

THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER?

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The communicative approach to language teaching reflects social tendencies of the period. The open and liberal ideas of the 20th and 21st century have challenged standard models of language teaching and changed the understanding of the teacher's competences. The article hypothesizes a strong correlation between the language teacher's expertise in communication and quality of the communicative language teaching. In order to better account for the communicative approach, it is said that the language teacher needs to enrich the communicative competence. The article also raises the question of the relevance of the communicative competence of the language teacher, as well as discusses the insufficient treatment of the issue in contemporary Lithuanian academic environment.

Keywords: communicative competence, communicative approach, language teacher, interdisciplinary approach, interaction, professional development.

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Introduction

The Relevance of the Research. Since the 1970s, the world has been continually discussing the notion of 'communicative competence', which is one of the theories that underlie the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. When the alternative concept of language teaching was introduced, it has been given strong support by majority involved in the field, whereas 'communicative competence' has become a catchphrase in public debate about communicative language teaching.

Despite early euphoria about rapid transition from the older language teaching model to the communicative one, now the language teacher is challenged to effectively implement the new teaching model in working practice. This difficulty, in particular, is relevant in Lithuania due to the fact that the notion of communicative language teaching is relatively fresh here. As any other novelty, the approach

is adapted and perceived gradually. Naturally, this means that the approach has to be implemented step by step. The issue of language teacher's readiness to meet the demands of the communicative language teaching requires new research perspectives. One of them is the analysis of the communicative competence, which is one of the constituents underlying successful practise of the language teacher.

A lot of insights on how to aid the teacher in adjusting the communicative approach in a class have been suggested. The majority of them concentrate on technical issues such as revision of existing language programs and exercise typology. However, the teacher's ability to communicate professionally and meet the demands of the communicative approach is not so widely discussed. Most of the time, when the discussion on the development of communicative competence in language teaching process is

taking place, the focus of interest is the student, whereas the question of the teacher's communicative skills is set aside. Finally, the lack of interdisciplinary approach to the development of language teacher's communicative competence could be named as an obstacle which limits a broader understanding of language teaching methodology.

Insufficient attention to the communicative competence of the language teacher raises multitude of questions immediately. Does this imply that the language teacher's competence consists mainly of professional knowledge? Or, on the contrary, should language teacher, in particular, give greater attention to the mastery of communicative strategies? Is there any logical connection between the quality of language teaching and the communicative competence of the language teacher? It could be assumed that one of the reasons for the lack of research in the field is that the real complexity of the problem has not been appreciated.

The Aim of the research. The issue of the communicative competence of the language teacher becomes so important that it has to be explored separately. The research attempts to analyse the correlation between the quality of the communicative language teaching and the language teacher's expertise in communication. Readers are introduced with some specific skills and strategies which could possibly underlie communicative competencies of the language teacher.

Furthermore, the language teacher's communicative competence and its treatment in both intercultural and Lithuanian literature and its status in Lithuanian academic culture are discussed. This research challenges readers to raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in communication performance. Hopefully, it will spark off new research topics and provoke fresh discussions on how to work resourcefully in the new era of communication.

The method of the research. The analytical-critical method is applied to the study. An extensive research and a critical evaluation of international and Lithuanian literature on

the field have been done in order to offer the following perspective on the communicative competence of the language teacher.

The Notion of Communication in Education

Before developing the issue of the communicative competence of the language teacher, conceptual and terminological background is necessary. In the 20th and 21st century, the notion of 'communication' has had a great influence on approaches to teaching. Ideas from this period, which has been marked by a rapid globalization, have revealed the call for innovative teaching methods which would leave room for individual self-expression and social interaction with others.

An American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, John Dewey, in his book *Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy of education* asserted that 'not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative' (1916). Dewey further maintained that communication should serve as a means of breaking away from formal notion of education, which is upon the machine-like plane. The formal notion of education suggests teacher and pupil relationships which are based on superiority of position, skill, and technical ability but do not effect a communication of interests and experiences. Dewey's early philosophy of education suggested that education demands communication to form a community.

