %	<i>Medium</i>	47 %	<i>Small</i>
27 %	<i>High</i>	22 %	<i>Medium</i>
13 %	<i>Low</i>	15 %	<i>Large</i>
8 %	<i>Very high</i>	9 %	<i>Very small</i>
6 %	<i>Very low</i>	7 %	<i>Very large</i>

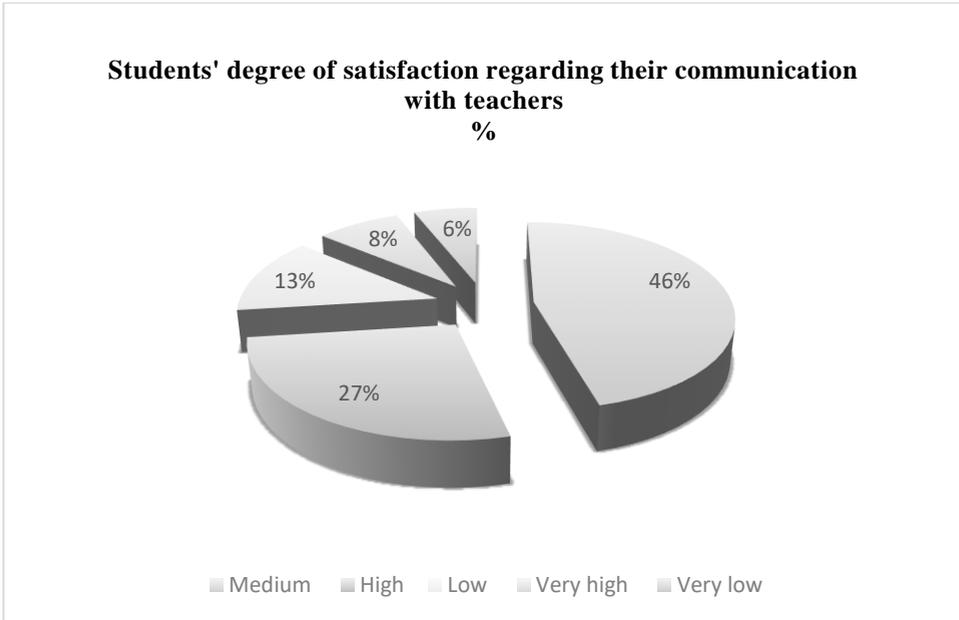


Figure no. 3. Students' degree of satisfaction regarding their communication with teachers

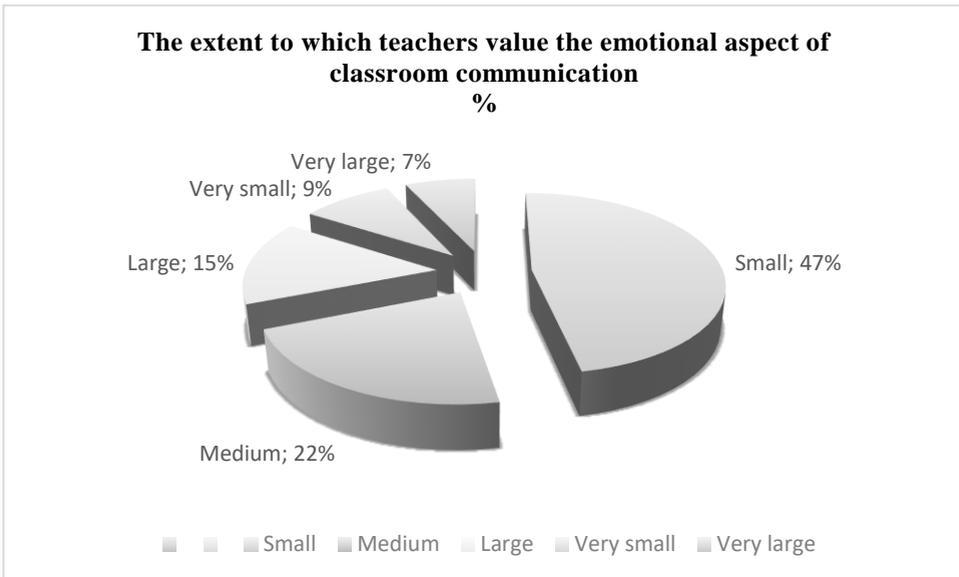


Figure no. 4. The extent to which teachers value the emotional aspect of classroom communication

Table 3, Figure 4 indicates the extent to which teachers succeed in valuing the emotional aspect of classroom communication: most of the answers (47 %) are focused on *Small* or *Medium* (22 %); the other assessments are: *To a large extent* - 15 %, *To a very small extent* - 9 %, and *To a very large extent* - only 7 %.

