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DEVELOPING A SCALE FOR ASSESSING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Ivana Nešić, Kimeta Hamidović

Toplica Academy of Applied Studies, Department of Business Studies, Blace, Serbia
Faculty of Philology, University of Novi Pazar, Dimitrija Tucovića bb, Serbia

Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to use models of communicative competence for designing a scale for assessing communicative competence. The first part of the paper defines communication, as well as communicative competence. Furthermore, models of communicative competence are presented, as well as the similarities and differences between them. Based on the presented models of communicative competence, the authors propose a scale for assessing students' communicative competence. This scale encompasses all the components of communicative competence that are relevant for assessing communicative competence. Also, an example of an activity through which students can be tested is presented. Based on the research conducted earlier using this scale, the paper argues that this scale could be a very good tool for testing communicative competence of students who are learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP).*

Key words: *communicative competence, assessment, English for Specific Purposes*

1. INTRODUCTION

The word *communication* originates from the Latin language, the verb *communicare* meaning to make common, to announce, notify. People communicate in almost all situations – they exchange messages, feelings, and opinions. Mutual communication is required for achieving general understanding of a specific thing or phenomenon. Communication is always present in all human activities, and it is a part of the entire human behaviour (Rot, 2004: 22).

Communication is used for exchanging information, and the aim of this exchange is to realize mutual understanding. However, communication as a general term differs from communication in a foreign language. Communication in a foreign language implies that participants who want to engage in communication in a certain situation are not native speakers of the language being communicated in or when different dialects or language varieties are used, or when they use different registers or styles. In such cases, misunderstandings can easily occur, having in mind the fact that participants often do not

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Corresponding author: Ivana Nešić, Toplica Academy of Applied Studies, Department of Business Studies, Blace, Serbia

E-mail: ivanadjokic@vpskp.edu.rs

understand words in the foreign language or the context in which information needs to be exchanged (Nešić, 2018: 15). In order to communicate, participants must possess not only linguistic competence, but communicative competence as well. In other words, the difference between communicative competence and real communication can be expressed in the following way: communicative competence presents an important part of real communication and it refers to the knowledge (what an individual knows about language and other aspects of communicative language use) and the skills in using this knowledge when interacting in real communication (Canale, 1983: 5).

Although “language knowledge” and “language use” are similar phenomena, they should be understood differently as knowing, i.e. understanding a language, does not imply the ability of using that language in certain situations and contexts (Nešić, 2018: 16). Linguistic competence is the language knowledge which every language user possesses (Chomsky, 2006: 55). It is the knowledge of language as an abstract system comprised of rules that together determine the form and the meaning of an unlimited number of sentences. Opposed to linguistic competence, linguistic performance refers to the language use (Chomsky, 2006: 102). However, Chomsky’s term “linguistic competence” cannot fully explain the communicative aspect of language knowledge because it refers exclusively to the formal knowledge of a language and it does not include the social aspects of language (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1978). This is the reason why Hymes (1972: 269-270) reacted to a linguistic theory dealing with an ideal speaker-listener in an entirely homogenous speaking community. As a result of disagreement and reacting to this linguistic theory that only considered linguistic competence and linguistic performance, without paying any attention to the socio-cultural aspect of language, as well as the language use, he introduced and defined the term “communicative competence”¹. The pedagogical implications of the term were very significant in 1970s as applied linguists started to realize that linguistic competence was not sufficient for successful communication in a foreign language. Today, teachers are well aware of the fact that language study includes not only the language itself, as language is a socio-cultural phenomenon (Chmelikova and Hurajova, 2019: 443). In addition to having knowledge of the grammatical structures and formal language characteristics (linguistic competence), a speaker wishing to communicate needs to know in which ways foreign language speakers use the language to communicate. Therefore, formal knowledge of a language only presents one aspect of communicative competence. In other words, communicative competence does not only imply the knowledge of the rules necessary in order to make grammatically accurate sentences, but also a set of schemes, formulas, rules and the ability to use them in order to shape what we want to say to the context standards (Widdowson, 1989: 135).

