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THE LANGUAGE OF CHILD'S EMOTIONS

ABSTRACT. Kłysz-Sokalska Natalia, *The Language of Child's Emotions* [Język dziecięcych emocji]. Studia Edukacyjne nr 48, 2018, Poznań 2018, pp. 303-313. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. DOI: 10.14746/se.2018.48.20

The article shows the problem of the importance of emotions as one of the soft competencies. The author bases her reflections on the thesis that an individual understanding of the emotions experienced by oneself and others may influence the internal (spiritual) integration of a person as well as the sense of acceptance and belonging to the community. Child's emotions, due to their primarily pre-interpretation of reality, also affect other developmental processes such as perception, memory and attention. The author of the article focuses on the importance of the emotional competence of the child expressed in a verbal way. She notes that skilfully used rich dictionary of concepts related to emotions can influence the subsequent proper functioning in community. Also, citing research, the author states that early emotional education influences the development of qualities such as sensitivity, ability to empathize and openness to another person. The combination of language education with emotional, moral and social education becomes the starting point for axiolinguistic education.

Key words: emotions, language, emotional development, emotional competencies, child's education

"Already in early childhood I was taught that the right decisions are made with cool calculation, and emotions and reason do not mix like water and oil"¹ writes Damasio in his introduction to one of the best known books about emotions and brain. The subject, which until recently was considered to be a metaphysical assumption on the borderline of fairy tales and magic, has gained scientific and medical background thanks to many researches.² The

¹ A. Damasio, *Błąd Kartezjusza*, Poznań 2016, p. 9.

² In: D.M. Tucker, *Lateral brain function, emotion, and conceptualization*, Psychological Bulletin, 1981, 89(1); R.J. Davidson, *Anterior cerebral asymmetry and the nature of emotion*, Brain and Cognition, 1992, 20; R.J. Davidson, S.K. Sutton, *Affective neuroscience: the emergence of a discipline*, Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 1995, 5; K.L. Phan et al., *Functional Neuroanatomy of Emotion: A Meta-Analysis of Emotion Activation Studies in PET and fMRI*, NeuroImage, 2002, 16(2); N.A.S.

correlation between emotional and cognitive processes is evident in various aspects, two of which seem to be the most crucial: emotional memory³ and verbalization of emotions, on which I will focus in this article.

The significance of shaping soft competencies, i.e. those relating to psychophysical traits and social skills as well as focusing on human behavior, attitudes, ways of being, which emotional competencies undoubtedly are, manifests itself in relation to the general functioning of a child, a student, and later – an adult. An individual understanding of the emotions experienced by oneself and others may influence the internal (spiritual) integration of a person as well as the sense of acceptance and belonging to the community. Child's emotions, due to their primarily pre-interpretation of reality, also affect other developmental processes such as perception, memory and attention, because "all of the emotions, not just pleasant ones, have an important role in life and each of them exerts an influence on the child's specific psychological and social adaptation".⁴

The emotional development of a child

The issue of understanding and perceiving emotions throughout the first years of life changes periodically. During the period of growing up, certain changes can be observed when it comes to the emotional reactivity. Right after birth, the newborn emits its first emotional signal – a cry. The first year of a child's life uncovers its physiological responses to such emotions as anger, fear, surprise, disgust, sadness and joy. In the following few years a young human being is exposed to new sensations which manifest themselves through expression along with the emotional experience.⁵

During the first months of a child's life most of the signals it sends are related to its psychophysiological state, i.e. weeping, crying, smiling, agitation. The answer to the particular needs is the concern of the parent (usually the mother), which results in the emotional satisfaction of a child. At the later stage of development, the child returns to these moments of solace by seeking help from the parent.⁶ At this stage of a child's life the positive emotional feelings manifest themselves through facial expressions and body movements.⁷

Farb, A.K. Anderson, Z.V. Segal, *The Mindful Brain and Emotion Regulation in Mood Disorders*, Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 2012, 8; J. Kagan, *Brain and Emotion*, Emotion Review, 2017.

³ P. Przybysz, *Emocje muzyczne i ich estetyczne modyfikacje*, [in:] *Neuroestetyka muzyki*, Eds. M. Bogucki, A. Foltyn, P. Podlipniak, P. Przybysz, H. Winiszewska, Poznań 2013, p. 114.

⁴ E. Hurlock, *Rozwój dziecka*, Warszawa 1985, p. 370.

⁵ R.S. Lazarus, *Znaczenie a rozwój emocjonalny*, [in:] *Natura emocji*, Eds. P. Ekman, R.J. Davidson, Gdańsk 2012, p. 303-308.