The data recorded after the administration and interpretation of the questionnaire were completed with those obtained through the focus-group interview. The interview was applied to 14 people, the questions being of different nature: probe questions, follow-up questions, key questions that address the objectives of the investigative approach, and exit questions.

We aimed at identifying the students' perceptions, representations and attitudes with reference to:

- a) the successful teacher characteristics;
- b) the main problems faced by students in the communication with teachers;
- c) suggestions/guidelines for enhancing communication interaction.

As far as classroom communication is concerned, the participants appreciate, first of all, aspects related to the emotional side of the teachers' personality and psychological support: supportive attitude, communication and counselling skills.

The main problems faced by students in communicating with teachers are:

- Lack of understanding/empathy;
- Abstract language;
- Emotional block/Intimidation;

It is noteworthy that the problems mentioned by the students are linked to the interpersonal dimension.

Regarding the enhancement of communicative interaction, we shall present the main aspects below, which, according to the participants, are of utmost importance as they result from interpreting the recorded data (Table 4, Figure 5):

Table 4. Dimensions of enhancement of communication interaction

No.	Enhancement of communication interaction, according to the students	%
1.	Nature of the learning tasks (requiring collaboration)	27
2.	Making the message accessible	25
3.	Praise, reward, interaction	19
4.	Supportive attitude (encouragement)	19
5.	Emotional climate (uninhibiting)	11
6.	Tolerance to a diversity of opinions	9
7.	Empathy	9

