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*Communicating Beyond Words:  
Active Listening as a Key to Readaptation  
and Reintegration of Refugee Children*

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**ABSTRACT :** The paper explores the role of active listening in the process of the readaptation and reintegration of refugee children within the educational system of a host community. Within the scope of the pedagogy of relation, active listening is identified as a useful tool that can facilitate communication between teacher and students, as well as between students themselves. The results suggest that active listening is a skill every teacher should apply, especially when teaching refugee children.

**KEY WORDS :** active listening, education, communication, refugee children, teacher

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## **Introduction: Children's right to education**

The significance of education is acknowledged in major United Nations documents of the last century. Namely, the 26<sup>th</sup> article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that everyone has a right to education, adding that it needs to be directed towards the full development of the human personality and at the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, while promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups. In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) legally obliges states parties to make primary education compulsory and available to all, as well as to direct education at the development of the child's personality, talents as well as mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential while developing respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Despite the fact that the Declaration has existed for almost seventy years and that it was signed twenty-six years ago by almost all member states of the United Nations (194 member states, except the United States of America), the right of children to education is still not universally achieved, with 58 million children worldwide who are not enrolled in primary school (Georgieva, 2014). The reason for such a situation can be found in unstable political circumstances, economic crises, natural catastrophes and on-going armed conflicts. Even among those children who do go to school in relatively safe and developed countries, there are many who experience violence at school on a daily basis. For instance, in Croatian schools 12% of students are considered to be victims of bullying, which is in line with other European countries (UNICEF, 2010). Although any child can become a victim of bullying, children of different nationalities, family backgrounds or religious beliefs are often the ones who tend to be singled out and picked on. Since these are usually characteristics of refugee children, efforts should be made to provide them the opportunity to access education and to ensure that they are educated in a safe and child-friendly environment, as proposed by the aforementioned documents. In Europe, refugee children have the right to education, the same as all other children in a specific community (ECRE, 1996), and therefore the educational environment must be supportive of all children equally.

Education of refugee children is a significant part of the process of their readaptation and reintegration into the host community. In this process, the teacher's

communication with children must demonstrate a special approach which facilitates their adjustment, but which also modifies existing conditions in order to make the classroom environment more culturally inclusive. All students must feel that they are being heard, and the key to achieve that is to develop the skill of active listening. This paper argues that active listening is a communication skill which can improve classroom relations. The emphasis is put on the active listening skills of teachers which can serve them to facilitate the process of readaptation and reintegration of refugee children. In the following chapters the significance of communication for education is explored, as well as the benefits that active listening can produce in the educational environment, followed by examples of best practice. Finally, implications for the further education of teachers are discussed.

### **The pedagogy of relation: the link between education and communication**

Education, which all children should be able to access, must be of high quality (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and one of the components that the quality of education depends on are the relationships that exist in the classroom. Classroom relationships represent the most significant feature that must be addressed when discussing school experience, according to the pedagogy of relation. The pedagogy of relation<sup>1</sup> is a relatively new approach in educational theory which proposes that schools must focus on human relations in order to solve contemporary problems (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Social issues that educators face nowadays cannot be solved by educational reforms centred on accountability and academic achievements. Such reforms are based

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is assumed that the term has been coined rather recently by professor Frank Margonis (The University of Utah, USA), the philosophy behind the pedagogy of relation is ancient and can be traced back to Aristotle. It is highly influenced by the works of Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). There is also significant influence stemming from critical pedagogy, especially from the works of Paulo Freire (1921–1997). It includes the contribution of contemporary authors (e.g. Nel Noddings advocating caring in education; Biesta defining the relation between teachers and students as a process of communication; etc.) and serves as a common ground for various theoretical frameworks. It is mainly directed at exploring human relations in education and their correlation to teaching and learning.

on the assumption that the primary mission of schools should be effectiveness materialised in teaching academic skills and content. Pedagogy as a science of education cannot accept such a mono-dimensional approach to the development of human personality. Instead, it calls for paying greater attention to the development of teachers' (and consequently children's) social competences.

