

## **Communicative competence and communication in foreign language teaching**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to introduce foreign language teaching approaches in a synchronic and diachronic perspective by analyzing their theoretical assumptions, language practice and effects in foreign language acquisition. Attention will be paid to the role and place of communicative teaching approach in the process of foreign language learning. Basic communicative act elements and their meaning for teaching effective communication and speaking on an elementary level will be mentioned. The question of effective techniques in teaching communicative skills will be described, together with the language opportunities while living in a foreign language country. Additionally, attention will be paid to the necessary conditions that have to be met to be successful in language teaching. Finally, the importance of communication testing techniques will be pondered on.

**Key words:** communicative competence, communication, foreign language teaching, testing, effective teaching

### **Foreign language teaching approaches (synchronic and diachronic perspective)**

The changing needs of society in a given period determine the aim of foreign language learning. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, language learning was oriented towards the knowledge of literature and cultural aspects of a particular country and the development of cognitive abilities. Thanks to such a taxonomy of teaching aims, one of the oldest methods – the grammar-translation method – proved useful in the ware cognitive process, i.e. code acquisition (here: foreign language). It gave the pedagogical grammar a privileged position. As a result, pedagogical grammar teaching and mastering was treated as an end in itself, at the same time justifying the need to use students' mother tongue in class. The knowledge of grammar was considered sufficient for students to produce sentences in a foreign language, which enabled participation in a communicative act as a result of automatic cognitive processes (Komorowska, 1975, p. 16). The need to teach language skills separately through specially prepared exercises was excluded.

The 1980s was a period when a new methodological idea was established due to a language concept stemming from Wilhelm von Humboldt theory (Komorowska, 1975, p. 17). It shifted the importance from the cognitive value of grammar to expressive function of language. The natural approach, also known as the direct, called for the use of living language on the level enabling unrestrained communication. This changed view on foreign language teaching also did not take into consideration the need to teach language skills through specially prepared exercises. The psychological approach, expressed in the direct method, eliminated the pedagogical grammar from the foreign language teaching, together with the need to use the mother tongue of learners during lessons. The attention was also paid to making the process of foreign language acquisition similar to the process of mother tongue learning through global teaching. Thus, teaching was treated as a comprehensive process. It assumed the division of a spoken text into sentences from which learners were able to separate smaller elements after hearing and repeating them for a few times. Such an attitude made foreign language learning an automatic process of sentence formation through direct utterances.

After the World War II the need to learn foreign languages quickly grew. Communication on an international level and the necessity of easy and efficient information flow were more important than ever (Komorowska, 1999, p. 4). It posed a challenge to language methodologists – to create efficient foreign language teaching methods.

Post-war glottodidactics was dominated by the behavioral approach in the 1940s and 1950s (especially popular in the USA). Language was seen as a form of human activity combined with the structuralist language approaches. The integration of the two gave birth to *the audio-lingual method* in didactics. In this way, the functionalist approach to linguistics of the Prague school (Fisiak, 1978, p. 41) turned the attention to the communicative function of language and influenced the primary goal of foreign language teaching, i.e. enabling an active participation in language communication and making language a tool of communication (social aspect of language). The approach was mainly characterised by ascribing importance to speaking skills (while marginalising reading and writing skills). Speaking skills were seen as the development of good language habits through drilling, memorising dialogues or group repetition of grammatical structures (Komorowska, 1999, p. 4). Enthusiasts of this method emphasise its effectiveness in preventing language interference thanks to mechanic language habits, thus reducing language mistakes and bad habits. Because of the fact that the language acquisition process ceased to be seen as intellectual and cognitive, pedagogical grammar and communication in students'

mother tongue was eliminated. Those factors were regarded as the ones hindering progress in foreign language acquisition.

