CZU: 373.2:81`246.2:37.042-053.2 **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(195)2026_26**

STRATEGIES FOR HARNESSING BILINGUALISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SCHOOLERS' SOCIAL SKILLS

Nuți ARAMĂ,
„Dunărea de Jos" University in Galati, Romania

Bilingualism in preschool can be harnessed not only for language development but also for enhancing social skills and effective group interaction. This paper aims to bring to attention a set of psycho-pedagogical strategies designed to develop social skills through bilingual activities, highlighting an applied and innovative approach in early education. In this context, we analyse current theoretical perspectives on the relationship between bilingualism and socio-emotional development, elucidating the essential components of social interaction in bilingual settings. This study outlines the characteristics of strategies for harnessing bilingualism, including: engaging pre-schoolers in cooperative bilingual activities, developing empathy through role-playing in both languages, raising awareness of cultural diversity, and emotional self-regulation in a bilingual context. Thus, the proposed strategies optimise, intensify, and support the development of pre-schoolers' social skills for harmonious group integration.

Keywords: *bilingualism, social skills, pre-schoolers, educational strategies, early education, social competence, emotional self-regulation, inclusion.*

STRATEGII DE VALORIFICARE A BILINGVISMULUI ÎN DEZVOLTAREA ABILITĂȚILOR SOCIALE ALE PREȘCOLARILOR

Bilingvismul la vârsta preșcolară poate fi valorificat nu doar pentru dezvoltarea limbajului, ci și pentru stimularea competențelor sociale și a interacțiunii eficiente în grup. Lucrarea de față urmărește să aducă în atenție un set de strategii psihopedagogice care au ca scop dezvoltarea abilităților sociale prin intermediul activităților bilingve, evidențiind astfel o abordare aplicativă și inovativă în cadrul educației timpurii. În acest context, analizăm perspectivele teoretice actuale privind relația dintre bilingvism și dezvoltarea socio-emoțională, elucidând componentele esențiale ale interacțiunii sociale în mediul bilingv. Prezentul studiu reliefează caracteristicile strategiilor de valorificare a bilingvismului, printre care: implicarea preșcolarilor în activități cooperative bilingve, dezvoltarea empatiei prin jocuri de rol în ambele limbi, conștientizarea valorii diversității culturale și autoreglarea emoțională în context bilingv. Astfel, strategiile propuse optimizează, intensifică și susțin dezvoltarea abilităților sociale ale preșcolarilor pentru o integrare armonioasă în grup.

Cuvinte-cheie: *bilingvism, abilități sociale, preșcolari, strategii educaționale, educație timpurie, competențe sociale, autoreglare emoțională, incluziune.*

Introduction

At the current stage, under conditions of increasing mobility and cultural diversity, educational environments are increasingly becoming spaces where different languages and cultures meet. We observe that bilingualism in preschool is no longer an exception, but a natural component of the reality of many communities [6, 10]. In this sense, when organising the educational process in kindergarten, we direct our attention not only to the transmission of linguistic knowledge but, more importantly, to the creation of procedures and methods that facilitate the harmonious development of the child's personality, including their social competences. In line with recent research, socio-emotional learning skills play an essential role in early school success, and pre-schoolers who demonstrate strong social competences are more likely to adapt successfully to the demands of the educational environment [3, 12].

Pre-schoolers' social skills are defined in the specialist literature as a set of learned behaviours that allow the individual to interact effectively with others, express emotions appropriately, and resolve conflicts [12]. Researchers emphasise that the preschool period represents a critical stage for the development of these skills, given that between the ages of 3 and 6, a dramatic transformation occurs across multiple developmental domains, including cognitive and socio-emotional areas [8; 9]. In the study conducted by Denham and his collaborators, four distinct profiles of socio-emotion-

al learning in pre-schoolers were identified, each having significant implications for later school success [3]. During this period, the prefrontal cortex develops rapidly, facilitating socio-cognitive processing, including self-regulation, emotion management, and attention. Luciana and Nelson discuss the fact that the functional development of the prefrontal cortex in early childhood is fundamental for acquiring behavioural and emotional self-regulation skills [8; 9].

Drawing from the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, child development occurs through interaction with others, with language playing a central role in this process, acting as a mediator of thought and social behaviour [12]. In this context, the use of two languages in interactions between children and with the educator can act as a powerful tool for mediating social relationships, facilitating mutual understanding and collaboration [7; 10]. Additionally, Liu highlights that multilingual educational environments offer unique opportunities for developing social competences, as children are naturally exposed to situations requiring negotiation, cooperation, and intercultural understanding [7].

