

LILIA LEVONYUK

Brest State A.S. Pushkin University
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1560-2747>

LARISA MAKSIMUK

Brest State A.S. Pushkin University
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8163-0842>

COMPETENCE APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING OF FUTURE SPECIALISTS IN BELARUS

Abstract: The article deals with the problem of competence-based approach to education today and its underlying principles. Nowadays, the most accepted instructional framework in foreign language programs is communicative language teaching, whose main goal is to increase learners' communicative competence. This theoretical term means being able to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately in the target foreign language and culture. However, the implementation of a communicative methodology is not an easy task since it requires an understanding of the integrated nature of the theoretical concept of communicative competence.

This article analyses and distinguishes the terms “competence” and “competency”, identifies and defines integral structure and contents of the communicative language competence, substantiates the choice of the key competences necessary for everyone, and function-oriented competences, which in their unity stipulate the successful adaptation and self-realization of a young specialist in the modern fast-changing world.

In the article, particular attention is paid to the development of cross-cultural communicative competence. Taking the intercultural component as the point of departure, the authors present a variety of activities in the four language skills for teaching learners this competence.

Keywords: competence, cross-cultural and communicative competences, intercultural component, four basic skills, communicative methodology, learner-centered approach

In today's world, education has been distinguished as the investment in the development of the society. The governments and the wide public are concerned about adequacy of quality of education and professional training as well as economic and social efficiency of the means invested in education. The matter of educational

contents corresponding to future demands has become a vital issue in educational reforms all over the world. The significance of flexibility, adaptability, mobility, creativity of education and life-long learning in the global, changing world is the focal point of modern national and international discussions concerning higher education and vocational training.

In accordance with Bologna agreements, assuming the academic and professional recognition of the state diplomas within the European space, graduation of qualified specialists, capable of life-long learning and performing professional work in conditions of multicultural environment, the problem of professionally-oriented communicative language competence development acquires a special meaning (Jonnaert, Barrette, Masciotra 2005).

The essential contribution to the theoretical analysis of concepts of competence and competency with reference to young specialists in conditions of a contemporary competitive market was made by such scientists and researchers as D. Hymes, C. Bremer and K. Kohl, D.S. Rychen and L.H. Salganik, F. E. Weinert, R. Nunn, I. Tişla, I. Maslo, E. Maslo, V.A. Bolotov, S.E. Shishov, A.M. Novikov, I.A. Zimnyaya, B.D. Elkonin, and others.

In a number of works, the concept of competency is defined as intellectual and personal ability of an individual to practical activities, and competence as a contents component of the given ability in the form of knowledge, skills and aptitudes (Zimnyaya 2003). From I.A. Zimnyaya's point of view, "competency always displays the actual competence" (Zimnyaya 2003, pp. 34–42). B.D. Elkonin believes that competency is a degree of a person's involvement into activity (Elkonin 2014). S.E. Shishov (1999) considers the category of competence as a general ability based on knowledge, values, aptitudes, enabling to establish relationship between knowledge and situation, to reveal a procedure (knowledge and action), suitable for a problem. I. Tişla defines competence as an individual combination of abilities and experiences stipulated by opportunities to gain the former (Tişla 2005). According to F.E. Weinert, in the light of terminological and conceptual disorder connected with the concepts of competence, skill, professionalism and so on, it is necessary to develop an explicit definition of the concept of competence. Weinert tries to show a link between a psychological and pedagogical concept, on the one hand, and a sociological one on the other. He defines competence as a "slightly specialized system of aptitudes, abilities or skills necessary for achievement of a specific goal. It can concern both the individual abilities and the distribution of abilities within a social group or establishment" (Weinert 2001).

At the international level, the work in the field of competences began in 1990 under the aegis of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with the International interdisciplinary programme DeSeCo (Defini-

tion and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations). DeSeCo defines competence as a “system of internal mental structures and abilities assuming mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills, and also social and behavioral components such as attitudes, emotions, values and ethics, motivations for successful realization of activity in a particular context” (*Education – Lifelong Learning...*, 2002).

In our opinion, higher education institutions as social institutes should prepare a graduate for life. And life as a circuit of consecutive objectives and responsible choices does not imply only academic knowledge. N.V. Bordovskaya and A.A. Rean argue that development of a person as a subject of activity necessarily includes the factors which form a socially-mature person:

- development of intelligence,
- development of positive thinking and positive attitude,
- development of autonomy and responsibility,
- development of motivation leading to self-development, self-realization (Bordovskaya, Rean 2000).