Social competences have already been included in the European reference framework for the EU as key competences for lifelong learning (along with seven others) and a recommendation has been issued for each member state of the European Union to develop those competences through education. As stated in the Annex of the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning*, social competences “[...] include personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence and cover all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary” (Recommendation, 2006: 16). In the same document it is explained in more detail what knowledge, skills and attitudes are related to social competences. First of all, for successful interpersonal and social participation it is essential to understand the codes of conduct and manners generally accepted in different societies and environments. It is equally important to be aware of basic concepts relating to individuals, groups, work organisations, gender equality and non-discrimination, society and culture. Understanding the multi-cultural and socio-economic dimensions of European societies and how national cultural identity interacts with the European identity overall is essential. Secondly, the core skills of social competences include the ability to communicate constructively in different environments, to show tolerance, express and understand different viewpoints, to negotiate with the ability to create confidence, and to feel empathy. Individuals should be capable of coping with stress and frustration and expressing these sentiments in a constructive way; they should also distinguish between the personal and professional spheres. Thirdly, social competences are based on an attitude of collaboration, assertiveness and integrity. Individuals should have an interest in socio-economic developments and intercultural communication and should value diversity, respect others, and be prepared both to overcome prejudices and to compromise (Recommendation, 2006). Social competences defined in this way call for introspection from teachers as well as raised

awareness of their own attitudes toward different groups of children they teach. Teachers' social competences make up an important part of their professional competence, since teaching without communicating in the way that promotes understanding and acceptance cannot fully reach educational goals.

When it comes to the development of student social competences, legislative support cannot yield any results if those who are meant to implement agendas and strategies do not recognise social competences as an educational goal which is equally important to academic ones. In order to achieve those goals, teachers must work on their relations with students and students' relations with one another. The pedagogy of relations is culturally responsive and in that sense it is emphasised that educators must create learning contexts that will provide children with "those tools that are vital for future citizens in a democracy: the tools of planning, relationships, creative and critical reflection, and communication" (Bishop, 2011: 186).

Human relations and interactions are built upon communication that is socially acceptable; in this way social competences are demonstrated. Social competences and communication are mutually intertwined and it is hard to draw a line between the two. Social communication is precisely what Biesta (2004: 12–13) sees as the essence of education, claiming that "education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, but in the interaction between the two." In other words, there is no education without communication, when communication is broadly defined as an exchange of information by any means.

The same author points out that communication can be theoretically determined in several ways – as the transmission of information; as participation; or as performance. The model that describes communication as the transmission of information from one place (the sender) to the other (the receiver) through a medium or a channel is the most common one, but is an inadequate model for the description of human communication. A more appropriate model would be one that views communication as participation. Thus, communication becomes a process of the construction of shared understanding, because the participation of both the sender and the receiver results in mutual influence and equal contribution to the meaning. The participatory theory of communication suggests that the so called "gap between the teacher and the students" should not be interpreted as something negative, as it is exactly what makes education possible.

Teaching is actually the construction of a social situation, and its effects result from the activities of the students in response to that situation. In other words, meaning does not exist independently but is co-constructed. Such a constructivist approach to communication is further developed in the performative theory of communication, claiming that the act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the speaker and the listener, but is always a unique experience so that the same signs are each time appropriated, re-historicised and read with a new meaning. The same is the case with listening in education or, as Kök (2014) notices, the act of listening requires listeners to make meaning from the oral input by drawing upon their background knowledge and previous experiences.

## **Understanding and developing teachers' active listening skill**

Before explaining what role active listening can play in the process of improving the quality of education (of refugee children), it is important to determine what it refers to. Active listening can be defined as a communication skill which is simultaneously a social skill (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). As a social communication skill it can serve as a tool for teachers to reach every child and build a relationship with them, which can contribute to higher educational outcomes regarding not only social competence but also academic achievements. The first part of the chapter describes the steps of active listening and its role in education, while the second part explains why it is especially important for teachers who work with refugee children to apply it and when this skill should be introduced in their professional development.

### **The role of active listening in education**

Active listening is actually not a single skill, but can be seen as a unified set of subskills. According to Hoppe (2007), those subskills include: paying attention; holding judgment; reflecting; clarifying; summarising and sharing. They could also be understood as steps in the process of active listening. In that sense, active listening begins with paying attention to one's own behaviour and the

speaker's behaviour, and thus creating the setting for a productive dialogue. The goal is to allow time and opportunity for the speaker to think and speak. While paying attention, one must focus not only on the meaning of the words that are being said, but also on feelings expressed as well as the underlying needs (Rosenberg, 2003). While communicating in the classroom, it is important for teachers to let the student know that they are paying attention by using the usual verbal and non-verbal signals such as eye contact, nodding, open body posture, and continuers (yeah, mm, mm hm, and uh huh) to confirm that the message is received and to display understanding that the student should continue speaking (Fitzgerald & Leudar, 2010).

