

Developing Communicative Competence of the First- and Second-Year Students

Journal of Research in
International Education
2024, Vol. 23(3) 45–51
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14752409234568245
<https://www.jrie.org>



X A Raimova

Teacher of English, Gulistan State University, Republic of Uzbekistan

Abstract

With the spread and development of English around the world and its increased use in Uzbekistan, research about improved methods to develop students' English level has become of great importance. This has promoted changes in both the teaching and learning process. This paper analyzes the necessity and feasibility of developing students' communicative competence of the first- and second-year students and also discusses the advantages and challenges of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). A questionnaire is used to determine students' understanding of the term of communicative competence, as well as to discover their opinions about teaching and learning within the framework of fostering their communicative skills. As it seems an appropriate time to implement communicative teaching approach in Uzbekistan universities, this paper also raises the issue of future reform based on current CLT in Uzbekistan. Moreover, it has been found out through constant research with the first- and second-year students by the researcher that only the learner-centered approach in the target context of teaching makes learners communicatively competent in the English language.

Keywords

English, communicative competence, CLT, drill, practice in context.

Introduction

Successful and efficient communication in English is the main purpose and the aim of any English as a Foreign or Second Language course, be it general English or English for Specific Purposes. Since this is an approach to language learning that aims to address the needs of a particular learner, it is nowadays present and addressed as a desired version of English suited to learners' needs and demands. This implies an assumption that knowledge and competence in general English are relevant and important aspects to be focused on throughout the courses for the first- and second-year students, and this is a prerequisite for a successful acquisition of the further courses by these students.

According to the most accepted theories, one of the earliest concepts of communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972). Hymes believed that the ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. In fact, students should learn how to use foreign language in their daily communication in order to demonstrate their mastery of language. The Hymes' theory of communicative competence has been widely acknowledged and accepted by English educators and scholars (Canale & Swain, 1980; Kunschak, 2004; McKay, 2002). As the concept of "communicative competence" is being further developed, different language skills such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic and pragmatic competences are receiving increased focus (Davies, 2005; Hedge, 2000). Moreover, Kramsch (2006, p.36) states that "language learning, as the acquisition of communicative competence, is now defined as the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning between two interlocutors or between a text and its readers".

Corresponding author:

Xilola Abdurashidovna Raimova, Teacher of English, Gulistan State University, GulSU building, 4th-microregion, Gulistan City 120100, Republic of Uzbekistan. Email: hilolaabdurashidovna@mail.ru

Communicative competence is seen as the ability to use language correctly in different communicative situations. The importance of communicative competence for the first- and second-year students is, therefore, clear if we consider the functional orientation of a language in English courses. It is most related to the learners' need to communicate a specific message and this is impossible without both written and oral language skills playing their respective parts in "interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning" (Savignon, 2018, p.4). Consequently, the development of language proficiency and communicative competence can be perceived as not only a significant component but also ultimately the aim of a well-organized and effective English lesson.

It is believed that one of the main goals of both TEFL and TESL in Uzbekistan nowadays is to develop students' communicative competence, as more students will regard English as a communicating tool after graduation. If students can use the English knowledge, skills and cultural aspects they have learned to communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds in real language contexts, they are then using English as a communication tool.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is defined as the ability to interpret and enact appropriate social behaviors, and it requires active involvement of a learner in the production of the target language (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Hymes, 1972). The origin of the concept known as communicative competence is traditionally linked to Noam Chomsky's seminal book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) where competence (the knowledge of the language) is distinguished from performance (the actual language use). However, advocates of a more communicative approach to language learning preferred Del Hymes's (1972) definition, in which communicative competence was defined as the ability to employ grammatical competence in various communicative situations. Among the scholars who attempted to define and understand communicative competence were Savignon (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990) who stand out as rather successful in this attempt and remain influential to this day. Savignon (1972) places a significant emphasis on language ability – for her communicative competence is "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" as this is often a dynamic process between interlocutors (Savignon, 2018, p.8).