Not satisfactory results of teaching by the audio-lingual method were the reason for the search of a new approach. The 1960s brought new tendencies in linguistics – the transformational-generative grammar. Noam Chomsky, the father of generative grammar, who never spoke about practical aspects of his theories for foreign language teaching methodology, had a major impact on the field and contributed to the rise of the cognitive approach. Although the approach never built a teaching method based on the transformational-generative grammar, it revolutionised the attitude towards language and questioned behavioral and structuralist approaches towards it. The cognitive approach assumed that the basic language characteristics stem from inborn aspects of human brain and from how experience is transformed by language. Assuming that language is not a set of structures that can be automatically learned, but a limited set of structures to generate an infinite number of sentences (Chomsky, 1957), the process of language learning cannot be treated as an imitative process of good habit acquisition. It has to be seen as a creative process of sentence generation, based on the rules. The cognitive thought on language learning concentrates on learners' mental abilities and their ability to use theoretical knowledge (Chomsky's competence) in language practice (Chomsky's performance). The goal of language teaching did not change – it was still about enabling communication. However, the emphasis was put on learners. They were ascribed an active role in language acquisition and allowed to make mistakes without being corrected each single time, and thus encouraged to speak spontaneously. The effective teaching in the light of the cognitive approach assumes conscious attention on grammatical rules and a creative aspect, which give learners the possibility to create an infinite number of sentences that they have never heard before.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a fundamental change in effective foreign language teaching attitudes as a result of the works and activities of Dell Hymes, a sociolinguist (Hymes, 1971, 1972). The change stems from the introduction of the notion of *communicative competence*. The idea relates to what is formally possible (grammatically correct) to be accomplished in a given language as a part of *performance*, what is appropriate in certain contexts or situations and what is actually used by native speakers in a communication community (Hymes, 1972, p. 284-286). The idea of communicative competence of Hymes was later developed by *Michael Canale* and *Merrill Swain* (1980), who in its scope distinguish *grammatical competence* (after Chomsky), *discourse competence* – which makes it possible to interpret and produce coherent utterances,

*sociolinguistic competence connected with the understanding of language social usage (participants' roles, information sharing, interactions) and strategic competence* (Bagarić & Mihaljević Djigunovi, 2007, p. 102) seen as the ability to cope with utterances which were not understood by a listener and with insufficient mastering of the remaining language competences. Bachman (1990) tried to improve the theory by introducing particularisation and changing the structure of the above components. The importance of the strategic competence was emphasised and put together with the language knowledge. The effectiveness of foreign language teaching seen from the perspective of communicative approach can, therefore, be understood as a combination of linguistic and communicative competences together with interpersonal skills of a teacher (Komorowska, 1999, p. 4).

The last foreign language teaching approach is the humanistic approach, developed in the 1970s and 1980s. It was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the theory coined by Rogers (1983) about a teacher facilitating learning in students. Maslow believed that human needs are divided into lower-order (physiological, safety, love and belonging) and higher-order (esteem and self-actualisation). Only by satisfying the lower level needs, the development of talents, skills and interests is possible (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 34-35). The views of Rogers (1983, p. 18) were similar. He called for taking appropriate steps to change the view on teaching and the role of both teachers and learners. He supported the shift from language teaching to language learning treated as a process and a change in the role of a teacher facilitating language acquisition. Three basic character traits of the teacher are supposed to help the teacher reach this goal: realness, acceptance of student individualism and empathic understanding. The humanistic perspective had a direct impact on the following language learning methods: the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, the Community Language Learning and the Total Physical Response. All of these approaches, apart from the Silent Way, are rooted in psychology. They take into consideration various aspects of student character traits and emphasise a comprehensive view on them as an integral component. It determines the choice of teaching methods in consideration of language learning process integrity, through the elimination of fear and through providing safety conditions (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 37).

The current language teaching process is more eclectic in its nature. As a result, it is not possible to name one dominating trend or method. However, the role of a teacher has become more oriented towards students and towards providing them learning strategies, thus making the process more efficient, aware and motivated (Komorowska, 1999, p. 5).

### The essence of a communication process and the success in foreign language teaching on A1 level

The communicative competence defined above is crucial in understanding the scheme of a communication process seen as (Bonar, 1997, p. 20): "(...) zespół zjawisk określonych w układzie: nadawca, odbiorca, kanał, kod, komunikat (przekaz). Jest to proces przebiegający między nadawcą a odbiorcą, polegający na przekazaniu odbiorcy pewnego komunikatu, na podstawnie którego dowiadyuje się on czegoś o stanie nadawcy" (...a set of phenomena determined in a system of: a sender, recipient, channel, code and message. This is a process between a sender and a recipient where the recipient is provided a message based on which they get to know something about the sender; translated by ML).

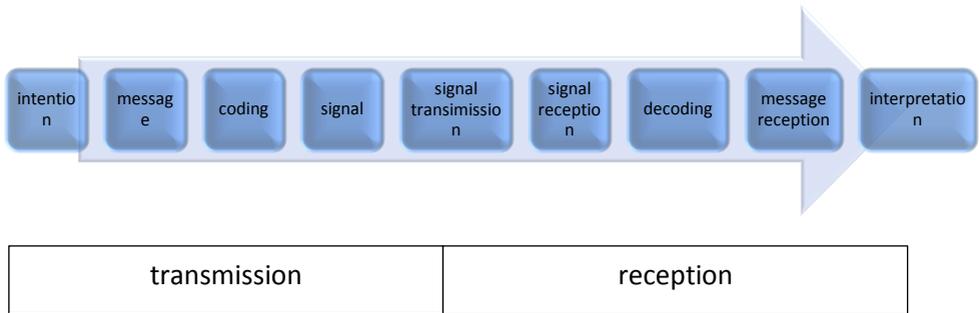


Fig. 1: Communication process (based on Bonar, 1997, p. 20).