As a response to the needs and conditions of the period, the notion of 'communication' was placed at the very centre of the realm of foreign language teaching. In the 1970s, the communicative approach to foreign language teaching was proposed as an alternative to the older language teaching model, in which the student's grammatical competence was given priority. The goal of the communicative language teaching is 'communicative competence'.

As Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor suggest, the term ‘communicative competence’ was coined by Dell Hymes (1972), a sociolinguist as well as ethnographer of communication, and later on elaborated by theorists Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), Lyle F. Bachman (1990), and Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995). The communicative competence is said to be comprised of four components: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (as cited in Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor 2008). In other words, it was said that along the linguistic knowledge the student should gain sociolinguistic knowledge. This involves knowing how to use language for certain purposes in different social contexts.

It is important to note that the notion of communicative language teaching has changed the understanding of the teacher’s and learners roles in a classroom. As an applied linguist and educator Jack C. Richards suggests, today the responsibility for the learning process is shared by both the teacher and the student.

Thus the teacher is not seen as a missing part of the truth anymore but as a facilitator or moderator of communication between participants in the learning process. Furthermore, classroom activities are oriented towards cooperative rather than individualistic model of learning (Richards 2006: 5). However, the principles of the communicative approach as such do not predetermine activeness and expressiveness of the student, nor they eliminate the existing problem of language barrier. Some of the students are reserved and individualistic in nature and needs to be opened up to develop communicative competence.

This requires investment of time and effort both by the student and the teacher. Consequently, language teachers, in particular, should give a great attention to the mastery of their own communicative competence if they are to teach from the perspective of the communicative model. The need for the development of the teacher’s communicative skills is a new challenge which has emerged with new opportunities and thus must be examined in a great detail.

On Defining the Communicative Competence of the Language Teacher

Dragana Bjekić, who has been carrying research on teacher’s communicative competence, claims that the professional competence of the teacher has started to be more fully explored only in the 21st century. It mainly comprises three domains: educational competence; programme (syllabus, content) competence and communication competence (Bjekić *et al.* 2008: 245). A careful study of literature on the area shows that for the majority of authors, the change in language teaching approach still relates primarily to the language teacher’s development of the educational and programme competence. However, the teacher’s communicative competence, which eventually adds to the student’s communicative competence, seems to be taken for granted. Naturally, the importance of the language teacher’s readiness to communicate professionally in the framework of the communicative language teaching should be investigated.

According to Daniel Goleman, ‘we are being judged not just by how smart we are or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other’ (1998: 4). Similarly, it could be said that the communicative competence is a necessary constituent of the teacher’s general competence. As a Lithuanian educator Liuda Šiaučiukėnienė points out in the book *Šiuolaikinės Didaktikos Pagrindai*, teaching is not a transfer of knowledge but rather interaction between the teacher and the student (Šiaučiukėnienė *et al.* 2006: 12). Thus the teacher is only one of the participants of the cooperative process, which is situated within the social context. In *Komunikacija: teorija ir praktika*, Lithuanian theorists Viktorija Baršauskienė and Birutė Janulevičiūtė-Ivaškevičienė further maintain that the sender and the recipient are the two participating parties in the process of communication. In the teaching/learning process, the teacher functions as the sender, whereas the student acts as the receiver. If any of these parties is malfunctioning, the process of

communication goes awry (2005: 21). For this reason, sociable nature of the teacher helps to establish effective working relations and atmosphere in a class. It also helps to avoid some problems which occur in a class due to the lack of the communicative competence. Naturally, a sociable teacher is more inclined to share her or his knowledge with students and, what is more, to encourage them.