The term “communicative competence” gave rise to the design of various models of communicative competence, which will be briefly described below.

¹Campbel and Wales (1970: 247) were among the first to point out that Chomsky’s division to competence and performance does not consider the socio-cultural aspect of language. These authors also emphasize the significance of “appropriateness” in a certain context, aside from “grammaticality”.

2. MODELS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

One of the first significant models of communicative competence was designed by Sandra Savignon, as it relates to foreign language acquisition and communicative competence. The starting point for Sandra Savignon was to consider the whole communicative situation, that is with whom communication is performed, the relationship of the speakers, the context, the intent (1976: 9). She described communicative competence as a set of four equally important components, which are interconnected: 1) grammatical competence (relating to grammatical forms, in terms of using them for interpreting or expressing a certain meaning, 2) discourse competence (the connection of the spoken or written words, expressions that make up a text or a whole, 3) sociocultural competence (social rules of language use and understanding the context in which language is used, the roles of the participants, the information they exchange, and the function of that interaction), and 4) strategic competence (strategies we use in unfamiliar contexts in order to overcome them).

Canale and Swain (1980: 19-20) introduced their model of communicative competence as a response to integrative theories of communicative competence (e.g. Savignon, 1972; Halliday, 1973; Van Ek and Trim, 1990) which they believed did not sufficiently address the matter of how individual sentences or statements can be connected on the level of discourse. In addition, they thought that these theories did not integrate different components of communicative competence and, therefore, they did not consider them to be integrative at all. Although communication is the main practical issue that should be addressed when learning a foreign language, it should not be more important than other language roles such as, for instance, expressing or creative writing. Also, these authors asserted that the assumption that grammatical form would follow after achieving the communicative goal is not correct because it is impossible to isolate individual purposes of language or methods in which these purposes function mutually. Also, communication should not be viewed as the only language purpose. In addition, Canale and Swain (1980) consider that Widdowson's view (1978) that speakers consider aspects of language use in normal communication and not of grammatical use as incorrect because such understanding can only be applied when considering communication between native language speakers, and when foreign language speakers communicate, attention must be paid to grammar use because they will not be able to pay attention to language use until they master some basic grammatical forms. Their model of communicative competence consists of three components (Canale and Swain, 1980: 29-31): 1) grammatical competence (vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology rules), 2) sociolinguistic competence (sociocultural rules of use and discourse rules), 3) strategic competence (verbal and nonverbal communicative strategies speakers use when interruptions occur in communication), and the fourth component was later incorporated into the model by Canale (1983): 4) discourse competence (ability to combine language structures in different types of texts).

Lyle Bachman's model of communicative language ability (1990) represents an extended model of his predecessors Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980, 1983), Savignon (1976). Bachman (1990: 84) introduced the term "communicative language ability" which consists of the knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in an appropriate context, that is, in communicative language use. His proposed model consists of three components: 1) linguistic competence (set of knowledge components used in communication), 2) strategic competence (ability to use linguistic ability when using language in a context), and 3) psychophysiological

mechanisms (neurological and psychological processes involved in expressing language as physical phenomena).

Cecli-Murcia, Deryei and Thurrell created a model of communicative competence as a basis for creating a syllabus in teaching a foreign language. The model resulted from the need for a direct approach in teaching communicative skills and it contains the description of what communicative competence implies, as well as how its components are used for creating a syllabus (1995: 6). In comparison to the model proposed by Canale and Swain, these authors added an additional component – action competence – the understanding of the communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and sets of speech acts (Ibid.: 9). Discourse is located where the lexicon, grammar, action organizational skills, communicative intent and sociocultural context are integrated to form the discourse, shaping each of the other components. Strategic competence in their model is the inventory of skills enabling the speaker to convey, interpret messages and solve problems.