⁶ A.I. Brzezińska (Ed.), *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka*, Gdańsk 2005, p. 49.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 52.

A pre-school child shifts its emotional development towards an increase in self-control. It deals better with the control of emotional impulses, shares emotions with others, and from 2 years of age the tendency to talk about emotions in conjunction with reflection on them grows systematically, which is connected to the development of speech at this stage. A pre-school child begins to experience emotions such as pride, shame, guilt, jealousy and embarrassment, which are the result of the generalization of many previous experiences.⁸ At that time, the initial stage of emotional representation starts to develop. That stage allows to define, interpret and control emotions.

The pre-school stage is also the time of so-called socialization of emotions. Smykowski⁹ while explaining this issue, writes:

the development of emotions depends on the response to them through the social environment. In the process of socialization, emotions become socially important and take socially accepted forms of expression (...). They are a source of information from other people, aiding the regulation of person's behavior and assisting adaptation of the forms of expression to social conditions." The child observes which emotions can be expressed and in what kind of situations.¹⁰

The child's school age covers the period of early school (integrated) education and the second stage of primary education. The change that occurs in the life of a child entering school is one of the most important things in its life, that is why it is often associated with psychological-emotional problems. As Brzezińska writes¹¹,

changes in the cognitive, emotional, and moral sphere as well as the ability to build satisfying relationships with peers and significant adults, who are now teachers, give a chance to end this development stage with a sense of being a competent person (...), and also provide a child with a chance to function in the social world in a manner that gives satisfaction and predisposes an individual to live a successful life.

The school stage is a time for a child to develop the awareness of their own feelings,¹² which is related to the strengthening of emotional competencies.

The early school age is the time to transform the emotional child spontaneity into the reflective, analytical and thoughtful image.¹³ The child takes

⁸ Ibidem, p. 192-193.

⁹ B. Smykowski, *Socjalizacja emocji (opracowanie)*, [in:] *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka*, Ed. A.I. Brzezińska, Gdańsk 2005, p. 194.

¹⁰ M.K. Rothbart, *Rozwój emocjonalny: zmiany reaktywności i samoregulacji*, [in:] *Natura emocji*, Eds. P. Ekman, R.J. Davidson, Gdańsk 2012, p. 312.

¹¹ A.I. Brzezińska (Ed.), *Psychologiczne portrety*, p. 260.

¹² L.S. Wygotski, *Wczesne dzieciństwo*, [in:] *Wybrane prace psychologiczne, II – Dzieciństwo i dorastanie*, Ed. L.S. Wygotski, Poznań 2002, p. 169.

¹³ B. Janiszewska, *Rozwój emocjonalny*, [in:] *Wybrane zagadnienia z psychologii*, Ed. S. Siek, Siedlce 1996, p. 223.

specific action only after that analysis. It levels its impulses with reflection and self-control. It is affected by the changes occurring in the child's environment, for example the beginning of the school education.

At the same time, the child's attitude to the environment changes. And the change in the child's attitude to the environment forces the change towards the child itself. (...) The environment might demand other requirements for dealing with emotions.¹⁴

Therefore, these changes determine the development of competencies influencing the proper functioning of the child in society as well as with oneself.

According to Wygotski,¹⁵ the student of early school education begins to see the internal nature of emotions, "it creates a clear orientation in its own experiences".

Many of the emotions that a child experiences during this time are related to cognitive activity at school, relationships with peers and a teacher. (...) School successes are a source of positive emotions, yet failures can cause a series of negative emotions (including the fear of school, the teacher's anger, the older children at school, etc.).¹⁶

Besides, early school age is characterized by increased ability to inhibit and control emotions, to which Wołoszynowa refers. As the age increases, the child is more able to control its own emotions, which is reflected in their expression.¹⁷ A particularly important element of this period is the emergence of deeper empathy, for example metaphorical consciousness of empathic suffering, which is the basis of mature empathy.¹⁸

School entry is also associated with increased tolerance for long-term emotional stress. This is an extremely important skill from the perspective of learning, since it gives a child the ability to function in a school situation effectively.¹⁹ The student copes better with the expectation for gratification or feedback from the teacher in the form of a mark, praise or criticism.