Similarly, according to Canale and Swain (1980) it is the combination of both knowledge and skill that renders learners competent in actual acts of communication. Finally, Bachman (1990) offers the concept of communicative language ability, joining in this way the ideas of language proficiency and communicative competence. He highlights the usage and role of language in reaching specific communicative goals in different contexts.

The role of language skills in obtaining and developing communicative competence should be carefully considered and explained. Classroom practices that have been developed within the frame of communicative language teaching (CLT) are considerably influenced by the need for assessment or language testing, implying that "one cannot teach that which cannot be described and measured by a common yardstick" (Savignon, 2018, p.5). These strategies of testing are continuously revised and improved to be in accordance with modern views of communicative competence in classroom practices. Accordingly, in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) communicative language competence is understood exclusively in terms of knowledge – knowledge and ability to construct proper language messages. This framework is also one of the models upon which communicative competence was measured within the project "English language in Croatia" (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007), where it was agreed that communicative competence would be measured in the activities of listening, reading, speaking and writing "either as isolated or integrated competences" (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007: 101).

Finally, according to Powers (2010), communicative competence is a complex construct which involves the collaboration of speaking, writing, reading and listening skills in different combinations and settings and in different situations, one of the most prominent being the modern workplace and its ever-growing demands.

The integration of four language skills in English classroom is indispensable in achieving communicative competence, especially in terms of topical demands in a globalized world. Although each of the language skills is a separate construct, the final aim of efficient communication cannot be achieved without an interplay of their principles (Powers, 2010). Consequently, a discussion is needed in which the main traits and importance of these skills are provided.

The Learner-Centered Teaching Strategies

Learner-centered teaching strategies and activities are those that focus instruction on the needs, preferences and interests of the learner. According to the most specialists in the sphere of age pedagogy (Sharma, 2017), interests and personal motivation are crucial for the first- and second-year students. Teachers on the high level usually act as facilitators of the learning process, providing direction and feedback rather than just instruction. They are interacting with materials, directing processes, making connections, identifying patterns and organizing materials. All of the learning is linked to existing knowledge. The learner is not passive, they are not receiving pre-digested or organized materials. Learners are encouraged to make guesses and learn from their errors. By going beyond what they have been taught, they are encouraged to employ a variety of communication strategies. Teaching communicative skills of language is comparable to teaching a child how to walk. At first the mother holds the child firmly by the hand, then progressively relaxes her grip until she feels that the child is ready for its first independent step. The relaxation of control is gradual, but inevitable. The same thing should happen in language learning: the teacher should lead the student along – prompting directing, guiding and encouraging him. Progressively, the tasks for the student should become more and more challenging, the help less and less direct, until it is withdrawn altogether. Students are given multiple opportunities to discover knowledge and practice skills in an environment that appeals to them. In learner-centered teaching, students are no longer passive receivers of knowledge, instead they are active participants in learning and “co-constructors of knowledge” (Columbus, 2013, p.7). Thus, to develop communicative competence of the first- and second-year students effectively, they should take an active part in both learning and teaching processes.

The Urgency and Feasibility of Developing First- and Second-Year Students' Communicative Competence

After the official implementation of PRESETT Curriculum in 2007 into EFL and ESL systems in Uzbekistan, listening, reading, writing and speaking skills have become key criteria by which to measure the success of learning the language. Consequently, the ultimate purpose of EFL/ESL in the context of the first- and second-year students in Uzbekistan today is not just to have students pass exams by blindly using the “cramming” teaching method in large classrooms.

Students whose major is English are a majority at Uzbekistan's universities among FL learners. Some students learn English to use it in their future careers such as business, law, and journalism. English is also used as a tool to communicate or negotiate with different people after their graduation. Thus, the number of the first- and second-year students learning English is quite a large.

In other words, the popularity of English worldwide provides a clear reason to reform ELT in Uzbekistan, get rid of exam-oriented education, and to focus on developing students' language (listening, reading, writing and speaking) skills so they learn to communicate effectively with others.