Research conducted in recent years has highlighted that socio-emotional development and linguistic competences are deeply interconnected in preschool children [2; 12]. In Mortimore's view, socio-emotional learning has been described as "the substance of education itself", and the beneficial effects on young children's well-being are profound and long-lasting [10, p. 903]. The author draws attention to the fact that the classroom environment and the quality of interactions are determining factors for the effective implementation of socio-emotional learning, and in the context of bilingual education, these aspects become even more relevant. We note, alongside Mortimore, that well-established pedagogical strategies can be mutually beneficial for both the development of bilingual education and the socio-emotional well-being of young children [10]. This finding justifies, in our opinion, the need to develop specific strategies for harnessing bilingualism in the development of social skills.

The longitudinal study conducted by Rojas demonstrates that, within free-play activities, emergent bilingual children develop their socio-emotional skills through authentic linguistic interactions, using their entire linguistic repertoire. The researcher emphasises that during free play, emergent bilingual children use their entire linguistic repertoire to negotiate meanings, resolve conflicts, and build social relationships [11]. These interactions allow them to build cooperation skills in problem-solving, understand their peers' emotions, and interpret their life experiences. Thus, free play represents an important context for negotiating lived experiences using the entire linguistic repertoire [11].

In the view of contemporary researchers, bilingualism does not represent merely the knowledge of two languages, but a specific way of processing reality, which develops cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness [1; 6]. A study conducted in Spain revealed that, after one year of primary education, children who followed bilingual programmes obtained significantly higher scores than monolingual children on a set of cognitive and social skills [2]. The results highlight that early exposure to a second language in an educational context can confer significant advantages both cognitively and socially, surpassing mere linguistic acquisition [2, p. 1778]. These results suggest that exposure to a second language in an educational context can generate considerable social benefits.

Educational practice indicates that social skills are influenced by the linguistic environment in which the child operates [12]. Halbach and Iwaniec have highlighted that bilingual educational programmes can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging and social responsibility in pupils, aspects essential for forming a balanced personality [5]. The authors argue that the integrated approach to content and language promotes not only linguistic competence but also the development of a sense of belonging to the community and social responsibility [5, p. 1610]. Their study shows that this approach can have a levelling effect, offering all children, regardless of their background, equal chances for social and cognitive development. Halbach and Iwaniec explain this phenomenon by the fact that bilingual programmes create a context in which linguistic diversity is valued, and all pupils are placed on common ground, thus fostering inclusion and social cohesion [5, p. 1620].

Research Methodology

The present study represents a theoretical synthesis research, based on the analysis and integration of specialist literature from the fields of developmental psychology, psycholinguistics, and educational sci-

ences. Starting from relevant bibliographic sources published in recent years, we analysed longitudinal studies, experimental research, and review articles from internationally rated specialist journals. Based on this analysis, we identified the essential characteristics of strategies for harnessing bilingualism and proposed a set of psycho-pedagogical strategies adapted to the specific nature of preschool age. The approach is applied, focusing on harnessing bilingualism as an active factor in the development of social skills, not just linguistic ones.

Results and Discussions

In the context of analysing the various activities undertaken by pre-schoolers in the educational environment, we identify the concept of strategies for harnessing bilingualism [6]. These are self-regulation and interaction strategies, used by subjects to increase or maintain the motivation to achieve social activities [12]. In our view, the development of social skills in a bilingual context unfolds under the influence of complex sets of factors, involving the child in authentic interactions, planning integrated activities for the formation of social competences, building positive expectations, and consolidating self-confidence [3; 11; 12].

Analysing the strategies for harnessing bilingualism in the development of social skills, we identified the following essential characteristics: (1) the active involvement of the child in authentic social interactions; (2) the alternation of linguistic codes according to the social context; (3) the mediation of conflicts through the use of both languages; (4) the development of intercultural empathy; (5) the consolidation of positive relationships within the group [1; 7; 10].

Starting from these theoretical foundations, we next propose a set of strategies for harnessing bilingualism in the development of pre-schoolers' social skills.