But what is the communicative competence of the language teacher? Bjekić offers the definition of the teacher's communicative competence, which is based on Spitzberg and Cupach's (1989) model of the communication competence. According to it, the communicative competence is the teacher's formative professional competence. It is also said that the teacher's communicative competence is the system of knowledge, skills, abilities, properties and motivational disposition which enable effective communication in the teaching process and in other educational social interactions (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1989 cited in Bjekić *et al.* 2008: 245). In addition to this, Bjekić uses Keatlen Reardon's (1998) phrasing to name the constituents of the communicative competence. Reardon identifies two dimensions which mainly constitute the communicative competence: cognitive and behavioural, and basic communication skills. Cognitive dimension involves the awareness process and the cognitive processing of information, whereas the behavioural dimension encompasses different manifestations of communication competence (Reardon 1998 cited in Bjekić *et al.* 2008: 246). From what has been stated, the development of the teacher's communicative competence starts from the awareness process. The self analysis helps to realize the teacher's motives, goals and needs. The teacher's self-awareness predetermines her or his communication with the student. Thus positive thinking of the teacher anticipates favourable results in a classroom. The teacher's self-esteem and respect to the student influences success of their communication. Consequently, the student can sense encouragement and approval even from the teacher's body language.

This point brings us to the behavioural dimension of the communicative competence.

The Manifestation of the Teacher's Communicative Competence

If the cognitive dimension involves implicit aspects of the communicative competence, the behavioural dimension is related with explicit ones. It stems from the cognitive dimension of the communicative competence. It should be stressed that the behavioural dimension is comprised not only of language but also by such non-verbal aspects as body language, listening, distance, appearance, etc. There are different directions to be taken to strengthen the manifestation of the communicative competence of the language teacher. Therefore, the question of how this competence could be used to engage the student into communication in a class could be briefly discussed here.

Since the language teacher is completely free to create class atmosphere, she or he should experiment with a variety of communicative strategies to develop a unique communication style. To begin with, rhetoric is, perhaps, one of the best showcase of the teacher's communicative competence. The teacher's expressiveness may generate interest and enhance the student's understanding of information. Thus it is likely that effective rhetoric of the language teacher may improve the student's overall performance in a class. The teacher who is a competent communicator uses rhetoric which does not evoke any stress or fear but rather inspires the student. A positive rhetoric could be consciously chosen to develop the climate of trust and support.

In the communicative language teaching, the personal relation between the student and the teacher should be paid a sufficient attention. This primarily relates to confidence building and engaging the student. More personal and trustful relationship with the teacher encourages the student to speak up in front of a class with more confidence and, in this way, to overcome language barrier. Baršauskienė and Janulevičiū-

tė-Ivaškevičienė claim that the psychological and social distance between the teacher and the student is decreasing (Baršauskienė and Janulevičiūtė-Ivaškevičienė 2005: 14). Consequently, this stimulates a collaborative rather than authoritative mode of communication. For example, learning the names of all students as soon as possible and addressing them as individuals may add to the development of a personal relationship. Moreover, starting a lesson with discussion on some issues of the student's personal and local concern, contributes to the more personal nature of the teacher and student relationship. Even if the primary goal of a lesson is teaching language for specific purpose, the importance of specific topics should not entirely supersede general ones. It could be argued that by underestimating general subjects, there is a risk to lose a personal touch with students as well as their interest in lessons.

Furthermore, the communicative language teacher could serve dialogue as one of the means to strengthen the interpersonal mode of communication in a class. The notion of dialogue in education is not new and traces back to an ancient tradition. However, the dialogue method experiences a *renaissance for it has been reinterpreted by such contemporary theorists as Martin Buber and Paulo Freire. Martin Buber suggested that the notion of communication should be used to explain the nature of dialogue. He claimed that dialogue is based on the 'I-You' symmetrical relationship* (Buber 2001: 77). In other words, dialogue helps to hear and understand the other. Thus it is suggested that the language teacher should employ different forms of dialogue (conversation, debate, dispute, discussion) to stimulate the social dynamics of a classroom. Nevertheless, the use of dialogue in a class can be fraught with difficulties. In such a case, the language teacher acts as a traffic-light which directs the traffic in a class. This means that the teacher involves the student into dialogue by using hidden interviewing strategies and later on guides the interaction by giving leading questions. However, the dialogue method requires a particularly subtle way of ap-

proaching certain topics discussed at class. For this reason, the teacher should not impose her or his values on the student by strong criticism and subjective generalizations. If the language teacher is equipped with different communicative techniques, the use of dialogue may provide a particular learning environment which is full of spontaneity and unexpected discoveries. Generally, the language teacher should pay great attention to the mastery of communicative strategies. They open up a wide spectrum of possibilities for the language teacher's practise.