Improving English teachers' abilities and qualifications necessarily means improving students' communicative skills. Teachers should participate in designing syllabi and be aware of the objectives. Many students who have earned MA and PhD degrees related to the English language or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) become valuable resources for developing first- and second-year students' communicative competence. According to Holliday (2006, p.385), many such teachers are overseas returnees and are both enthusiastic and better understand the English language and culture. Therefore, the prospective and reformative consciousness of such teachers gives EFL/ESL environment new opportunities and passions.

University facilities and resources are also gradually improving comparing with the past decade. Multimedia teaching provides a platform for developing speaking skills by stimulating students' interest and participation in class (Yang & Fang, 2008). Moreover, EFL/ESL in Uzbekistan today is more student-centered. Instructors can mostly act as catalysts in the process of communicative language teaching (CLT). As Kramsch (2006, p.38) have pointed out, “[teachers] set up the conditions under which learners learn to learn. The teacher is to be a guide on the side, rather than sage on the stage”.

Different attitudes of teachers and students toward English teaching and learning should also be mentioned. In fact, many first- and second-year students still do not have specific (except – professional, or academic) motivation for learning English, or they learn English simply to pass exams. Therefore, it is not an easy task to implement a project to develop university first- and second-year students' communicative competence.

The Advantages of Developing Communicative Competence on the Initial Stage of Higher Education

Since the communicative approach is considered to be the most effective path to learning foreign languages, the development of communicative competence becomes urgent issue from the first professional stage of EFL/ESL that is for the first- and second-year students of higher education institutions. While developing their speaking abilities and increasing their vocabulary level, students simultaneously develop their listening skill and also gain confidence during the process of communication. It is apparent that an English context is automatically created during various activities when implementing CLT while English is used as the medium for students to communicate with each other. In addition, the English context can help students cultivate their sense of the language, and create an atmosphere where students can improve their English ability (Brain, 2015). CLT provides students an opportunity to speak and share ideas in a relatively relaxing way. Therefore, students become the protagonists in the classroom, and their initiative and motivation are both enhanced. A problem that the lack of an English context may block students' English study can be solved by implementing this teaching method, because CLT not only focuses on developing students' listening and speaking skills of English, but reading and writing skills too. Developing communicative competence on the initial stage of higher education requires introduction of new teaching methods, creating a diversified teaching process. Teachers can use various resources to help students develop their communicative skills, which is another manifestation of the diversity of the teaching method. For example, English teachers can use pictures to promote group discussions, thereby helping students understand the informational and cultural background of various topics. Games can also be used to help students learn vocabulary and practice their writing skills. More specifically, teachers can help students create an English context when teaching grammar and the culture of the English-language countries. They can ask students questions such as "If you had been born in the United States, how would your life be different now?" "What experiences would you have had?" "What things would not have happened to you that actually have?" During group discussions, students not only practice their spoken English, but also learn about different cultures. Grammar can also be practiced during this process.

However, the challenges of this process cannot be ignored and the traditional ELT model in Uzbekistan may not be easily changed. This is why we must also discuss some problems concerning this aspect.

First, a traditional limitation to developing students' communicative competence is the inadequate interaction between teachers and students. Teachers simply spend much time lecturing while students take notes and seldom participate in class. The relatively tedious test-based teaching method makes students reluctant to freely participate in classroom discussions. Therefore, the communicative teaching approach is still on a journey from theory to practice in many universities. Currently, teachers and students do not fully realize the benefits of enhancing the latter's communicative competence in the process of ELT.

Second, another obstacle to implementing CLT to the first- and second-year students is the problems with evaluating system. 5-Band scale and 100-Points assessment are still varying from time to time, but both of these assessment scales do not fit international standards set by CEFR or implemented during IELTS, CAE or TOEFL examinations. It is highly important to set universal evaluation standards to test students who are English majors.

