

STUDENT–TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION MOTIVATION^{***}

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ABSTRACT

Teachers (preschool teachers, primary school class teachers, and subject teachers) carry out their profession through various forms of communication with students, families, colleagues, and the social community. The dynamic dimension of their communication competence direct their communication. The paper studies the structure and strength of student-teacher motivation for interpersonal communication. The Interpersonal Communication Motives Scale and the Questionnaire on students' sociodemographic characteristics were used. The sample included 260 students from three faculties in Serbia that educate preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and subject teachers. The results indicate that the students are most motivated to communicate by the need for emotional connection and exchange of affection, and by the following motives of equal strength: to achieve communication satisfaction, relaxation, and social interaction involvement. The students are less motivated to communicate to establish control or avoid something through communication. The only identified difference among students of different years of study concerns their motivation for interpersonal communication aimed at achieving satisfaction and pleasure during the communication

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process itself. It was concluded that the education of future teachers should include training in their own communication motives recognition, so that they can integrate them into professional action.

Key words

interpersonal communication, communication motivation, student-teachers.

Introduction

The teaching process and the overall educational work of the teaching staff are based on complex communication and instructional interaction. Teachers spend most of their working time communicating. For this reason, communication competence is a key competence of the teachers involved at various system levels.

Communication competence is a system of knowledge, abilities, skills, personality traits, motivational dispositions, and attitudes required for effective communication. This personal system enables individuals, during interaction, to choose appropriate communication behaviour that will help them achieve their own goals during interactions in specific social situations (Zlatić & Bjekić, 2015: 96). The level of communication competence demonstrated by one communicator is affected by the behaviour of the other, which is emphasised in teacher–student interaction (Zukorlić & Pavlović, 2023), as it presents a specific form of intergenerational communication (Williams & Garrett, 2002).

Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) developed a three–component model of communication competence. For an individual to be competent in communication, it is necessary:

- to be motivated – to show interest and to be oriented toward engaging in or avoiding various social situations (want to communicate);
- to have the knowledge required for communication – to be able to plan actions, to know how to act, to be aware of one’s own behaviour, and to know how to act in different social situations (recognize adequate communication practice);
- to be skilled – to possess and apply specific behaviors and skills necessary for mutual contact, socializing, and message exchanges (communication).

Teachers’ motivation to communicate appropriately and effectively is an important component of classroom activity management (Djigić, 2018; Rubin & Feezel, 1986). Due to the importance of this topic, this paper considers what motivates student-teachers (students–future educators or prospective teachers) to communicate with others.

Practicing teachers’ and student-teachers’ communication competence

For professions that rely on continuous social interaction, activities directly focused on other people, and the necessity of engaging with others to perform professional activities, a system of communication competence is an essential condition for success. In the wider community, the teaching profession is recognized as one in which communication competence is a key competence. “Teachers’ communication competence includes knowledge of appropriate and effective communication behaviour, the development of the skills repertoire that ensures effective communication, and abilities to act adequately and effectively within the framework of interaction” (Rubin, 1990, as cited in Bjekić et al., 2020: 24).

Based on the results of many years of research on communication competence of students – future teachers and active/practicing teachers, and on the systematic review of the other studies (Zlatić & Bjekić, 2015), the following communication competencies are identified: high level of interaction involvement in the conversation and the other forms of social interaction, a set of social-emotional skills, an integrative style of conflict resolution, readiness for team work, continuous readiness to improve their own communication skills. These competencies of the student–teachers are developed, strengthened through their training within the educational programmes, and clearly recognised in effective teaching.

Drawing on positive psychology as well as rhetorical and relational theories of instructional communication, Xia and Derakhshan (2021), through review and synthesis of multiple empirical results, confirmed that teachers’ positive interpersonal communication behaviour serves as a facilitator of a wide range of students’ academic outcomes (they considered motivational effects and causes). Other researchers also examined the impact of teachers’ interpersonal behaviour and manner of communication on students’ specific motivation for courses (Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, Wubbels, 2005; Kerssen-Griep, 2001), and the role of teachers’ interpersonal behaviour in students’ academic achievement (Khan, Khan, Zia-Ul-Islam, Khan, 2017; Tariq & Ullah, 2024; Zhang, 2022). Considering the overall well-being of both students and teachers, studies have explored the impact of various training programmes on teachers’ interpersonal functioning on the development of their emotional and social competencies (Bergin, Tsai, Murphy, 2024; Gimbert, Miller, Herman, Breedlove, Molin, 2021).