What is of fundamental importance in the communication process is the sender's intention, the reason why the communication took place, together with a message interpretation by the receiver – equivalent to an attempt to understand the sender's intentions. That is why in the process of message transmission and reception signal coding and its transmission (i.e. coding a message into words of a language known to both parties) is considered secondary with respect to the sender's intentions. The analogical situation is seen from the perspective of the recipient for whom effective communication is based not only on the sole message decoding. Intentions of a sender can be relatively easily framed through speech act functions which involve: phatic function, informative function, impressive (persuasive) function, performative function, poetic function and expressive function. If the receiver decoded a message wrongly, it can be assumed that the message was disrupted. Disruptions are most often present on the level of intentions or coding. Frequently, the reason for disruptions on the

sender's side are the lack of their own intention awareness or a situation in which more than one intention occurs and it is contradictory or when the sender purposefully hides their intentions and misleads the recipient. We can speak of the communication disruption on the coding level when the message sender chooses an inappropriate set of signals (code) with respect to the receiver's abilities and when they use an ambiguous code.

It has to be mentioned that each time when the notion of *communication* is used, its verbal (spoken and written code) and non-verbal dimension is meant (Lipińska, 2004). Because of the fact that it is verbal communication (especially spoken code) is of more importance for this paper, let us see how its non-verbal aspect is involved in communication.

A non-verbal code is of a similar function to a verbal one. It can express emotions or attitudes of communication act participants and make the verbal code complete or even replace it fully. When thinking of non-verbal code, gestures, mimicry and body movement come to the fore. It is considered necessary to get to know the non-verbal communication of a language community since non-verbal mistakes are the same in their effect as the verbal ones. Additionally, a paralinguistic aspect has to be taken into account, such as the tone of voice, pace of speaking, intonation, pauses and a proxemics factor which includes information of the arrangement of elements in a space surrounding communication act participants, distance between them and such. These elements of non-verbal communication are crucial during language classes, because they are analogous to mother tongue acquisition.

In conclusion, it can be said that the communicative competence makes it possible to adjust individual language behaviour to patterns in a given culture, to combine all elements of situational context and, thanks to suitable language means (code), make the message efficient or to interpret a message according to circumstances.

In the light of the above, what can be considered a success in foreign language teaching (Komorowska, 1978)? The success will be different on different language levels. However, it is for sure connected with mastering a course material and curriculum that will prove useful in communicative situations in which students may participate. Ergo, an indicator of success in foreign language is most of all the level of communicative competence. It is the ability to use a foreign language in a natural way. As a result, the linguistic competence is not necessary, because effective communication is possible even when the sender makes a lot of mistakes that do not hinder communication as such. However, a certain degree of linguistic correctness is needed; otherwise, the message can be blocked.

**A few tips from a practitioner. How to teach effective communication?**

In the process of foreign language teaching on an elementary level (A1) the attention should be paid to the fact that students at first face a message in the form of a text uttered by the sender (analogous to a mother tongue acquisition). That is the reason why they first hear and try to understand the message and then they verbalise in a foreign language what they understood. Reading and writing skills are secondary with regard to listening and speaking, because students should become familiar with written forms only after mastering pronunciation. They should be able to read them first, then write. Introducing all language skills at one time on the elementary level may store too much information concerning phonetic signs and respective graphic signs in students' mind. It may also cause phonetic and graphic interference. This is the reason why at the initial stage of teaching foreign language, it is advisable to teach without using a textbook (Brzeziński, 1987, p. 83-89; Miodunka, 1980, p. 83). Despite the fact that it is easier, both for teachers and students, to work with a textbook, such a no-textbook solution is worth considering. Language teachers are often concerned that if their students do not write down new words, expressions and sentences, they will forget them quickly. Such a situation is possible, but only if a lesson is constructed and carried out not carefully enough. The stage without using a textbook requires preparing suitable visual and audio materials as well as other study aids replacing the textbook. What is more, a number of introductory exercises and revisions are needed. They should make students speak.