Currently, the evaluation reforms pay more attention to developing students' integrated ability. Although, certificates are no longer related to a student's degree, the overwhelming effect of the evaluation test is to put pressure on students to learn English, making the system of connecting certificates to improve job opportunities hard to change. Students who take the oral English proficiency tests are mostly higher-intermediate students, who comprise a small portion of the university population.

Although some universities pay more attention to developing students' communicative competence, the traditional assessing system is still ingrained, and the dichotomy between "accuracy" and "fluency" is still worth considering if this teaching method will be more widely implemented in Uzbekistan. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers and students create a good balance between English teaching and learning, thus allowing the first- and second-year students' communicative competence to gradually improve.

Quite a number of students still maintain high aspirations for learning English at university; improving speaking skills is one of the most important things for students. As Hedge (2000, p. 71) notes, "communicative language teaching sets out to involve learners in purposeful tasks which are embedded in meaningful contexts and which reflect and rehearse language as it is used authentically in the world outside the classroom". Therefore, CLT is useful for creating a learning environment and should be implemented in more universities. Also, curriculum design and class size should be adapted to better fit this teaching method. Developing first- and second-year students' communicative competence should help them more easily practice their English. Their pragmatic competence can also be developed through cultivating their English ability using this teaching method, allowing students to learn English in a more practical way. Scovel (2006, p.10) points out that "communicative competence does not neglect grammatical competence; it simply builds upon it by emphasizing that other skills need to be acquired if one is to become a fluent and accurate speaker of another language".

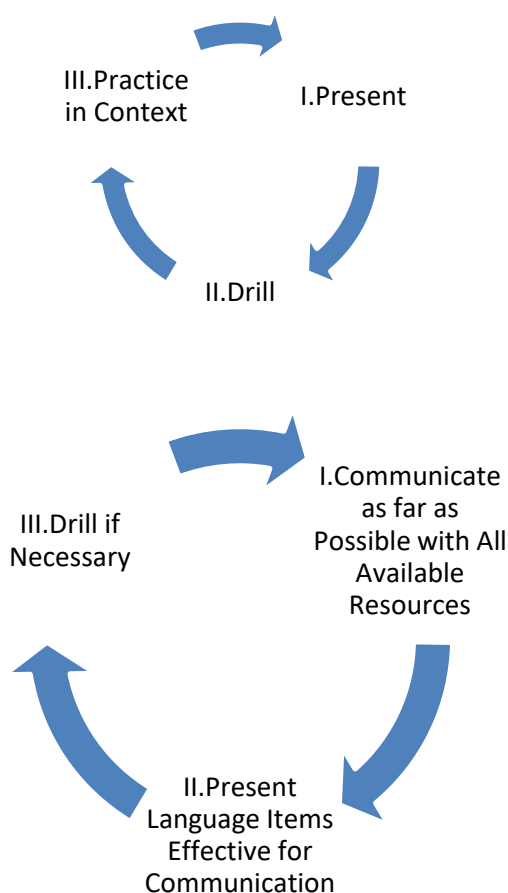


Figure 1. Traditional and Post-Communicative Model

Thus, the use of language needs of the learners is to be carried out in a context which is appealing, motivating and encouraging the learners. Teaching should aim at enhancing the student's natural desire and strategies to learn, most of which is developing on the initial stage of higher education level, that is during the first- or second-year courses. Knowledge needs to be distinguished from information, and teaching needs to be seen as a professional activity, not as coaching for memorization or as transmission of facts (Brooks, 2004, p.148).

Moreover, the students must be put in an atmosphere where they would like to listen to whatever is said, is likely to understand it and feel like responding to it.

Such an atmosphere is not likely to be found in a typical classroom where students are seldom encouraged to speak and the mundane atmosphere of the class dampens the students' spirit to explore, experiment and learn. "The innate enthusiasm of the teacher is indeed infectious. Most of the learners just catch it. But with the few who do not get influenced by this natural desire and love to learn the language which is not their mother tongue then the teacher has to go that extra mile" (Dornyei, 2001, p.7). It is the duty of the teacher to make the learners take part in the learner-centered activities with enthusiasm.