The next step is to keep an open mind and to suspend judgement as the intention of the active listener should be to connect and to understand the speaker, not to judge him or her for the ideas expressed or for having a different perspective on the subject matter. Even when teachers have strong views, they should hold their criticism and avoid arguing, which does not necessarily mean they agree; it shows that they are trying to understand what the students are saying (Hoppe, 2007). This way respect is being conveyed for the student and his or her views and experience. Experience, culture, personal background and current circumstances all contribute to each person's unique perspective of a situation. In this respect, it is of vital importance that the teacher expresses empathy. Appropriate empathy is a state of human interaction in which the listener enters and understands the speaker's perspective, whilst getting in touch with their thoughts and feelings, but also remains rational in their understanding of the speaker's situation.

The ability to reflect the other person's content as well as feelings creates a strong rapport between teacher and students. Therefore, the teacher must demonstrate that he or she is tracking the information presented by restating the other person's basic ideas, while emphasising the main points as this is the way to confirm that he or she has understood them. Identifying the emotional message that accompanies the content is equally important but often more challenging as it can be contained in the words used, as well as in the tone of voice, intonation, body language etc. (Hoppe, 2007). In this way students can hear for themselves how they are being heard by others, i.e. what kind of message they are sending across. This allows them to identify possible misunderstandings and change the course of communication if the intended message is not similar enough to the one received.

In order to show that the teacher is listening actively, it is recommended to ask occasional questions and elicit answers which would provide the listener with certain clarifications. They should be open-ended questions which stimulate the speaker to provide more information, as they cannot be answered simply with ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Clarifying questions help to ensure understanding and clear up confusion (Hoppe, 2007). Those questions should demonstrate cultural sensitivity (Gardiner & Walker, 2010) and not create an interrogation-like situation. They ultimately serve to deepen communication and to encourage the student to go through his or her story again in order to understand it better. Additionally, the teacher should briefly paraphrase what has been heard. Summarising serves to help students identify their key themes as well as to confirm and solidify the listener’s grasp of their point of view. The summary does not necessarily imply that teachers agree or disagree but helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

A teacher acting as an active listener does not just passively soak up the received messages; he or she should also provide their own contribution. After the teacher gains a clearer understanding of the student’s perspective, he or she should introduce his or her own ideas, feelings and suggestions. In this step, the teacher must decide what kind of contribution he or she can offer, either direct (offering practical help) or indirect (referring the student to another professional). This step is a very sensitive one as the teacher should be careful not to coerce the student to do something, additionally they should be mindful not to promote their own attitudes or even give advice. The teacher should simply present possible solutions and let the student decide what to do next. Sometimes speaking, and simply the sense of being heard, can have a therapeutic effect on the speaker (Robertson, 2005).

Those six subskills of active listening can make a great difference in the teacher’s interactions with students. Classroom relationships become more solid when they are based on mutual respect, and this is why it is important for teachers to apply the active listening skill when communicating with their students. There are numerous benefits for teachers who are able to listen actively. According to Vodopija (2007), active listening correlates with: keeping an open mind when facing new ideas; innovation; improved relations among colleagues; better personal relationships; lowered stress levels; prevention of conflict and consensus in the decision-making process.

A teacher who listens actively helps the student to whom he or she listens, and at the same time serves as a model to their peers of how to communicate in a socially competent manner. In such a case, the teacher assumes the role of a model whom students can imitate and practice their own skill of active listening. By applying their active listening skill in the classroom, teachers also teach their students to listen actively to each other. For Huerta-Wong and Schoech (2010), in the case of active listening, learning by doing is a much more effective way of acquiring the skill than the direct instruction or theoretical lectures.

Apart from the benefits that a teacher can gain due to active listening, students too can profit from developing their own listening skill. For instance, educational efforts directed at learning vocabulary and the skill of active listening foster an increased level of literacy in children (OECD, 2012). At the same time, when students feel that they are being heard, they tend to feel more confident and to perform better in an academic and social environment. As a result, students who listen actively achieve higher scores in reading, have better learning outcomes and develop their abilities to a larger degree. Active listening assists students in the process of becoming self-actualised individuals who think positively of themselves and others. Therefore, it can be stated that active listening influences the overall classroom climate because it contributes to the formation of friendship culture (Crosnoe, 2000; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013), as opposed to the existing culture of violence (Curle, 1999). Friendships among students and friendships among teachers create a sense of belonging and togetherness which results in an atmosphere that has a positive educational influence on the learning process as well as the development of students' personality.