Apart from the extensive didactic and other qualifications of a teacher, it is also crucial for teachers to take into account a few conditions which motivate students to learn and speak a foreign language (Komorowska, 2002, p. 149-154). Creating a suitable atmosphere is one of such conditions – the level of public speaking fear is reduced (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 37) and a speaking barrier disappears. In order to reach this goal, the teacher should give their students a freedom of speaking (even when on an elementary level students are only able to build short sentences or monologues) and do not correct their mistakes while they speak. Later, when students finish their speaking, the teacher should most of all see the effort that they put in speaking, see how long they spoke and appreciate their willingness to do it, putting correctness aside. This is the reason why exercises on linguistic correctness and fluency should be separated.

The next condition is elicitation which means providing a stimulus for speaking. On the elementary level it is important to prepare vocabulary materials in a way which will give students an authentic tool to build utterances in real life communicative situations. Of course the material should vary with respect to the country in which students live (living in a foreign language country is itself an

opportunity to be in touch with a living language on a daily basis and is different from learning a foreign in a student's native country). The last essential condition concerns aiding students in building utterances by asking them right questions and thus facilitating the use of new vocabulary and syntactic structures.

At the initial stage of speaking in a foreign language, the attention should be paid to its duality – a stage of controlled speaking and the stage of structure activation. In the first stage, the teacher should become a guide through new vocabulary, should supervise phonetic correctness and intonation. The teacher should communicate with students with questions which contain a partial answer in them. The next step is about teaching students to ask questions. It is a very demanding stage, though feasible. At the initial stage students may face problems with asking questions. It may be a result of an excessive initiative of the teacher. It also signals an important problem – without the ability to ask questions, the communicative act is hindered. The ability to form questions and answer them is a foundation of conversations. It is also an initial phase in building short monologues. In order to form a coherent utterance, students should be able to form questions and answers. For example, speaking about a self-presentation requires answering the following questions: What's my name?, Where do I come from?, Who am I?, Where do I live?, How old am I?, Where do I work/study?, What am I interested in? etc. (Seretny & Lipińska, 2005, p. 173). The teacher on this stage becomes a driving force and an initiator of students' activities. It is crucial to remember about changing forms of work – from teacher-student communication to small group and pair work. Students should change groups and pair partners as much as possible to make communication acts more authentic. Then the predictability of a communication act is lower. This can be observed not only in more advanced groups, but also on an elementary level where motivated and encouraged to speak students try to give their utterances a more individual character.

It is of great importance to make use of speaking techniques in teaching according to their efficiency in stimulating independent utterances. Such stimuli as pictures, words and sound can be of help (Komorowska, 2002, p. 149). It seems also crucial to pay attention to one more classification in teaching speaking – preceding communicative exercises with pre-communicative activities. The role of vocabulary teaching should be emphasised, although in the first models of communicative competence it was discarded. It was treated as a part of linguistic competence including vocabulary, word formation, syntax, pronunciation and writing (Hymes, 1972; Paulston, 1974; Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). Over the years, when notions started to be defined more precisely in the abovementioned models, vocabulary began to be seen as a

distinct part from grammar in a comprehensive linguistic competence view. Hence, lexis becomes especially significant in the light of communicative competence development. Poor vocabulary is a reason for communication problems and it not only hinders, but totally blocks communication (after a speaker used an array of non-verbal signs). On the other hand, poor grammar rarely blocks communication – more often it hinders an information flow. Therefore, the basis of efficient and fluent communication is based on vocabulary (Komorowska, 1988, p. 75). Hence, if mostly lexis conditions communication, teaching and consolidating it should be a priority in the communicative approach.

What about grammatical correctness? It was mentioned before that poor grammar or its inappropriate use in a communication act hinders communication and may irritate an interlocutor. Rarely does it block communication totally. As a result, teaching grammar in the communicative approach became secondary, because from the perspective of effective communication the following sentence is perfectly understandable: “I and you here tomorrow five” (Seretny & Lipińska, 2005, p. 111). The information about a willingness to meet, the place and time of meeting as well as the participants is clear. The condition of suitable lexical filling has been met. Even if on the initial stage of foreign language acquisition such an utterance should be praised by the teacher (for making an effort and for overcoming a linguistic barrier), it seems that foreign language learners will not care only for such an efficiency and fluency. That is why teaching grammar should never be neglected because of its great value in using a foreign language correctly. Then, there is a need to teach grammar structures in communication acts and teach how to combine them in logically – how to use the code (Allen & Widdowson, 1983, p. 96).