While research on teachers’ communicative competence is extensive (Arskieva, Magomedova, Batchaeva, 2024; Bakic-Tomic, Dvorski, Kirinic, 2015; Bjekić & Zlatić, 2015; Rubin & Feezel, 1984; Zlatić, Bjekić, Marinković, Bojović, 2014), the dynamic, particularly motivational, components essential for effective communication within the teaching profession remain underexplored. Existing studies more commonly focus on motivation for choosing teaching as a career, teaching-related motivation, its measurement, and its effects on students’ self-regulated

behaviour (Belay & Melesse, 2024; Day, 2004; Demir, Yavuz, Yavuz, 2024; Han & Yin, 2016; Jud, Hirt, Rosenthal, Karlen, 2023; Simić, Purić, Stančić, 2018; Thommen, Sieber, Grog, & Praetorius, 2021; Usher, 2021). However, these studies do not address motivation for interpersonal and group communication within teachers’ professional practice. The absence of reference research on teachers’ and prospective teachers’ motivation for communication underpins the rationale for the present study.

Motivational components of the communication competence

How do researchers view motivation for communication? In the definition of the communication competence, dynamic dispositions are emphasized as necessary components and conditions for success communication: motivational dispositions, attitudes, values, and styles (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Duran & Zakahi, 1984, Eadie & Paulson, 1984, Emanuel, 2013; Graham, Barbato, Perce, 1993; Norton, 1984; Rahim, 2001, cited in Zlatić & Bjekić, 2015: 106). Various motivational components are crucial for establishing and developing social interaction, and, therefore, for communication. When examining the prerequisites influencing motivation for interpersonal communication, researchers have identified life position and locus of control: indicators of life position were associated with motivation for interpersonal communication, and interpersonal motivation aligned with the locus of control (Rubin & Rubin, 1992).

The significance of interpersonal motives as a foundational element in differentiating most interpersonal behaviour was elaborated in the theory of Horowitz and colleagues (Horowitz, Wilson, Turan, Zolotzev, Constatino, Henderson, 2006). The theory represents a revision of Leary’s circular model applied in various social-psychological domains (Leary, 1957, as cited in Horowitz et al., 2006). According to this theory, interpersonal behaviour is a manifestation of broader motivational dimensions that guide it. The motivational construct organizing interpersonal behaviour varies in scope or level of abstraction, and it is usually hierarchically designed. According to this two-dimensional theoretical model, the hierarchy highlights the importance of motives for communion/togetherness (emphasizing connectedness between people) and the motive for personal individual development (protection, affirmation, and expansion of the self), which appear in early childhood. Personal development motives are further differentiated into motives for separation and exploration, which in turn encompass motives for autonomy, achievement, and control. Given the broader meaning of ‘motive’ compared to ‘goal’, the latter denoting a specific category that drives an activity, the meaning of behaviour depends on the goals underlying it. When the motive (or motives) behind interpersonal behaviour is unknown or unclear, the behaviour is ambiguous and unclear, which can be interpreted in multiple ways and lead to miscommunication between interacting partners. When communicators are aware of their interpersonal behaviour goals and motives, communication is better regulated and can provide more complete communication among them.

Investigating the concept of motivation for interpersonal communication – that is, the reasons why people communicate – Rebecca Rubin and colleagues (Rubin, Perse, Barbato, 1988) found that interpersonal communication is goal-oriented, and that people communicate (use communication) to satisfy their basic needs (Rubin et al., 1988: 615-617):

- inclusion: a person’s need to be a part of a group, to be with and share feelings with others and to overcome loneliness;
- affection: a person’s need to express love/caring and/or to be loved by others appreciation for others;
- control: a person’s need to control situations, to have power over others, to give power to others, and to gain compliance;
- pleasure: a person’s need to communicate because it is fun and exciting;
- relaxation: a person’s need to relax and rest;
- escape: a person’s need to avoid other activities and concerns through communication with someone.

In developing an instrument to measure motives for interpersonal communication (ICM Scale – Interpersonal Communication Motives Scale) Rebecca Rubin and colleagues (Rubin et al., 1998) found that individuals with relatively low levels of communication fear (or communication apprehension) communicate with others for pleasure, affection and control, whereas individuals with higher levels of communication fear are motivated to communicate in order to be included into the social group or dyad. Motives related to pleasure, affection/attachment, and relaxation are more strongly associated with communication satisfaction.