Educational results are demonstrated by students’ (graduates’) knowledge, skills and abilities after the accomplishment of an educational process, which can be expressed by means of competence.

It goes without saying that competence is not a static characteristic. Since it is inseparably connected with socialization – communication and joint activities of people, the process of its development goes on during the whole life as life-long learning and self-education, as aspiration to self-development and self-realization in the fast-changing world. Professional successes, achievement of professional blossoming as well as professional longevity have already been confirmed by lots of experimental data (Rychen, Salganik 2001).

METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND AND PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The last five decades have witnessed vast changes in our understanding of how languages are learnt, and subsequently taught. Empirical results from linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics have better established the complex nature of language learning: it has become evident that linguistic, psychological and sociocultural factors play a key role in this process. Furthermore, these results have also shown that communication is a pivotal point in language learning and that the degree of success achieved in this process depends much on how meaning is negotiated in communication. This concept of language learning explains the emergence of communicative approaches to a foreign teaching over

the last decades, whose pedagogical goal is to develop learners' communicative competence, i.e. the ability to use the linguistic system in an effective and appropriate way in their future professional activity.

However, the implementation of a communicative methodology is not an easy task. In fact, it represents a challenge to language practitioners since it requires an understanding of the complex and integrated nature of the theoretical concept of communicative competence.

The term "communicative competence" was coined by D. Hymes (1972), who defined it as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context. His work clearly demonstrated a shift of emphasis among linguists, away from the study of language as a system in isolation, a focus seen in the work of N. Chomsky (1965), towards the study of language as a communication tool.

Into scientific use of linguodidactics the term of communicative competence was introduced by scientist M.N. Vyatiutnev. The scientist suggested to assume communicative competence

(...) as a choice and implementation of programs of speech behavior depending on the ability of a person to be guided in different communicative situations; ability to classify situations depending on the subject, tasks, communicative sets arising beforehand and also during the conversation in the course of adaptation (Vyatiutnev 1977).

Specifying the essence of communicative competence, N.I. Gez gives the following definition: ability of coherent use of the language in various socially determined situations (Gez 1985).

The widely cited model by M. Canale and M. Swain (1980), later expanded by Canale (1983), includes four competencies under the heading of communicative competence: grammatical competence (i.e. knowledge of the language code); sociolinguistic competence (i.e. knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a particular context); strategic competence (i.e. knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication) and discourse competence (i.e. knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text). Pragmatic competence is essentially included in this model under sociolinguistic competence, which Canale and Swain (1980) described as "sociocultural rules of use".

However, it was not until L.F. Bachman that pragmatic competence came to be regarded as one of the main components of communicative competence. Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language ability included three elements, namely language competence, strategic competence and physiological mechanisms.

Language competence comprises two further components: organizational and pragmatic competence. On the one hand, organizational competence consists of

grammatical and textual competence, thereby paralleling Canale's (1983) discourse competence. On the other hand, pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence, the former referring to knowledge of speech acts and language functions and the latter referring to the knowledge of how to use language functions appropriately in a given context. This distinction between these two sub-competencies echoes G. Leech's (1983) and J. Thomas's (1983) division of pragmatics into pragmalinguistics, which has been defined as "the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions", and sociopragmatics, which has been defined as "the sociological interface of pragmatics".

Apart from language competence, the model also includes strategic competence and physiological mechanisms. The former refers to the mental capacity to implement language competence appropriately in the situation in which communication takes place, whereas the latter refers to the neurological and psychological processes that are involved in language use. The most notable advance on Canale's (1983) model is that Bachman's (1990) model identifies pragmatic competence as a main component of the construct of communicative competence that is coordinated with grammatical and textual competence rather than being subordinated to it and interacting with the organizational competence in many ways (Kasper 2001).

The framework of communicative competence presented by E. Usó-Juan and F. Martínez-Flor includes five components: discourse, linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and strategic competency (Usó-Juan, Martínez-Flor 2006, pp. 3–26).

Discourse competence is defined as the selection and sequencing of utterance or sentences to achieve a cohesive and coherent spoken or written text given a particular purpose and situational context. Linguistic competence refers to all the elements of the linguistic system, such as aspects concerning phonology, grammar and vocabulary which are needed to interpret or produce a spoken or written text. Pragmatic competence concerns the knowledge of the function or illocutionary force implied in the utterance that is intended to be understood or produced, as well as the contextual factors that affect its appropriacy. Cross-cultural competence refers to the knowledge of how to interpret and produce a spoken or written piece of discourse within a particular sociocultural context. Therefore, it involves knowledge of cultural factors such as the rules of behavior that exist in the target language community as well as cross-cultural awareness, including differences and similarities in cross-cultural communication. Finally, strategic competence is conceptualized as knowledge of both learning and communication strategies.