The emotional self-control, already shaped at pre-school stage, develops continuously, also at the school level. The child knows how to respond emotionally to specific situations, it controls its effects, both negative and positive. On the one hand, behavior is attributed to established social norms, on the other – their means of expression are individualized. Every child tries to feel positive

¹⁴ K. Kuszak, *Kompetencje emocjonalne młodszych uczniów*, [in:] *Uczeń w świecie emocji*, Ed. K. Kuszak, Nauczanie Początkowe. Kształcenie Zintegrowane, 2016/2017, 2, p. 12.

¹⁵ L.S. Wygotski, *Wczesne dzieciństwo*, p. 171.

¹⁶ K. Kuszak, *Kompetencje emocjonalne*, 2016/2017, p. 13.

¹⁷ L. Wołoszynowa, *Młodszy wiek szkolny*, [in:] *Psychologia rozwojowa dzieci i młodzieży*, Ed. M. Żebrowska, Warszawa 1979, p. 625.

¹⁸ M.L. Hoffman, *Empatia a rozwój moralny*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 75.

¹⁹ A.I. Brzezińska (Ed.), *Psychologiczne portrety*, p. 273.

and negative emotions in a different way, to react to success and failure otherwise. Emotional competence of a school-aged child gains definition in various forms of child's expression – musical, artistic and linguistic activities.

School age marks also the beginning of the development of empathy, which in the interpersonal relationships in the school environment is characterized by a high degree of significance. On the basis of the research conducted by Kuszak,²⁰ it is concluded that children can find themselves in the other person's position through demonstrated understanding for negative situations, as well as by analogy with their own emotional states and experiences. It has a positive impact on the further development of emotional competence, which takes the form of emotional education in the final stage²¹ or emotional intelligence, influencing the effectiveness of functioning at school and work in adult life.²²

The cognitive character of emotion – child verbalization of emotional states

One of the elements of the process of socialization is the ability to skillfully express emotions and to recognize emotions and feelings of others. Language is a very important ingredient in the process of shaping these competencies, since it becomes a source of information about them.²³ Along the side of the non-verbal emotional indicators, such as mimicry, gesturing, behavior, it's the verbal communication – due to its conceptual richness and the most objective interpretation of meanings – that represents the precise definition of emotions.

The cognitive nature of emotions is difficult to capture. It stems from the fact that emotions occur within the human being and they are part of the system responsible for creating a representation. A person has the control over the course of the emotion itself, which is a subjective phenomenon. Also, emotions are always directed at someone or something, then the content of emotions appears between one subject and another subject (or object). In addition, emotions change over time – in the short or long term. Emotions also

²⁰ K. Kuszak, *Kompetencje komunikacyjne dzieci w okresie późnego dzieciństwa w aspekcie rozwojowym*, Poznań 2011, p. 274.

²¹ D. Goleman, *Inteligencja emocjonalna*, Poznań 2012, p. 437.

²² In: E. Aronson, *Nobody left to hate*, New York 2000; J. Moczydłowska, *Potęga inteligencji emocjonalnej*, Zeszyty Naukowe WSZiP Łomża, 1, Łomża 2000; D.R. Caruso, Ch.J. Wolfe, *Emotional intelligence in the workplace*, [in:] *Emotional intelligence in everyday life: a scientific inquiry*, Eds. J. Ciarrochi, J.P. Forgas, J.D. Mayer, Philadelphia 2001; M.J. Elias, L. Hunter, J.S. Kress, *Emotional intelligence and education*, [in:] *Emotional intelligence in everyday life: a scientific inquiry*, Eds. J. Ciarrochi, J.P. Forgas, J.D. Mayer, Philadelphia 2001; A. Matczak, K.A. Knopp, *Znaczenie inteligencji emocjonalnej w funkcjonowaniu człowieka*, Warszawa 2013.

²³ B.B. Schieffelin, E. Ochs, *The Impact of Language Socialization on Grammatical Development*, [in:] *The Handbook of Child Language*, Eds. P. Fletcher, B. MacWhinney, Oxford 1995, p. 73-94.

affect the individual's behavior – its strength or direction. This may also affect the perception of social or personal situations.²⁴

The concept of cognitive representation of emotion allows us to understand the creation of the inner world representation in a general sense. Its source can be searched at Reykowski, who claims that a conscious representation of emotion can be formed at one of two levels: the first (lower) level, in which the representation of a fact or a process allows for this fact or process to be taken into account in performing the activity, and the second (higher) level, enabling a person to capture the represented fact or process in symbolic forms.²⁵ The codes constitute the foundation of emotion representation. These codes (image code, verbal code, and abstract code) are connected to each other and reveal other emotional aspects.²⁶

The full representation of emotions has a multiunit character. The process of transition between separate elements of the representation is significant. Emotional recoding processes are bidirectional, which allows for easier access to semantic content, and emotions become resistant to forgetfulness and distortion. Recoding processes allow the reinterpretation of emotional experiences or the development of emotion representation²⁷.