The Communicative Competence of the Language Teacher in the Lithuanian Academic Environment

It is likely that the language teacher needs to constantly rethink her or his teaching philosophy and practise to make sure that it is constantly developed. In early societies it was important to discuss the issues of pedagogical practice and competence with philosophical sophistication. In order to solve educational problems, the teacher of today should also develop personal teaching philosophy which would be a self-reflection about what is taught, how is taught and why is taught (Ozmon and Craver 1995: 10). In the period of transition into a global and information society, philosophical insights into education are very important. Kazys Varnelis characterizes our era by historical phenomenon – network culture – which is intensified continuity of modernism and postmodernism. He claims that today we perceive ourselves less as individuals and more as the product of multiple networks composed of both humans and things (Varnelis 2007). In the context of social evolution, the teacher's critical rethinking of established attitudes and competences may eventually give birth to alternative perspectives to language teaching.

The fact that nowadays the language teacher is a part of the global network reinforces exploration of new ways of effective collaboration with other 'online' and 'offline' professionals.

Modern sociology has named social networking as a new phenomenon which initiates a free intercourse and communication of experience. Viewed in this way, an interdisciplinary approach becomes inseparable from the notion of social networking. The awareness of insights from other disciplines contributes to the open and sociable nature of the teacher. Interaction with other disciplines helps to cross the boundaries between traditional academic disciplines. Eventually, it expands the perspective to the development of the language teacher's competences. If the language teacher is to fill the role of a proficient communicator and even psychologist in a class, she or he should consult such disciplines as social psychology, oratory, and communicative studies. It is important to note that the notion of inter-discipline is based on the notion of dialogue. Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue says that dialogue helps to understand the other and in this way to expand the perception of the self. A monologue, on the contrary, is based on isolation and the fear of the different. It does not question conventional habits of thought and action, which consequently limits the understanding and progress (Buber 2001: 72). As Lithuanian culturologist Almantas Samalavičius puts it, Lithuanian academic culture is mainly monologue-based and does not establish an effective dialogue with other academic disciplines (Samalavičius 2008: 8). If the language teacher does not consult professionals from multiple academic disciplines, she or he misses an opportunity to engage in informal professional development which occurs both within an institution and outside an institution.

What the previous paragraph amounts to is the assertion that the future language teacher should be encouraged to draw on other disciplines and approach them in ways which are relevant to communicative teaching. In language teacher training, the introduction of a wide spectrum of academic disciplines has a positive impact on the future teacher's perspectives. Lithuanian high schools of pre-service teacher education do offer such courses. However, very

often courses on communication, psychology or oratory are offered as parallel or independent disciplines rather than a full annual study program. They give only fragmented insights into common issues and do not offer any interdisciplinary generalizations.

Moreover, the courses are communicated in discipline specific language and lack interdisciplinary approach which could aid understanding of the subject. Therefore, a special attention to how such courses could be efficiently integrated into curriculum of the language teacher's education should be given. With respect to the language teacher, the collaborative nature of such courses would allow to articulate the interplay of the teacher's communicative competence and successful teaching practice. Subsequently, the future language teacher would be able to use gained knowledge in a more functional manner.

As a final note, the Republic of Lithuania and other European countries require teachers, and especially language teachers, to have both professional and communicative competence. If this requirement is not met, it could be assumed that the principles of the communicative language teaching are implemented only superficially or sketchily. Unfortunately, the Lithuanian academic culture is associated with rather superficial practice.