In our opinion, cross-cultural and communicative competences contain a key aspect as linguistic and cultural orientation of functionally substantial vector of competences. Within the meaning of component structure cross-cultural and

communicative competences, in terms of basic theoretical principles cognitive-linguistic and cultural methodology, we consider it is fair to point out cross-cultural communicative competence as an independent competence. The structure of cross-cultural communicative competence that we assumed is presented by the following sub-competences reflecting the training system, forming cross-cultural competence-based level of linguistic skills: social sub-competence, cognitive sub-competence, socio-cultural sub-competence, conceptual sub-competence, learner-centered sub-competence, communicative sub-competence, linguistic and cultural sub-competence.

We also think that linguistic and cultural sub-competence forms personal conceptualization of the world on the basis of a peculiar culture, as linguistic and cultural reflection of national language, consciousness and mentality, which puts the ground for “reconceptualisation” (Kunanbayeva 2010). That is why, while teaching foreign languages, it is also useful to use students’ native country cultural material study. In this case, it is understood as a cultural study focused on tasks and requirements of learning a foreign language (Shveytser 1976).

From our point of view, communicative competence approach emphasizes the importance of the four main language skills teaching – listening, speaking, reading, writing – since they are viewed as the manifestations of interpreting and producing a spoken or written piece of discourse. So, taking the cross-cultural component as the point of departure, a variety of activities in the four language skills are presented for teaching learners cross-cultural communicative competence.

In trying to develop learners’ overall communicative competence in the target foreign language through the four language skills, we have decided to focus particularly on the cross-cultural communicative competence. The process of teaching this competence can be organized around three main stages: explanation, collection and implementation.

In the first stage, i.e. explanation, the teacher explains to learners the concept of intercultural competence in order to make them aware of the importance of paying attention to the culture of the target foreign language. Once the concept has been introduced, learners are told they are to explore the culture of the target language and they are presented with a list of key areas that offer the possibility for developing intercultural competence, including Family, Education, Law and Order, or Power and Politics among others.

In the second stage, i.e. collection, learners are given the task to gather material outside the classroom in relation with the cultural topics they have agreed to work with in the first stage. Learners are recommended to collect material from a variety of sources including photocopied information from different printed materials, photo-documentaries, pictures, video or DVD scenes, recorded material like inter-

views to native speakers, excerpts from the Internet and the like. The good thing of this activity is that learners' cultural awareness is further increased through having to question themselves what is culturally representative of the given topic.

In the third stage, i.e. implementation, learners work with a variety of activities that require their use of the four skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to develop their overall communicative competence, and promote their cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

As for the development of listening skills, activities such as video-taped cultural dialogues, audio- or video-taped cultural misunderstandings and taped-recorded interviews with native speakers, among many others, could promote this type of skills with a special emphasis on the intercultural competence.

As for speaking skills, in our opinion, activity formats such as face-to-face tandem learning, making up questions to a native speaker or role-playing, among others, may develop speaking skills with a particular emphasis on the intercultural component.

A variety of activities may be used in the language class to develop reading skills with a focus on the intercultural component. We can mention a few, including critical reading, cultural bump activities, activities that focus on written genres or cultural extensive reading, among others.

And, finally, activities such as tandem e-mail learning, designing stories and story continuation, among others, may develop writing skills with a particular emphasis on the intercultural component.

In Belarus, in the course of foreign language teaching at higher education establishments, the following competency-based technologies are successfully used: project-based learning; developing critical thinking through reading and writing; debates method, sometimes called Socratic method; game technology (language games, role-playing, dramatization); problem-solving discussions; interactive teaching technology (in pairs, in small groups); scenario- and context-based technology; module technology.

If we take the teaching goal (ability to communicate in foreign languages with a focus on intercultural component) as a basis, the categories of the traditional language description (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.) will be insufficient. The functional aspect of the language system is of higher priority. For example:

- realization strategy (what, how much and with what reason should one realize or understand?);
- speech intentions (assessment of speech situation and selection of language means);
- types of texts (what types of texts are characteristic for understanding?);

- non-language means (gestures, facial expression, accents and intonations as “bearing some meaning”).