The perspective of interpretation of the verbal code is of utmost importance for this topic because it concerns the functions defining, denoting and naming emotions. In terms of school pedagogy it refers to the language of a child, within which the dictionary of emotional terms is located. Connecting the cognitive process, which in this case is the acquisition of verbal competence (language) with emotional processes affects the cohesion and maturity of a human personality.

From a research perspective, the issue of naming emotions by children is not a particularly popular topic. This may be due to the complexity of the process (emotionality and language), which requires versatility and an interdisciplinary approach in the fields of: psychology, pedagogy and linguistics (psycholinguistics). A holistic approach to the issue of verbal emotion, however, provides a full picture of the subject and a view from different perspectives.

The ability to express words of emotions allows the child to gain an orientation in his or her own experience, which influences their personalization process and strengthens the sense of subjectivity.²⁸ Verbalization

²⁴ E. Zdankiewicz-Ścigała, T. Maruszewski, *Teorie emocji*, [in:] *Psychologia*, t. 2 – *Psychologia ogólna*, Ed. J. Strelau, Gdańsk 2008, p. 417.

²⁵ J. Reykowski, *Eksperymentalna psychologia emocji*, Warszawa 1968.

²⁶ T. Maruszewski, E. Ścigała, *Emocje – aleksytymia – poznanie*, Poznań 1998, p. 59-70.

²⁷ E. Zdankiewicz-Ścigała, T. Maruszewski, *Teorie emocji*, p. 419.

²⁸ Ł. Dawid, „Odpowiednie dać uczuciu – słowo”, czyli o potrzebie kształcenia sprawności językowej uczniów w zakresie werbalizacji przeżyć uczuciowych, [in:] *Problemy edukacji lingwistycznej*, t. I – *Kształcenie języka ojczystego dziecka*, Eds. M.T. Michałowska, M. Kisiel, Kraków 2001, p. 182.

of emotions also has a positive effect on "getting accustomed" to internal experiences²⁹ and the appropriate form of their emotional expression, which fulfills a number of functions, like: uncovering, creative, regulative-normative and therapeutic.³⁰ In addition, providing emotions with conceptual categories expressed verbally causes the transformation of strictly emotional behavior into rationalized³¹ and socialized behaviors.

As Harris notes,³² "speech allows human beings to communicate not only what they feel in relation to the present situation, but also feelings related to past and future hypothetical events". The ability to accurately specify feelings influences the elimination of frustration and discouragement in relations with peers and adults. The child learns to distinguish between the direct expression of feelings and the violent and spontaneous discharge of them.³³

With reference to the level of the language dictionary of child's emotions, the literature of the subject presents, for example, the results of research Kuszak³⁴ and Górecka-Mostowicz³⁵ (2005) conducted in this field. Despite different research objectives, it is possible to draw similar conclusions from their diagnoses and tests. Research studies conducted by Kuszak show that students at the age of 6 "cannot yet adequately and accurately call on the feelings experienced by others, however they understand their mood".³⁶ Over time, however, there is a noticeable change in this respect, which occurs systematically. The development of the competence to recognize and verbalize emotional states is evident.

Górecka-Mostowicz points out that students at early school age, by defining their emotions, relate to situational events based on statements associated with their own life experiences.³⁷ First of all, students treat emotions in the context of interpersonal relationships, and their expressions include a number of terms related to action, "which is undoubtedly related to the fact that their perceptual orientation is dominant as well as recognition of the reality in the course of action".³⁸ According to the author, verbal messages from adults and from observations of human behavior in everyday life play a considerable role in the students' beliefs about emotion.³⁹ In addition, the author notes that

²⁹ E. Sujak, *Rozważania o ludzkim rozwoju*, Kraków 1992, p. 37.

³⁰ Ł. Dawid, „Odpowiednie dać uczuciu – słowo”, p. 183-184.

³¹ M. Kofta, *Samokontrola a emocje*, Warszawa 1979, p. 230.

³² P.L. Harris, *Zrozumieć emocje*, [in:] *Psychologia emocji*, Eds. M. Lewis, J.M. Haviland, Gdańsk 2005, p. 362.

³³ Ł. Dawid, „Odpowiednie dać uczuciu – słowo”, p. 184.