Strategies for cooperation and teamwork. Bilingual group activities involve assigning pre-schoolers to linguistically mixed teams, participating in cooperative projects or games in both languages [6]. The aim of these activities is to develop empathy, mutual respect, and the ability to negotiate roles and tasks. The novelty of the approach lies in the fact that bilingualism is used as a tool to facilitate collaboration, not just as a linguistic objective. Research shows that during free play, emergent bilingual children build their cooperation skills in problem-solving, using their entire linguistic repertoire to negotiate and collaborate effectively with peers [11]. Linguistically mixed pair learning involves children helping each other to understand words, instructions, or rules in the secondary language, aiming to increase mutual trust, stimulate communication, and consolidate interpersonal relationships [7; 12].

Strategies for developing empathy and emotional expression. Bilingual discussions and role-plays with social themes offer children the possibility to interpret scenarios in which they must recognise others' emotions, resolve conflicts, or support peers [10; 12]. A strategy we propose consists of using puppet theatre to explore simple social situations, accessible to children aged 3-5 years. For example, a puppet who is not allowed to join a game, another who is sad because they have lost their favourite toy, or two friends who argue over a toy. The puppets "speak" alternately in the two languages, using short, repetitive phrases. Children are invited to identify the characters' emotions (e.g. "How do you think the puppet feels?"), suggest solutions for resolving conflicts, and later re-enact the scenarios using the puppets. Given that at preschool age thinking is predominantly intuitive and tied to action, scenarios are accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions and visual support [12]. The aim of these activities is to develop the ability to perceive others' feelings, manage conflicts, and encourage prosocial behaviour. The novelty lies in the fact that alternating languages between game roles stimulates cognitive flexibility and intercultural empathy. Mortimore emphasises that the classroom environment plays a key role in the effective implementation of socio-emotional learning through bilingual education, with well-established pedagogical strategies being mutually beneficial for both the development of bilingual education and the socio-emotional well-being of young children [10, p. 908]. Expressing emotions in both languages allows for the creation of a safe environment for expressing emotions and consolidating authentic social relationships.

Strategies for social integration and inclusion. Bilingual cultural projects represent activities in which children are familiarised with songs, customs, or objects specific to a language [1; 6]. A strategy we propose consists of organising a "cultural week" adapted to the preschool age. Children can be encouraged to share

their experiences through practical activities. For example, modelling a traditional object from plasticine, colouring a specific drawing, or learning a simple song in the respective language. To maintain the interest of children aged 3-5 years, we suggest that activities be of short duration. Through this strategy, we aim to develop respect for diversity and awareness of the value of intercultural collaboration. The aim is to develop respect for diversity and awareness of the value of intercultural collaboration. The novelty of the approach lies in transforming bilingualism into a bridge between cultures that facilitates inclusion and social communication. Halbach and Iwaniec observe that bilingual educational programmes contribute to the development of a strong sense of belonging to the community and the formation of positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, the levelling effect of these programmes consisting of creating a common ground on which all pupils can interact on equal terms [5, p. 1615]. Bilingual cooperation games involve preschoolers collaborating and making decisions using both their mother tongue and the secondary language, aiming to develop negotiation skills, active listening, and group decision-making [11; 12].

Strategies for the educator. Modelling bilingual social interactions involves the educator mediating conversations between children, using both languages to subtly correct mistakes and facilitate effective communication [7; 10]. Liu's research indicates that multilingual teaching positively influences the social behaviours of preschool children, especially when educators adopt an immersive approach and create an inclusive learning environment [7]. Liu highlights that the successful implementation of multilingual education among pre-schoolers requires not only adequate linguistic resources but also a pedagogical approach that harnesses the social potential of bilingual interactions [7]. A strategy we propose for teaching staff consists of adopting an active role in modelling bilingual social interactions. The educator does not limit themselves to speaking the two languages but explicitly mediates conversations between children, reformulating messages when necessary, subtly correcting mistakes, and facilitating mutual understanding. Given that at preschool age imitation is a fundamental learning mechanism, the educator uses simple, repetitive formulae, accompanied by gestures and facial expressions: "Now Maria says: Please give me the red cube. And Andrei replies: Here you are, Maria!". Through this strategy, the educator becomes a model of communicative flexibility and respect for linguistic diversity [1; 5]. Creating a stimulating bilingual social environment, which includes visual materials, games, and tasks that involve interaction in both languages, supports active engagement and collaboration [7; 11]. Another strategy we propose consists of arranging the educational space in such a way as to support bilingual social interactions. For example, setting up a 'story corner' with board books illustrated in both languages or a "friendship corner" [6; 12].