The communicative competence model from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001: 108-130), has three basic components: 1) linguistic competence (lexical, grammatical, semantic and phonologic competence), 2) sociolinguistic competence (required knowledge and skills for language use related to the social dimension), and 3) pragmatic competence (rules according to which messages are organized, structured and distributed (discourse competence), used for performing communicative functions (functional competence) and based on interaction and transaction schemes.

2.1. Similarities and differences

Figure 1 represents an adapted version of the similarities and differences between models of communicative competence presented by Bagarić and Mihaljević-Đigonović (2007). These

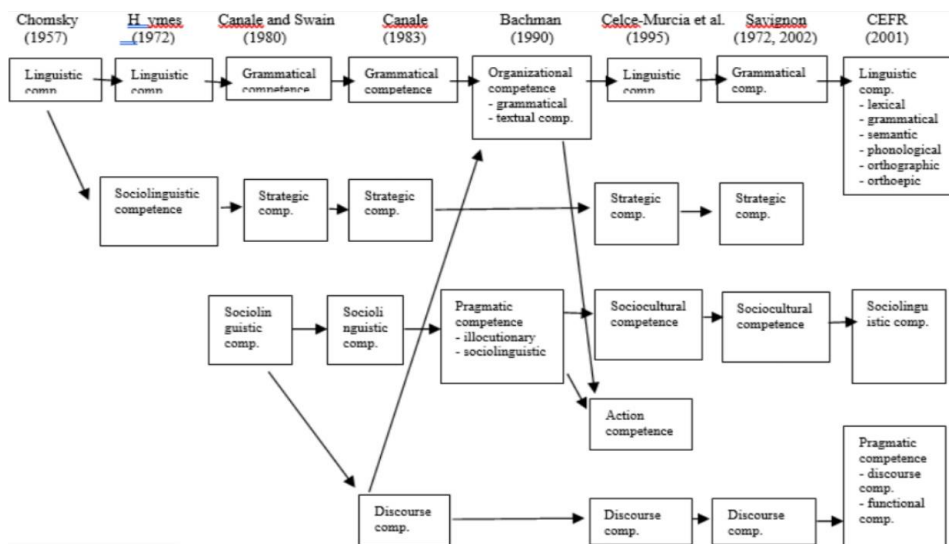


Fig. 1 Chronological overview of different models of communicative competence

Source: Bagarić and Mihaljević Đigonović (2007), Nešić (2018)

authors describe the similarities between the following models of communicative competence: Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Bachman and Palmer (1996) and CEFR (2001), and this paper proposes the addition of other models described in the previous section (Chomsky, 1957; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1972, 2002; Celci-Murcia, 1995, 2007 and CEFR in Council of Europe, 2001) because they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation of communicative competence. In addition, based on this presentation, the scale for assessing communicative competence of students learning Business English was designed (Nešić, 2018).

Since there is a parallel between the descriptions of components of communicative competence in all previously mentioned models, the designed scale for assessing communicative competence is used for examining the following competences:

- 1) linguistic competence – as it was described by Bachman (1990), within which the lexical, grammatical, semantic and phonological competence are examined,
- 2) sociolinguistic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001),
- 3) discourse competence (Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celci-Murcia, 1995),
- 4) functional competence/illocutionary competence (Bachman, 1990).
- 5) strategic competence (Savignon, 2002; Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celci-Murcia, 1995).

3. MODELS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Having described the different models of communicative competence and having chosen the components that can be examined, the question of assessing communicative competence of students needs to be addressed. As a consequence of viewing language as a means for conveying meaning, an inconsistency occurs, i.e., a universal scale for assessing individual linguistic competences of students does not exist. Communicative competence of students depends on the context and the purpose, as well as their roles and attitudes in those contexts (Savignon, 2002: 5).