In Belarus, there is a growing trend towards foreign languages teaching as a means of international communication. It can be reached by the virtue of:

- formation and development of basic communicative abilities in the main types of speech activity;
- implementation of communicative-speech skills within foreign-language environment of the countries of a target foreign language (in the frame of studying themes and situations);
- improvement of all components of a foreign-language communicative competence;
- sociocultural development of students in the context of European and world culture by means of cross-cultural, cultural and linguocultural material.

To our mind, cross-cultural communicative competence involves the following major abilities:

- to read and understand simple, authentic texts (understanding the main idea together with a full comprehension);
- to communicate orally in standard situations, such as professional, educational, cultural;
- to briefly introduce oneself, describe environment, retell, express opinion;
- to express some information in the written form (e.g., letter of invitation, business letter).

This is the minimum level of communicative competence of the state educational standard for foreign languages.

According to the conception of developing educational system of Belarus, such issues as cross-cultural communicative teaching of foreign languages, which are oriented to reach practical effects, are of crucial importance. All branches of professional state education standard involve a foreign subject, which aims to form and develop communicative competence of an expert. Future professional is a graduate, who extensively has a hand in vocational training in a foreign language which covers the spheres of science, technology, production and education. Mastering communicative competence and cross-cultural awareness means for the student not just having a better command of language, but breaking of communicative and cultural barriers. The achievement of language competence helps to realize personal and business contacts in order to satisfy professional necessities, self-education and self-improvement.

In modern methodology there is no universal method of teaching a foreign language. Thus, it is necessary to combine various techniques depending on the purposes, conditions of training and other factors. The preference is given to the

learner-centered approach, which stimulate creative activity and increase motivation to foreign language learning.

The main goal of teaching becomes the ability “to communicate in a foreign language”. The content of teaching a foreign language is focused on the formation and development of all components of communicative competence: speaking skills and abilities, which are created on the basis of language, linguistic and cultural knowledge and country studies.

Language competence and its making parts, such as grammatical skills and abilities, take a leading place in the course of achievement of the main goal of teaching a foreign language which is the ability to communicate in a foreign language. It is indisputable that communication is possible only with the presence of the language competence, which is based on mastering grammatical skills and abilities.

Communicative competence appears to be of prior purpose. At the same time, foreign language is just a mean, which gives an opportunity to get and show one’s cultural level, an ability to think, create, evaluate another person’s thought, creativity or, in other words, to make communication possible. Therefore, among different techniques of mastering a foreign language, the preference is given to the ones which possess a developing potential: provoking thoughts, enriching feelings, improving the culture of communication and social behavior as a whole.

Linguistic and cultural sub-competence as a part of cross-cultural communicative competence makes personal conceptualization of the world on the basis of a certain culture, as linguocultural reflection of national language, consciousness and mentality. That is why it is also important to use some country study material, as well as national peculiarities. That will make the lessons more interesting, stimulate the students to learn a foreign language independently, motivate them to travel a lot and use the language for communication.

We can form an opinion about the efficiency, effectiveness and success of the educational process only by the final result, by students’ level of achievement. If one of the individual results is falling behind, it will pull backwards the success of the whole group and, eventually, show a lower functional level of the learning system.

The educational process is distinguished by its functional mobility and flexibility, which allows at any time to introduce a regulating factor by changing any functional element of the process. Comparing a predetermined purposeful result with an actual interim result, the system can rearrange its activities at any stage, at any time to amend individual intermediate deflections or deviations to avoid the destruction of the whole system.

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KOMPETENCYJNE PODEJŚCIE DO NAUCZANIA JĘZYKÓW OBCYCH PRZYSZŁYCH SPECJALISTÓW NA BIAŁORUSI

Abstrakt: Artykuł zawiera krótki przegląd kompetencyjnie zorientowanego podejścia do nauczania języków obcych oraz jego podstawowych zasad. Komunikacyjne ukierunkowanie na nauczanie języków obcych jest podstawową zasadą współczesnych programów nauczania. W opracowaniu przedstawiono analizę i wyjaśnienie pojęć „fachowość” oraz „kompetencja”, ustalono integralną strukturę i treść językowej komunikacyjnej kompetencji, uzasadniono także wybór kluczowych kompetencji niezbędnych dla każdego oraz funkcjonalnie skierowanych kompetencji, które w swojej jedności zapewniają sukces przy adaptacji i samorealizacji młodego specjalisty we współczesnym dynamicznym świecie. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono rozwojowi międzykulturowej komunikacyjnej kompetencji realizowanej przez różne rodzaje aktywności.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencja, kompetencja międzykulturowa i komunikacyjna, komponent międzykulturowy, metodyka komunikacyjna, podejście zorientowane na osobowość