Let us concentrate now on techniques how to teach speaking which are most useful on the elementary level (Komorowska, 2002; Seretny & Lipińska, 2005). Speaking is here stimulated by pictures, sounds and words. The strongest of the stimuli is a picture stimulus (such as an illustration, photography, poster, map, slide or video). New vocabulary can be introduced and revised. Students can ask questions and give yes/no answers; they may also describe the picture and draw conclusions on what the picture does not present. The same situation is with a sequence of pictures in a form of a story (maximally 8 pictures). Narration and improvisation can be exercised by imitating what was said by characters in pictures. A more demanding version would require telling the whole story if one or two elements are missing. A similar exercise to activate speaking is a picture technique similar to the dominoes which involves a few loosely connected pictures that students use to tell a story that other students accept. Also, real life

materials are of value, e.g. leaflets (restaurants, cafés, swimming pools, concert halls, fitness clubs and such), entrance or flight tickets, cinema and theatre programs etc. (which are not a speaking material here, but only pictures). Based on these, students can say how they came into possession of the materials and report on a cultural event, journey or meeting that they took part in. The same technique can be used for pair or group work.

When it comes to the techniques based on a speaking stimulus, the ones working best on an initial stage of language acquisition involve asking questions by the teacher and provoking a reaction in students. It is required from students to be fully engaged and concentrated only on a vocabulary and intonation. An especially valuable exercise concerns situational stimulation (feasible only in the country of a foreign language) in the form of outdoor lessons during which students have to start a conversation with strangers in order to find answers to questions they build themselves, based on what the teacher requires (asking for direction, buying a ticket, ordering food etc.). A similar stimulation to picture stimulation (based on real life materials, e.g. leaflets, maps, advertisements, pictures) is using them as a real example of a text from which students have to read certain information, e.g. about a price, opening hours, address, phone number etc. Other methods to activate students' speaking involve constructing monologues according to a set plan or a plan created by the speaker.

The last stimulus used to encourage speaking is sound. It can be used to practice new vocabulary while recognising the sounds of habitual activities or in putting the activities in a chronological order. Additionally, playing real or specially prepared songs to mime and verbalise them (either fully or in parts) is also advisable.

### **The need to test speaking skills and assessment methods**

In the light of the problems described above which concern the communicative competence, its role in the foreign language acquisition, a success in foreign language learning and effective teaching of speaking, the need to test this skill seems essential. The results will show the degree of speech naturalness, its interactive character and, taking into account its low predictability; the degree of fluency. Of course, a paradoxical situation of testing communication only with written tests (e.g. gap filling exercises, dialogue formation, written answers to questions or descriptions of places, people and situations) should be avoided. The progress in speaking should be assessed orally. However, even if preparing exercises to test speaking is not problematic, an objective assessment of students is a difficult task.

Basic ways to test speaking involve the abovementioned techniques of teaching communication (Komorowska, 1984, p. 233-250). And thus, on an elementary level the following techniques are advisable: asking questions and eliciting one sentence answers, picture techniques with verbal stimulus, controlled interviews made up of a few questions which require one sentence answers and describing situations based on a picture with a few main elements with no causal link. Worth considering are also mini-dialogues which imitate real life situations, such as buying a ticket, ordering dinner in a restaurant, booking a table, ordering a taxi, asking for directions etc. In order to elicit a longer utterance, a picture technique can also be used as well as a story technique, a controlled interview or monologue, e.g. "Me and my family" which assume free text and information organisation. Except for the results

While considering a general assessment of speaking, we have to consider testing students in front of an examining board consisting of at least two members, due to the fact of an unavoidable emotional subjectivity of teachers who know their students. If such a solution is not possible, teachers should distance themselves from their students while testing or they ought to make use of technological solutions and record each student, then compare the recordings. Clear criteria should be set and the following skills assessed: communicative competence to understand speaker's intentions, fluency of speaking, the ability to maintain a conversation, grammatical correctness, the choice of vocabulary, idioms, style of speaking, pronunciation and intonation (Seretny & Lipińska, 2005, p. 184).

### **Conclusions**

Situating the communicative approach in a suitable historical reference gave us an opportunity to see its primacy with regard to other approaches in foreign language teaching. In spite of current eclectic approaches, the importance is shifted to communicative competence. A positive attitude towards the language, learner's motivation, teacher's assistance and a good atmosphere in class help to reach this goal. Those factors aid foreign language acquisition during which carefully planned didactic process and effective teaching goals have to be present. What is needed to define the success in language learning and teaching is to specify the scope of skills which students should reach on the elementary level through pre-communicative and communicative exercises and testing. The skills should include intention decoding, fluency in speaking, the ability to maintain short and long conversations, lexical diversity, knowledge of grammatical structures, pronunciation and intonation correctness.

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