Thus, the starting point should be to assess students in situations that depict situations from everyday life. In order for participants to be assessed in this way, they have to be involved in activities that depict such situations, such as presentations, role play, interviews, pair/group work, etc. Such activities often need to be adapted to a certain context or communicative situations that students may encounter in the future. This also means that communicative tests should be adapted to situations that are related to language for specific purposes, and for the purpose of this paper, to situations in a business context. In addition, applying role play activities, as well as the others listed above, into the classroom adds variety and opportunities for lot of language production and also lot of fun. In addition, learning takes place when activities are engaging and memorable (Shinde and Shinde, 2022: 5).

Speaking of assessment, we have in mind the measurement of knowledge, so the question arising is what are the criteria for assessing communicative competence of students? An ideal method does not exist. Namely, communicative competence of students needs to be assessed indirectly, through their responses or through practical activities performed in class, and since the teacher is the basic instrument for this measurement, the subjectivity in assessing students cannot be completely overcome (Konečni, 1990: 89). Duran (1984) emphasizes the significance that research of

communicative competence had for the development of integrative testing because it starts from the assumption that language skills can best be assessed in contexts where language is used naturally. Schmidhofer et al. (2012) presented the possibility of testing the four components of communicative competence (structural, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence) in the form of specific recommendations to teachers about the teaching methods, materials that should be used. Šafranĳ (2009) measures communicative competence through a scale for self-perception of students' communicative competence.

The scaling technique refers to the use of previously prepared scales for assessment. The scaling techniques present a survey form used for series of data that need to be arranged in a continuous series. This technique is used for converting a series of qualitative facts into a quantitative series expressed as a variable (Mihailović, 1999: 194). The scales used in the scaling technique are very similar to questionnaires in ordinary surveys. Their design is much more difficult and it requires a higher degree of methodological expertise. The questions appearing there contain a larger number of responses, between two and five, which are mutually equally distributed, making a certain scale (Ibid.: 195). The aim of assessing performance is to measure what students can do (e.g. speech and writing) and it is mostly in the form of direct assessment where respondents are assessed by performing a certain activity that requires them to use certain skills or competences (Phakiti, 2014: 120). Phakiti describes this type of assessment as being an authentic assessment as well, because students use the target language for communicative purposes.

This paper proposes a specially designed scale for assessing students' communicative competence. The scale was designed and prepared in the research conducted by Nešić (2018), based on the described models of communicative language competence and it consists of six subscales. The subscales are used for measuring: 1) general communicative competence (GCC), 2) linguistic competence (LC), consisting of subscales for measuring the lexical (LC), grammatical (GC), semantic (SC), and phonological competence (PhonC), 3) socio-linguistic competence (SLC), 4) discourse competence (DC), 5) functional competence (FunC), and 6) strategic competence (StrC). Communicative competence is measured by two independent evaluators assessing each of the 30 characteristics of communication with the marks from 1 (incompetent) to 5 (fully competent). The marks are then summarized in subscales and the total score on the scale.

Each component of the scale can be broken down, so that linguistic competence is broken down into lexical competence (three characteristics), grammatical competence (three characteristics), semantic competence (two characteristics), and phonological competence (two characteristics). Sociolinguistic competence is assessed based on three characteristics, and discourse, functional and strategic competence based on four characteristics. All characteristics should be assessed separately. In brief, 30 characteristics of communicative competence are to be measured (5 general characteristics, each of which presents one component of communicative competence and 25 characteristics referring to different components of communicative competence).