## **Learning to listen to refugee children**

Understood as a social communication skill, active listening plays a substantial role in the education of all children, so one can ask the question of *why refugee children should receive special attention* (1). The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ERCE) defines refugee children as persons below the age of 18 who are “seeking refugee status or international protection; who are considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or

by any other adult; or who are forced to flee across an international border (as a result, for example, of war, civil war, generalised violence)” (ECRE, 1996: 2).

The reason for emphasizing the necessity of active listening, when it comes to the education of refugee children, lies in the fact that they represent an especially vulnerable group of students at risk of being rejected by their peers. Peer rejection, along with other common problems of refugee children (such as withdrawal, being bullied, problems with their studies, anger management and dealing with traumas) can have a negative effect on the readaptation and reintegration of refugee children in a host community. Teachers should employ their active listening skill in order to help them diminish those negative effects.

Phillips (2014) argues that active listening plays an important role in the process of recognising refugee children’s needs and providing help in early resettlement period. Reaching out to children (who are described as the group of refugees least likely to express the so called settlement euphoria (Phillips, 2014)) is an especially delicate task. Gardiner & Walker (2010) report that 70% of refugees are found to have experienced some form of physical or mental trauma. The effects of trauma on children and adolescents will depend on each individual and their developmental stage, but common symptoms include: learning and behavioural problems; poor appetite and sleep; psychosomatic symptoms; enuresis and encopresis; low self-esteem and guilt. These may all be manifestations of an underlying anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cognitive reprocessing of traumatic memories is considered to be central to recovery. In other words, when speaking and being heard, children are given the opportunity to become aware of what the problem really is, which can present a first step to its solution.

The process of sociocultural adaptation can be quite gradual, and refugees integrate to different extents within the host community. Children with disrupted or minimal school education are suddenly immersed in a new educational system. In such a situation, racial discrimination and bullying are widespread (Fazel et al., 2012) due to social stereotypes and prejudices rooted in the fear of an unknown (relatively different) culture experienced by the members of the host community. In order to facilitate the readaptation and reintegration of refugee children, active listening must be applied with host population as well, to provide them with the opportunity to become aware of their own (mis) conceptions so that they might suspend certain forms of behaviour leading to discrimination.

An additional question that arises is *why teachers ought to be the ones who should listen to refugee children in an active manner* (2). In fact, active listening is already recognised as an important skill for various professionals who deal with refugee children: medical staff (Bryant, 2009), lawyers (Tyner, 2009) and police officers (McMains, 2009). Their right to be heard (ECRE, 1996) must be exercised not only when it comes to legal issues but also in an educational environment. Therefore, active listening should matter to educational staff, too, since children's right to education depends on them. It seems that active listening has been rather neglected in Croatian schools, considering that teachers spend two thirds of every lesson speaking and only one third listening (Peko, 2003). As a result, teachers' verbal domination hinders students' initiative and independent choice of topics that they would like to discuss in class (Peko et al., 2014). It can be concluded that Croatian teachers in general are not prone to listen to students, especially when it comes to issues that matter to students but do not seem to be a part of curriculum. In this way, the educational potential of topics that students are interested in remains unrecognised.

The absence of active listening from school can be partially explained by the obstacles that exist in this environment. For instance, a teacher is often perceived as the classroom leader, and students expect that the leader will dominate the communication process. Another obstacle Hoppe (2007) finds is the fact that silence is not interpreted as an attempt to understand, but as a sign of agreement, whereas in active listening silence is used solely to enable the speaker to express himself or herself. In addition, sometimes favourable conditions for active listening (comfortable place and enough time) cannot be achieved during a regular school day. Also, the teacher's personality traits can determine if they are prone to listen patiently or not. Finally, in western culture, listening and speaking are not equally appreciated, and much more attention during formative years is traditionally paid to practicing verbal presentation.