Our proposed approach is applied, focusing on harnessing bilingualism as an active factor in the development of social skills, not just linguistic ones [2; 6]. The strategies are structured along social dimensions of cooperation, empathy, negotiation, and inclusion, which constitutes, in our opinion, a holistic perspective on the role of bilingualism in preschool education [10; 12]. This approach offers educators tools to transform bilingualism into an engine of social and interpersonal development [5; 7]. As Rojas synthesises, understanding how emergent bilingual children use their entire linguistic repertoire in social interactions is essential for designing educational interventions that simultaneously support linguistic and socio-emotional development [11].

Conclusions

Based on the above, we can conclude that:

1. Bilingualism at preschool age constitutes an educational resource that can be significantly harnessed for socio-emotional development, there being a bidirectional relationship between linguistic and social competences. Languaging interactions offer emergent bilingual children unique opportunities to develop both categories of competences in an integrated manner.

2. The strategies for harnessing bilingualism for the development of social skills optimise, intensify, and support positive interactions between pre-schoolers, contributing to the formation of intercultural empathy, cooperation, and inclusion. The integration of socio-emotional learning into early bilingual programmes represents a promising direction for optimising children's holistic development.

3. The novelty of the proposed approach lies in the change of perspective: bilingualism is no longer just a context or a learning objective, but becomes an environment and an active tool for facilitating social interactions, contributing to the formation of pre-schoolers who are more empathetic, more cooperative, and better prepared for life in a diverse society. Well-designed bilingual programmes can contribute to the development of responsible, competent citizens with a strong sense of belonging to the community.

Bibliography:

1. BIALYSTOK, E. Bilingualism and the development of executive function: The role of attention. In: *Child Development Perspectives*, 2015, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 117-121. ISSN 1750-8592. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12116
2. CHAMORRO, G., JANKE, V. Investigating the bilingual advantage: the impact of L2 exposure on the social and cognitive skills of monolingually-raised children in bilingual education. In: *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2020, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 1765-1781. ISSN 1367-0050. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1799323 .
3. DENHAM, S., BASSETT, H., MINCIC, M., KALB, S., WAY, E., WYATT, T., SEGAL, Y. Social-emotional learning profiles of pre-schoolers' early school success: A person-centered approach. In: *Learning and Individual Differences*, 2012, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 178-189. ISSN 1041-6080. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2011.05.001.
4. GARCÍA, O., WEI, L. Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 175 p. ISBN 978-1137385758.
5. HALBACH, A., IWANIEC, J. Responsible, competent and with a sense of belonging: an explanation for the purported levelling effect of CLIL. In: *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2022, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 1609-1623. ISSN 1367-0050. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1786496 .
6. KROLL, J. F., DUSSIAS, P. E. The benefits of multilingualism to the personal and professional development of residents of the US. In: *Foreign Language Annals*, 2017, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 248-259. ISSN 0015-718X. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12271
7. LIU, X. The Impact of Multilingual Teaching on the Social Behaviors of Preschool Children. In: *SHS Web of Conferences*, 2026, vol. 228, article 03001, pp. 1-8. ISSN 2261-2424. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202622803001 .
8. GRAF PETER (PHD.), NOBUO OHTA. *Lifespan Development of Human Memory*. MIT Press, 2002, 304 pp. ISBN. ISBN: 9780262072366
9. LUCIANA, M., NELSON, C.A. The neural and functional development of the human prefrontal cortex. In: *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Development (1st ed.),* de Haan, M., & Johnson, M.H. (Eds.). Psychology Press, 2003, pp. 155-178. ISBN 978-0863779307.
10. MORTIMORE, L. CLIL and Social and Emotional Learning in Early Bilingual Education: Compatible and Mutually Beneficial. In: *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2023, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 903-911. ISSN 1798-4769. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1404.06 .
11. ROJAS, N. M. An exploration of languaging interactions of young Spanish-English emergent bilinguals to build social-emotional learning skills during free-play. In: *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2025, pp. 1-15. ISSN 1367-0050. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2025.2522831 .
12. VYGOTSKI, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. 159 p. ISBN 978-0674576292.

Data about author:
Nuți ARAMĂ, PhD Student, Doctoral School of Psychology, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chișinău, Clinical Psychologist, Prof. associated at „Dunărea de Jos" University from Galați, Romania.
ORCID: 0009-0007-7295-9148
E-mail: arama.nuti@upsc.md

Presented: 27.02.2026
Reviewed: 30.04.2026
Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026