The proposed scale for assessing communicative competence is as follows:

Table 1. Scale for Assessing Communicative Competence

General evaluation of components of communicative competence					
1. In communication, the student correctly uses vocabulary and grammatical rules when speaking.	1	2	3	4	5 ²
2. The student uses the language correctly in a specific context, taking into account the situation, participants, shared information, register, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Cohesion and coherence, the connection of spoken words, are present in communication.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Functional use of language is present, resulting in fluency and accuracy in expression.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The student uses verbal and non-verbal strategies when there is a change of topic or a break in communication.	1	2	3	4	5
Linguistic competence					
Lexical competence	1 (lowest mark) – 5 (highest mark)				
1. knowledge and ability to use common expressions (sentence formulas, idioms, common phrases, phrasal verbs, collocations)	1	2	3	4	5
2. knowledge and ability to use lexical sets of open class words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) and lexical sets of closed class words (e.g. days of the week).	1	2	3	4	5
3. knowledge and ability to use articles, prepositions, personal pronouns, relative pronouns, interrogative words, conjunctions, and other grammatical elements belonging to closed class words	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical competence					
1. ability to correctly combine elements into meaningful sentences	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to understand and express the meaning of formed sentences	1	2	3	4	5
3. ability to organize words in sentences based on syntactic rules	1	2	3	4	5
Semantic competence					
1. ability to recognize the relationship of words with the context, interlexical relations	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to recognize logical relations (e.g. implicature, presupposition)	1	2	3	4	5
Phonological competence					
1. ability to recognize and use phonemes and their distinctive features (e.g. nasality, pronunciation of “th”, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to use accent, rhythm and intonation	1	2	3	4	5
Sociolinguistic competence					
1. ability to use language in a certain context	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to understand the context in terms of the participants’ roles and the information they exchange	1	2	3	4	5
3. ability to correctly use grammatical forms for specific styles or registers (e.g. informal and formal register)	1	2	3	4	5

² The marks from 1 to 5 represent the lowest mark (1) to the highest mark *(5)

Discourse competence					
1. ability to combine language structures in order to achieve interrelatedness	1	2	3	4	5
2. existence of coherence (connection of spoken words, expressions in the text) and cohesion (e.g. correct use of conjunctions; correct arrangement of information)	1	2	3	4	5
3. ability to use the language for conversation (starting, maintaining and ending conversations)	1	2	3	4	5
4. ability to be flexible in terms of adapting what is said to the way in which it is said to a situation and the speakers	1	2	3	4	5
Functional competence					
1. ability to functionally use simple utterances in interaction (micro-functions), e.g. giving and asking for information, expressing opinions, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to functionally use spoken discourse or written text consisting of a series of sentences for describing, explaining, arguing, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
3. ability to cope and express oneself in a dead-end situation (fluency/fluent expression)	1	2	3	4	5
4. ability to formulate thoughts and utterances so that the meaning is clear (precision of expression)	1	2	3	4	5
Strategic competence					
1. ability to initiate communication	1	2	3	4	5
2. ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies when there is a stop in communication	1	2	3	4	5
3. ability to react quickly when the topic of the conversation changes	1	2	3	4	5
4. ability to convey the main ideas to speakers	1	2	3	4	5

3.1. Example of an activity

The presented scale for assessing students' communicative competence requires students' participation in an activity based on which the assessment can be performed. The idea is to perform the assessment based on providing the evaluators (two independent evaluators) with the recorded audio material. Also, the evaluators need to carefully study the scale before starting the assessment in order to make sure that they clearly understand what each component implies. The evaluators need to be provided with clear instructions if there are any concerns as to how to differentiate among the components.

Once the evaluators have a clear understanding as to what and how they are supposed to evaluate the students, they should be provided with recorded audio material. This material contains an activity in which a student presents his/her knowledge. Some examples of activities which students can perform are as follows:

- Presentation of a company³

Task for the students: Choose a local or foreign company that you would like to present. Some information that the presentation should contain is: the name and the registered seat of the company, the product/s of the company, activities of the company, information on employees and the business operations of a company, etc. You may add any additional information they consider to be relevant.

- Business negotiation

Task for the students: Choose a partner for this task and discuss the possible solutions and/or compromises. The situation before you is that a producer of dairy products (one student) sells most of its products to a chain of supermarkets (another student) that is late in payments. The supermarket claims that the quality of the supplier's product has become worse.