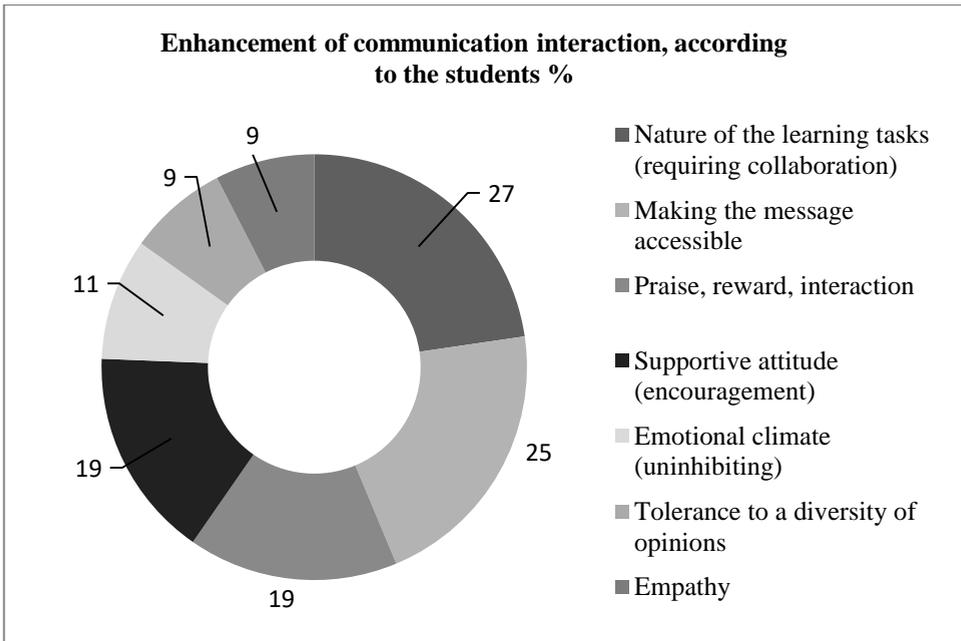


Figure no. 5. Dimensions of enhancement of communication interaction

Conclusions

- The findings of the questionnaire highlight the idea that the efficiency of the communication between teachers and students is primarily influenced by the emotional-affective dimension; the participants mainly appreciate the climate of communication, the enthusiasm of the teacher, his/her respect to and trust in the student, the warm attitude;
- 46 % of the students showed a *Medium* degree of satisfaction concerning their communication with teachers, and only 27 % of the students are satisfied to a *High* degree;
- Students appreciate that 56 % of the teachers fail to highlight the emotional aspect of classroom communication: 47 % of the participants choose the option to a *Small* extent and 9 % opted out for a *Very small* extent;
- The subjects investigated during the interview outlined several suggestions for the purpose of making classroom communication more efficient; in this sense, teachers should know and observe some guidelines, among which:
 - accurate, open and direct speech (which prevents or reduces message distortions);
 - encouraging feedback from students (to know to what extent messages have been correctly received and understood);

- careful, patient and encouraging listening to the messages received from students while at the same time trying to understand exactly the meaning of these messages;
- establishing emotional connection with the students (this idea is also supported by I. O. Pânișoară, 2009);
- use of several forms of classroom communication for the same type of messages (as a rule, oral and visual communication are used concurrently);
- repetition of more complex messages.
- Communication interactions can be enhanced, among others, by:
 - tasks involving collaboration, group work;
 - making the messages more accessible;
 - praise, reward of interactive behaviour;
 - tolerance to a diversity of opinions, etc.

All these findings signal the importance of the teaching process to education theorists, more particularly with reference to emotional and affective aspects. Students need a tensionfree, relaxing, refreshing environment, they need encouragement, to be trusted and engaged in a close relationship with professionals. An efficient communication relationship is based on respect, enthusiasm/commitment and a positive attitude.

Full awareness of these perceptions and expectations of the students regarding the communication with the teachers provides a necessary reference framework for the organisation of teachers' intervention in order to gear the concrete communication processes towards optimisation (Ezekil, 2001, p. 9).

Teachers should not ignore the socio-emotional dimension of the training, achieving desirable academic results depends, to a significant extent, on the climate of communication between teacher and student.

REFERENCES

1. Chiș, V. (2005). *Pedagogia contemporană - Pedagogia pentru competențe*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House.
2. Dobrescu, E. M. (2007). *Sociologia comunicării*. București: Fundația România de Mâine Publishing House.
3. Ezechil, L. (2001). *Comunicarea educațională în context școlar*. București: Publishing House Didactică și Pedagogică.
4. Frăsineanu, E.S. (2014). *Pedagogie – Managementul clasei de elevi: suport de curs*. Craiova: Sitech Publishing House.
5. Georgescu, M. (2007). *Introducere în psihologia comunicării*. București: Fundația România de Mâine Publishing House.
6. Graur, E. (2001). *Tehnici de comunicare*. Cluj-Napoca: Mediamira Publishing House. Available at: [http://itee.elth.pub.ro/~mm/tcp/exemple/Bibliografie/Tehnici-de-comunicare %20- %20MANUAL.pdf](http://itee.elth.pub.ro/~mm/tcp/exemple/Bibliografie/Tehnici-de-comunicare%20-%20MANUAL.pdf), [online, 06.12.2018].

7. Ilie, V. (2007). *Pedagogie. Perspective teoretice și aplicative*. Craiova: Universitaria Publishing House.
8. Pantanella, R. (1996). Pourquoi tant parler de communication. *Cahiers pédagogiques*, no. 326.
9. Pânișoară, I.O. (2003). *Comunicarea eficientă: metode de interacțiune educațională*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
10. Pânișoară, I.O. (2009). *Profesorul de succes: 59 de principii de pedagogie practică*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
11. Prutianu, Ș. (2000). *Manual de comunicare și negociere în afaceri. Comunicarea*, Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
12. Roberts, K., Hunt, D. (1991). *Organizational Behavior*. New York: PWS-Kent Publishing Company.
13. <https://comunicareeficienta.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/E-book-Dezvoltarea-abilitatilor-de-comunicare.pdf>, [online, 05.12.2018].
14. <http://www.asociatia-profesorilor.ro/comunicarea-didactica.html>, [online, 06.12.2018].