Even if the need to develop teachers' skill of active listening is recognised, the question remains: *When should teachers work on their active listening skill?* (3) The answer is provided by two examples of best practice – the first one referring to pre-service teachers and the second one to in-service teachers. The first example shows that active listening can be learnt during the initial preparation for the teaching profession while still at university. Namely, an experimental study that was conducted with a group of university students (prospective

teachers) who were trained in active listening by the use of the so called LAFF strategy (McNaughton et al., 2007). LAFF is an acronym that stands for:

L (*listen*) – pay attention and show some understanding and acceptance as well as respect

A (*ask questions*) – ask open ended questions (and take notes)

F (*focus on the issues*) – recognise the problem, feelings and needs expressed

F (*find a first step*) – contribute to the solution to the problem (in a direct or indirect way)

Those are the simplified steps in active listening which the university students were instructed to demonstrate while communicating with parents of school children. Data collected before and after the training suggest that active listening can be taught in an effective way.

The second example is set in a community and describes the Listening Project<sup>2</sup> conducted in Croatia in the post-war period with people of conflicted nationalities who returned to their homes and had to live next door to their “enemies”. In order to ease intercultural communication, a group of volunteers was trained in active listening. The project aimed at:

- identifying problems and issues that people care about
- including unheard or unheeded voices
- fostering the emergence and development of new community leaders
- generating creative solutions for community needs and problems
- disseminating issue-related information and determining the need for additional information
- encouraging personal growth as all involved consider new viewpoints and information
- forming uncommon coalitions and alliances through which diverse viewpoints can resolve, rather than clash over difficult issues
- promoting insight, empathy, and understanding among people with conflicting views
- creating long-term capacity for grassroots community building

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<sup>2</sup> Listening Project is an American non – profit organisation founded by Herb Walters in 1981. Since then they have helped many community-based organisations around the world to address the issues of social and economic injustice; ethnic, racial, religious and cultural conflict; community health and education; and sustainable development. More information available at: <http://www.listeningproject.info/index.php>, Access date: 20 August, 2015.

Kruhonja (2001) reports that the volunteers in the project conducted approximately 1800 interviews in Croatian settlements with high level of war trauma (massacres, concentration camps). The semi-structured interviews contained the types of questions that are meant to build mutual trust; encourage people to express their worries and feelings of anger and anxiety; affirm mutual beliefs and hopes; urge people to list their problems and realise that they themselves present a part of solution. For such interviews, volunteers had to work on their own prejudices, remain open-minded and refrain from judgement. Their active listening skill turned out to be crucial for intercultural understanding and cooperation even between the volunteers, for they came from both Croatian and Serbian ethnic backgrounds.

The project resulted in improved communication between volunteers and local community members. Moreover, communication within the local community was re-established, stereotypes dismissed and issues identified in order to commence building a future together. This example confirms that active listening can be taught and learnt in a community. Since the classroom is a kind of community, its members (teachers and students) are also capable of developing and improving their active listening skill, regardless of their age or work experience (Jindra et al., 2010). It can be said that active listening is a skill that cannot be mastered once and for all, but needs to be continuously improved and it is never too early nor too late to start developing it.

## **Conclusions and implications for teacher education**

Within the theoretical framework of the pedagogy of relations, active listening is seen as a key to the readaptation and reintegration of refugee children in the educational environment of a host community. It is a special skill that enables us to communicate in a more meaningful way and to understand children's needs more profoundly. Since the teachers' main task when teaching refugee children is to avoid creating new traumatic experiences in the new social environment, the skill of active listening proves to be a useful tool. It is a skill which every teacher should demonstrate in their everyday work. In the classroom they should concentrate on children's non-verbal (e.g. body language, expressions, reactions etc.) and verbal messages and relate them to their story.

Verbal communication articulates the child's experiences, behaviours and feelings. Therefore, a skilled teacher should encourage them to continue talking while being non-judgemental and emphasising empathy rather than sympathy. This is because empathy and rapport provide children with the warmth, comfort and safety necessary to facilitate effective, positive educational outcomes.

Due to all the discussed benefits that active listening can lend the process of creating an inclusive classroom and because it can help improve the educational experience in a host community for refugee children, it is recommended that the development of this skill should become an integral part of initial teacher education. While still at university, prospective teachers should be enabled to gain the necessary intercultural knowledge, develop their active listening skill and form positive attitudes towards the marginalised social groups as a segment of their overall professional competence. Such institutional support would equip teachers to enter contemporary classrooms with an increased feeling of (social) competence and decreased level of fear and prejudice, so that they could serve as positive role models to all their students.

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