- Role play - Conversation

Task for the students: The situation is that an employee (one student) is late for work all the time and the employer (another student) is inviting the employee to his office to have a conversation. Present the issue and create the conversation between the employee and the employer trying your best to resolve the problem.

3.2. Limitations and implications for future research

The listed activities are only a few examples that can be used by teachers in order to assess their students' communicative competence. The scale for assessing communicative competence was designed to assess several components of communicative competence based on one activity. However, such activities are not comprehensive enough to be able to cover all the components of communicative competence equally. One of the ways in which to make the assessment better in future research is for respondents to be assessed on several occasions, so that each activity is designed in such a way to be able to assess some component of communicative competence. If we choose only one activity to assess the students, we will have to rely on already formed opinions about the knowledge of the students we are assessing and the knowledge about their competences. If done so, the assessment would have to rely not only on one audio recording, but rather on the entire knowledge that the respondents expressed during their studies.

Therefore, the main limitation of the proposed scale and activity on which it is supposed to be used is the inability to assess all components of communicative competence based on only one type of an activity. Certain activities allow better insight into certain components of communicative competence. Also, our opinion is that the development of communicative competence of students could be tracked and assessed in more detail if the progress of the group of students being assessed is monitored for the whole duration of the course. During a longer period, the possibility of using various teaching activities and testing different components of communicative competence is greater. This would allow the analysis of the initial level of communicative competences of students and their achievements.

³ The authors chose the presentation of a company because it is intended for Business English learners. This does not imply that the scale cannot be used for assessing learners of general English. However, the topic of the activity (presentation) needs to be adapted to the purposes of the course.

The authors argue that such a scale can be used on a greater sample, for instance higher education institutions on the territory of Serbia where Business English is learned, because a large sample would produce reliable results that could be generalized and based on which practical and pedagogical solutions would be more visible. Results encompassing a larger number of students could provide more general conclusions about creating the curriculum. The results could be more generalized if the research would be extended to higher education institutions in which English is used for different specific purposes. Also, it can be used for various education levels. This scale and research that it can be used for need not to be applied only to students, but it can also be extended to professional environments, to people who are already employed and learning English for specific purposes. However, the control of such research would be more difficult.

In addition to the above-mentioned limitations of using the scale for assessing communicative competence, research on the compliance between the self-assessment of communicative competence of students and the teachers' assessment of students could be very beneficial. The self-assessment of students can be very effective. However, self-assessment should be performed in relation with the objective marks of teachers.

4. CONCLUSION

The first part of the paper was concerned with communicative competence as a complex, multilayered phenomenon. Namely, a succession of models of the communicative competence has been presented, starting with one of the first significant four-component model designed by Sandra Savignon (1976), ending with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages model comprising three basic components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Based on the comparison between the existing models of communicative competence, presented by Bagarić and Mihaljević Đigonović (2007), the authors of the paper proposed the scale for assessing communicative competence of students learning English for specific purposes, specifically Business English, having reached the conclusion that a universal scale for assessing individual linguistic competence is non-existent. The proposed scale tends to be as comprehensive as possible, thus comprising six subscales aiming at measuring general communicative competence (GCC), linguistic competence (LC), socio-linguistic competence (SLC), discourse competence (DC), functional competence (FunC), and strategic competence (StrC). In addition, each of the six subscales can be further fragmented into even two or three characteristics, overall thirty of them. Two independent evaluators, who are provided with recorded audio materials, are to be well acquainted with the intricacies of the scale in order to evaluate the results properly. Furthermore, the authors supplied three examples of the activity that can be used as a tool for implementing the proposed scale under real circumstances.

However, certain limitations have been acknowledged, such as the drawback of using just one activity to assess all of the components. In order for the proposed scale to be efficient it has been recommended that the students should be assessed on several occasions, using multiple activities so that all of the necessary components are included.

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