³⁴ K. Kuszak, *Kompetencje komunikacyjne dzieci*.

³⁵ B. Górecka-Mostowicz, *Co dzieci wiedzą o emocjach*, Kraków 2005.

³⁶ K. Kuszak, *Kompetencje komunikacyjne dziecka sześciolatniego – wybrane aspekty*, [in:] *Dziecko-uczeń a wczesna edukacja*, Eds. I. Adamek, Z. Zbróg, Kraków 2011, p. 167.

³⁷ B. Górecka-Mostowicz, *Co dzieci wiedzą o emocjach*, p. 68.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 69-70.

the definitions of emotional mimic expression become more and more relevant with age, the accuracy of naming the emotional states illustrated on the pictures rises, and the quality of spoken description of decoded emotions increases, on the basis of their external manifestations, in situations causing given emotions.⁴⁰

While conducting my own research orientated towards the ways of emotion verbalization of students at school age, by using my own research tool (*emotional competence test*), I noticed that in at least 60% of the total response test of all tasks students correctly interpreted the encrypted emotion. For a complete representation of the emotional state, they usually stepped in the role of the main character, and rarely acted as observers, which is an evidence of empathy⁴¹ and the development of the theory of mind, which accentuates social maturity and the possibility of taking another person’s perspective.⁴²

On the basis of the answers provided in the test, I observed that in most cases, the children know the emotions analyzed (all of which are basic emotions). However, this knowledge is lacking awareness, since it is expressed by the relatively low dimension of in-depth descriptions of emotional states. Despite the analogy included in the instructions to the notion of feelings (*what do they feel, what emotion, what feeling*), students usually refer to events and situations, less often to emotional states. This provides the evidence of creating close connection between the situation and emotion, where the situation is treated as an emotional state.

Table 1

Descriptions of situations referring to the emotions of the poem – fragments of the results of one of the tasks in the test to assess the level of emotional competencies expressed in the language of secondary school students

Emotional states descriptions	Descriptions of the situation	
	Reference to the poem	No reference to the poem
<i>I was scared and happy, I didn't like anything, there was always something wrong, I just had a bad day, My brother was angry with me because I destroyed his homework,</i>	<i>I was on holiday and it was raining, It was a rainy day and I could not walk the dog, I was at home, it was raining and I wanted to go out with an umbrella</i>	<i>When I cracked my head, When my grandmother died, When there are no physical education classes, When I'm home, When I cannot sleep, When girls broke my new toy,</i>

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 86.

⁴¹ B. Winczura, *Dziecko z autyzmem. terapia deficytów poznawczych a teoria umysłu*, Kraków 2008, p. 58.

⁴² M. Tomasello, *Kulturowe źródła ludzkiego poznania*, Warszawa 2002, p. 16.

<i>I was sad, nobody allowed me to play, everyone was rude to me, I'm sad and bad at such a time</i>		I got a bad mark and I argued with my parents, I argued with my friend once, we did not play together and we did not see each other
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Conclusion

The issue of feeling, naming, and recognizing correctly emotional states is not an individual problem, but it also has a wider (global) dimension. "Their rank grows as the ever deeper understanding of the importance of feelings in solving difficulties and conflicts not only of individuals, but of groups or nations".⁴³ The importance of soft skills in shaping a full human personality is increasingly accentuated. Early emotional education influences the development of qualities such as sensitivity, ability to empathize and openness to another person.⁴⁴

The use of linguistic education for the purpose of verifying emotion is relevant when it adopts a communicative-discursive character, less normative, subject-oriented rather than object-oriented.⁴⁵ The combination of language education with emotional, moral and social education becomes the starting point for axiolinguistic education,⁴⁶ thanks to which the students gain the ability to reflect on their own behavior, as evidenced by the correct verbal message. With such an assumption, in addition to deepening the dictionaries of the child's emotions, the teacher can influence the development of empathy as well as emotionality in a broader sense.

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⁴³ Ł. Dawid, „Odpowiednie dać uczuciu – słowo”, p. 182.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ K. Bakula, *Rozważania nad koncepcją kształcenia językowego w szkole podstawowej*, [in:] *Z teorii i praktyki dydaktycznej języka polskiego*, t. 14, Eds. E. Polański, Z. Uryga, Katowice – Kraków 1995, p. 80.

⁴⁶ J. Kowalikowa, *Kształcenie językowe w świetle reformy szkolnej. Szanse i zagrożenia*, [in:] *Język w przestrzeni edukacyjnej*, Ed. R. Mrózek, Katowice 2000, p. 94.

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