Communication satisfaction is best predicted by low fear of communication and communication motives related to affection, relaxation, and escape. When people communicate for affection and emotional exchange, for relaxation, or to avoid certain activities through communication, they experience higher communication satisfaction. Graham et al. (1993) cited research that confirms that motivation to communicate is related to age, fear of communication, loneliness, context, locus of control, and general satisfaction with communication, as well as differences between respondents of different genders. A comparison of communication motives between older men and women confirmed that women primarily communicate for emotional expression, whereas men’s primary motivation for communication is instrumental control (Barbato & Perse, 1992).

Graham and colleagues (1993) assumed that the motives for communication with others can reflect three components present in all types of interaction: the relationship level (Who is the person talking to?), the communicator’s communication style (How the person talks with others?), and self-expression (What are people talking about?). Based on the correlation between communication motives and these

components, they found that affection is the most prominent communication motive with all types of interlocutors (strangers, formal relationships, coworkers, close friends, family members, and spouses or romantic partners). Affection and the desire for social inclusion primarily belong to the category of personal motives and are more strongly related to the breadth of communication and self-expression.

Barbato (1986, as cited in Graham et al., 1993: 172–173) found that people's motives for talking with others, which is the most direct form of communication, reflected both interpersonal functional needs (self-confirmation, inclusion, and affection) and mediated needs (social influence, personal identity, and entertainment). Barbato's research suggested that these needs can be fulfilled not only through direct interpersonal communication but also through mediated communication, including social media networks.

Research on communication motives in small groups (Anderson & Martin, 1995) confirmed that the pleasantness is one of the reasons for responsible communication, whereas escape (avoidance), control, and inclusion were not identified as significant motives. Studies of motivation for everyday communication found that inclusion motivation is correlated with the high evaluation of the importance of conversation and with positive social outcomes (Step & Finucane, 2002). Research examining the relationship between interpersonal communication motives and extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism (Paulsel, 2002) indicated that “extroversion was positively correlated with the interpersonal communication motives of pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, and relaxation, and was not correlated with motive of control; neuroticism was positively correlated with inclusion, escape, and control, negatively correlated with pleasure, and not correlated with affection and relaxation; psychoticism was positively correlated with control, negatively correlated with pleasure, affection, inclusion, and relaxation, and was not correlated with escape.”

Motivation for interpersonal communication (conversation as the most obvious form of social interaction) has been studied in relation to job satisfaction worldwide (Awad & Alhashemi, 2012; Luky, Kurniawati, Cerya, 2021; Madhur & Ramshanker, 2020).

However, in the context of the teachers' and student-teachers' professional activities, and especially within the framework of classroom teaching as a setting for developing students' key competencies that teachers are expected to model, teachers' motivation for interpersonal communication has rarely been investigated.

One of these rare studies investigated interpersonal communication motivation (using ICM scale) and adolescents' communication satisfaction (Astuti, Bajar, Rachmatie, Venus, 2021); the study showed that a pleasant classroom atmosphere facilitates balanced communication (both between teachers and student, and between students themselves), supporting the teaching and learning process; the primary communication motives were found to be pleasure and relaxation, both motives being highly correlated with communication satisfaction.

Research methodology and organization

The primary research problem of this study is the motivation for communication among student-teachers (preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and subject teachers) and the relationship between their interpersonal communication motives.

The aim of this research is to investigate student-teachers' communication motivation and to compare communication motivation among student-teachers at different stages of initial teacher education.

Variables:

– Interpersonal communication motives are motives that initiate, direct, and regulate interpersonal communication. The most obvious manifestation of interpersonal communication motives occurs during conversation. Operationalized by Rebecca Rubin and colleagues (Rubin, Perse, Barbato, 1988, as cited in Rubin, Palmgreen, Sypher, 2004: 211–216), interpersonal communication motivation comprises six factors: pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control.

– Year of academic studies: the first, second, third, and fourth year of bachelor's academic studies, and the fifth year of integrated academic studies (or the year of master's academic studies).

Although this research is exploratory, it relies on results of teaching motivation research (Bjekić, Vučetić, Zlatić, 2014; Day, 2004; Demir et al., 2024; Lazarides, Schiefele, Daumiller, Dresel, 2025) and research on communication competence development during the educational process (Chagovets, Chychuk, Bida, Kuchai, Salnyk, Poliakova, 2020; Zlatić, Bjekić, Marinković, Bojović, 2014). Drawing on those results, the following initial assumption was formulated: Student-teachers (preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and subject teachers) are more strongly motivated to communicate by motives oriented toward connection (the exchange of affection and communication involvement), and the intensity of their communication motives changes during their initial education.