ELT in Uzbekistan needs to be discussed by both teachers and students so they might gain a proper understanding of the objective and how it can be further developed and reformed to improve the way communicative competence is developed in the first- and second-year students of higher education institutions. In fact, according to Bygate (2001, 17-28), teaching English is not simply providing "the opportunity for learners to use language in order to communicate meaning without focusing on accuracy" and "a distinct methodology and syllabus may be needed".

Conclusion

The development of communicative competence on the initial stage of foreign language learning will produce a large number of fluent English speakers, especially in EFL countries such as Uzbekistan. We should also understand that it is necessary to have reasonable objectives and requirements, and to improve current teaching methods to develop first- and second-year students' oral English proficiency.

The results of the study can be formed as a list of proved statements:

- Communication skills in English of the first- and second-year students can be developed only when the learning environment is conducive.
- Learner-friendly environment can create a congenial atmosphere for the first- and second-year students to learn the foreign language unconsciously.
- Learner-centered activities through the specifically designed materials and tasks can make the first- and second-year students competent in English language.
- Learner-centered activities can pave way for the first- and second-year students' autonomy and, subsequently, can lead to self-learning to gain communicative competence in English.

Developing students' communicative competence is mandatory for ELT in universities, and for this reason it should be a priority when teaching and learning English. English teachers in universities should be armed with sufficient knowledge to guide students from the initial stage in the long-term process of learning English. Therefore, it is promising to implement integrated skills into English teaching when promoting the communicative teaching approach. Teachers and students should look at communicative approach as a task within the bigger framework of ELT. As a result, it will be appropriate to implement the communicative language teaching approach to help first- and second-year students in Uzbekistan improve their English skills.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Bachman, L. F. 1990. *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bagarić, V., Mihaljević-Djigunović, J. 2007. Defining communicative competence. *Metodika*, 8(14), 84-93.
- Brain, G. 2015. *Teaching English to the World: History, Curriculum and Practice*. Second edition. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brooks, N. 2004. *Language and Language Learning: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt.
- Bygate, M. 2001. Speaking. In C. Ronald & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 14-20.
- Canale, M. & Swain, M. 1980. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics* 1, 1-47.

- Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z., Thurrell, S. 1995. Communicative competence: A pedagogically motivated model with content specifications. *Issues in Applied linguistics* 6(2), 5-35.
- Columbus, K. 2013. *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. National Middle School Association.
- Davies, A. 2005. *A Glossary of Applied Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. 2001. *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hedge, T. 2000. *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holliday, A. 2006. Native Speakerism. *ELT Journal* 60 (4), 385-387.
- Hymes, D. 1972. On Communicative Competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 269-293.
- Kramsch, C. 2006. The Uses of Communicative Competence in a Global World. *Review of Applied Linguistics in Asia* 2, 30-50.
- Kunschak, C. 2004. *Language Variation in Foreign Language Teaching: On the Road to Communicative Competence*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang Publishing.
- McKay, S. L. 2002. *Teaching English as an International Language: Rethinking Goals and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Powers, D. E. 2010. The case for a comprehensive, four-skills assessment of English-language proficiency // *R & D Connections* 14, 1-12.
- Savignon, S. J. 2018. Communicative competence. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, 1-7.
- Scovel, T. 2006. Learning Communicative Competence: Insights from Psycholinguistics and SLA. *Review of Applied Linguistics in Asia* 2, 7-29.
- Sharma, R. A. 2017. *Essentials of Measurement in Education and Psychology*. Second edition. Meerut: Lall Book Depot.
- Yang W. Y., & Fang F. 2008. Optimization of Multimedia English Teaching in Context Creation. *International Education Studies* 1 (4), 136-142.

Author biography

Xilola Abdurashidovna Raimova, Teacher of English, Gulistan State University, Republic of Uzbekistan.