This, according to Samalavičius, could be explained by the fact that Lithuania has experienced the coincidence of the beginning of globalization process and the post-communist transition period. Therefore, Lithuanian academic culture is still suffering from the consequences of long-lived isolation. For this reason, it is difficult to get rid of habits of thought and action which have been intruded during the Soviet Period. The continuity of negative 'tradition' limits the progress of institutions of higher education (Samalavičius 2008: 8). He goes on saying that we have taken over the academic discourse which is commonly used by contemporary Western democracies but we, unfortunately, use it only superficially. The concepts that we have borrowed refer to

phenomena which do not exist or do not function in our society yet. And if these notions do exist, they are at the dawn of their existence. Nevertheless, the usage of these concepts makes an impression that they are real, tangible and unquestionable. In this way, we create illusion of reality and practice deception (Samalavičius 2008: 11). Drawing on the suggestions which were proposed by Samalavičius it could be further assumed that there might be discrepancy between the teacher's advocated theory and its manifestation in practice. This means that the language teacher, who is propagating the communicative language teaching, might be missing a range of communicative skills which underlie effective teaching practice. Therefore, it is necessary that the language teacher improves the communicative competence both in the form of pre-service and in-service professional development programs.

Conclusions

After a careful review of both the Lithuanian and international literature on the communicative approach to language teaching, the following could be concluded:

1. The change in language teaching model has resulted in increased sensitivity to the communicative nature of the language teacher.
2. The success of the implementation of the communicative approach relies not only on the modification of the teaching methodology but also on the increased communicative competence of the language teacher. Thus the language teacher is expected to practise, apply and develop communicative skills continually.
3. However, for most of the international and Lithuanian authors who have been writing on the subject of the communicative approach, the development of the educational and programme competences of the language teacher is a primary concern. Nowadays focus is shifting gradually to the issue of the communicative competence of the language teacher, but still a lack of multiple exhaustive studies is evident.
4. In order to express various communicative intentions in a class, the language teacher should develop her or his unique communication style. It is suggested that the language teacher should manipulate different communicative strategies to gain the student's interest and trust.
5. In the era of communication, social network and dialogue with the other become extremely important. Social networking could be used by the language teacher to consult and share experiences with other specialists from fields of communication studies, social psychology, or oratory.
6. Interdisciplinary courses could possibly broaden the perspective of trainee language teacher. In Lithuania, however, different disciplines, which could possibly add to the teacher's communicative competence, are communicated as parallel disciplines rather than integrated courses in the curriculum of the language teacher's education. Since a new need to expand the communicative competence of the language teacher has recently emerged, an effective integration of such courses into the language teacher's education should be considered.
7. The introduction of the borrowed notion of the communicative approach does not spontaneously predetermine its complete implementation in a class. There are different phases of the adaptation of the new model. Since the communicative language teaching is relatively new in Lithuania, it could be assumed that the Lithuanian language teacher is still 'domesticating' the new approach.
8. A possible repertoire of communicative skills and strategies could be the focus of other research on the communicative competence of the language teacher.

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KALBOS MOKYTOJO KOMUNIKACINĖ KOMPETENCIJA?

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Komunikacinio metodo taikymas, mokant užsienio kalbų, atspindi laikmečio pažangias socialines tendencijas. Atviros ir liberalios XX ir XXI a. idėjos, mesdamos iššūkį tradiciniams kalbų mokymo modeliams, suformavo naują požiūrį į kalbos mokytojo kompetencijas. Šiame straipsnyje daroma prielaida, jog egzistuoja aiški sąveika tarp kalbos mokytojo komunikacinės kompetencijos ir kokybiško komunikacinio kalbos mokymo. Teigiama, jog, norint pateisinti komunikacinio metodo principus, kalbos mokytojui būtina tobulinti savo komunikacinę kompetenciją. Šiame straipsnyje yra keliamas klausimas dėl kalbos mokytojo komunikacijos kompetencijos aktualumo ir siekiama apibrėžti šios temos problematiką šiandieninėje Lietuvos akademinėje terpėje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: komunikacinė kompetencija, komunikacinis metodas, kalbos mokytojas, tarpdisciplininis požiūris, bendravimas, dialogas, profesinis tobulėjimas.

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