To collect the data, a survey technique was applied, and two instruments were used within the project *Entrepreneurial and value orientations and communication of teachers' faculty students* (Bjekić i Zlatić, 2023; Bjekić, Zlatić, Stojković, 2024; Bjekić, Zlatić, Zlatković, 2023):

– The Questionnaire on sociodemographic and educational characteristics of future preschool teachers, primary school teachers and subject teachers (the data used involve gender and year of study).

– The Interpersonal Communication Motives Scale (ICM Scale) (Rubin et al., 1988; Rubin et al., 2004: 211–216) was developed to explain why people

communicate with one another (Rubin et al., 1988). By conducting a series of factor analyses of the original 28-item scale, the authors established a six-factor structure of the instrument and identified six motivational factors for interpersonal communication: pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control. The complete version of the scale was applied. Each factor is represented by at least three items (control) and up to eight items (pleasure), and responses are assessed on a five-point scale (statement examples are shown in Table 1). The reliability of the subscales is very high (Cronbach’s alpha from .81 to .97).

Table 1. Examples of ICM Scale subscales’ items
(Rubin et al., 1988, p. 617–618; Rubin et al., 2004)

Factors (number of items)	I talk to people ...
Pleasure (8)	... Because it’s fun.
Affection (5)	... To help others.
Inclusion (4)	... Because I need someone to talk to or be with
Escape (4)	... To put off doing something I should be doing.
Relaxation (4)	... Because it relaxes me.
Control (3)	... Because I want someone to do something to me.

The following statistical procedures were used to process the data: descriptive statistics, significance of differences between means, correlation analysis, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The sample consists of 260 students enrolled in bachelor’s, master’s, and integrated academic study programmes for the education of preschool teachers (112 students), primary school teachers (129 students), and subject teachers (28 students). This sample includes: 67 first-year students (25.8%), 53 second-year students (20.4%), 62 third-year students (23.8%), 59 fourth-year students (22.7%), and 19 fifth-year students (7.3%). A total of 239 female students (91.9%) and 21 male students (8.1%) participated in the study. Data were collected during the summer semester of the 2020/21 academic year. Students’ participation was voluntary. Completing all instruments included in the project required up to 60 minutes, whereas responding to the instruments presented in this paper took up to 25 minutes.

Results and discussion

The mean values of the subscales for different motives for interpersonal communication suggested that, based on self-assessed motive levels and considering the significance of the differences between the means, three subgroups of communication motives can be distinguished (Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2. Student–teachers’ interpersonal communication motivation

Factors/motives	AS	St. dev.	Subgroup/Rank
Affection	4.20	.73	I
Pleasure	3.87	.65	
Relaxation	3.83	.92	II
Inclusion	3.82	.96	
Control	2.25	1.05	III
Escape	2.16	1.04	
N=260			

Student-teachers are most strongly motivated to communicate by the need for emotional connection and affection changes (the motive to express affection or love and the motive to feel loved by others).

Table 3. Significance of differences of the student–teachers communication motive means (paired sample test)

Communi- cation motives	Affection	Inclusion	Escape	Relaxation	Control
Pleasure	–.33**	.05	1.71**	.04	1.62**
Affection		.38**	2.04**	.37**	1.95**
Inclusion			1.66**	–.01	1.57**
Escape				–1.67**	–.09
Relaxation					1.58**
N=260				** p < .01	* p < .05

Next in order, and relatively equal to one another, are the motives for achieving pleasure in social interaction, the motive to relax during communication, and the motivation to be included in social interaction. This aligns with the core findings of Graham and associates (Graham et al., 1993) on the motives of effective communication. The third group of communication motives consists of communication escape motive and control motive: student–teachers are less motivated to use communication as a means to avoid other activities or to exert control than they are by the other communication motives examined.

The picture of interpersonal communication motivation among student–teachers is incomplete because students’ self-assessment data are the only data used in this study. Self-assessments could be shaped and influenced by knowledge of

socially desirable behaviour as well as by other factors that can influence self-evaluation.

Thus, student–teachers primarily communicate to show respect and care for others, as well as to receive appreciation themselves, which represents one of the fundamental dimensions of a teacher's professional practice.

This finding aligns with the results of other researchers who have identified helping and supporting as an integrative aspect of professionalism in the teaching profession and a key factor of teacher identity (Lopes, Pereira, Marta, Sousa, 2012; Stojković, 2022). The students assessed that motives for experiencing pleasure in communication, which constitutes a foundation of responsible communication (Anderson & Martin, 1995), relaxation, and involvement in interaction (to be with others, share emotions with them, and reduce feelings of loneliness) are important to them.

The correlation analysis of the scores on the self-assessment scale of communication motives among student–teachers reveals significant positive correlations (Table 4). These correlations further highlight the previous grouping of interpersonal motives.

*Table 4. Correlation matrix of the interpersonal communication motives
(*r* coef.)*

Communi- cation motives	Affection	Inclusion	Escape	Relaxation	Control
Pleasure	.55**	.35**	.08	.56**	.04
Affection		.41**	-.12*	.41**	-.05
Inclusion			.21**	.48**	.24**
Escape				.13*	.68**
Relaxation					.17**
N=260				** $p < .01$	* $p < .05$

The positive correlation among communication motives that are fundamentally based on social connection is high: there are strong mutual correlations among achieving satisfaction through communication, exchanging affection, attaining a sense of involvement (and avoiding loneliness), and relaxation.

Moreover, the escape and control motives are highly correlated: students who are more motivated to communicate in order to exert control are likewise more motivated to use communication to escape certain interactions.

The communication motives of students from different years of study are compared (Table 5).

Table 5. Different years of study student–teachers’ interpersonal communication motivation

Factors/ motives	Year of initial teacher education					F	Sig.
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth (First MAS)		
Pleasure	3.65	3.77	4.04	4.07	3.82	4.970	.001**
Affection	4.06	4.06	4.35	4.32	4.18	2.095	.082
Inclusion	3.67	3.86	3.97	3.82	3.73	.839	.501
Escape	2.07	2.13	2.04	2.33	2.32	.857	.490
Relaxation	3.63	3.77	3.96	3.94	3.91	1.488	.206
Control	2.18	2.25	2.19	2.29	2.56	.545	.703
	67	53	62	59	19	** p < .01	

The results show the differences among students of different years of study in the motivation to communicate for the purpose of achieving satisfaction and pleasure within the communication process itself. According to LSD indicators, these differences exist between first- and second-year students, on the one side, and third- and fourth-year students, on the other side. Third- and fourth-year students are more driven by the motive of communication satisfaction than first- and second-year students. First- and second-year students do not mutually differ in the strength of this communication motive, nor do third- and fourth-year students. Fifth-year students do not differ from the students of any of the four previous years of study. No statistically significant differences were found in the strength of other motives for communication among students of different years of study.

In the initial education of future preschool and primary school teachers, internships in educational institutions are organized starting from the first year of study. They last for several weeks. However, only from the third year of study onward, they include more hours of direct work in educational groups or classes. This allows the development of affective bonds with the groups or departments in which the internship is carried out; students report that during the third and fourth years of study, there is a certain shift in terms of professional identity – that is, the way they perceive themselves as teachers, preschool teachers, or educators changes. The experiences students gain during their longer internship at school (during the third and fourth years of study) are part of their narrative transformation in perception of themselves as teachers in the classroom (Stojković, 2022). This development of professional identity during internship, reflected in increased professional commitment, has also been confirmed in other research (Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Given that teacher students are then immersed in specific school communities, they encounter the challenges of

intergenerational communication with various participants in the educational process and experience the importance of satisfaction in communication across multiple interpersonal relationships. This becomes a tangible factor of professional practice, which may explain the finding that communication among higher-year students in educational professions is more strongly driven by the motive of satisfaction in communication.

Conclusion and education implications

This study identified three subgroups of communication motives based on student-teachers’ self-assessed motive strength. They primarily communicate to show care and respect for others, as well as to gain respect themselves, which is a fundamental dimension of teachers’ professional practice.

The motivation to experience pleasant emotions through exchange with others was moderately expressed, while the desire to establish control through communication was shown as the least prominent communication motive among student-future teachers.

The fact that students in the higher years of study are more strongly motivated by the pleasure of communication than first- and second-year students can serve as a guide for the instructors of future preschool and primary school teachers, indicating how and to what extent to direct students’ attention and awareness toward this complex topic. While satisfaction and generally pleasant feelings in communication are desirable, the educational role of these professions often involves regulating states that reflect frustrations, developmental, situational, and other challenges. Given that successful communication is based on clear motivation to communicate, teacher education programs – for both future and active preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and subject teachers – should include content and activities focused on communication motives as part of communication competence development.

Since competence-building programmes are multi-layered (Scoular, Heard, Wardell, 2025; Zlatić & Bjekić, 2015), activities aimed at developing motivation for communication should reflect this complexity. The first step is to expand knowledge about different communication motives. This is the basis for the second step – increasing awareness of one’s own motivation to communicate in various forms of social interaction, especially in the educational process (awareness of the motives of interpersonal behavior and communication enables more effective and complete communication). And the third step is developing specific motivation for pedagogical communication.