

## THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: A NEW APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *The communicative competence represents the knowledge that the participants in a communicative instance need to interact and their capacity of applying this knowledge into practice, which means, using the language adequately, in various contexts. Thus, in order to ensure its formative projection, there is need for establishing a definition area. The communicative competence has known, throughout three decades, various definitions, from the linguistic competence, in Chomsky's studies, to Hymes's, Canale& Swan's, Widowson's or Bachman's models. The present article aims at reviewing these models, for sensibly projecting the communicative competence within the institutionalized educational framework.*

**Keywords:** *communicative competence, linguistic competence, strategic competence.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “competence” has just recently entered the psychology lexis, for a long period, only such terms as ‘aptitudes’, ‘skills’ or ‘abilities’ being used. As a set of projected latencies, competences have met, later on, the roles associated to specific statuses, provening from the area of sociology and together with them defining the dynamic part of those statuses. The term ‘competence’ has emerged from the fertile field of communication theory and then it started being used by other social sciences, thus contributing to the career designing. From a practical perspective, the term has become acknowledged through the psychology of labor and the human resources management, it being a decisive factor in designing educational models.

Coming from the Latin ‘*competens*’, meaning ‘competent’, which was itself derived from ‘*competere*’, a compound word consisting of the stem *com* = together and the verb *petere* = to follow, *competence*, with its current meaning in the lexis of psychology, has only started being studied since the late decades of the last century. In fact, the import of the term ‘competence’ in the area of psychology and psycho-pedagogy, and further on in the human resource management was

possible due to the Chomskyan theory.

The term ‘competence’ has started to built up its own status within psychology, defining „*the capacity, skill or ability to do something correctly or efficiently, or the scope of a person's or a group's ability or knowledge*” [1]. Recently, the term has been more and more intensely exploited, to such extent that the Great Dictionary of Psychology, published by Larousse expands its meaning area, defining it ‘in its ontogenesis’, as an ‘*assembly of the most precocious possibilities of answering in relation with the surrounding environment*’[2].

### 2. FROM THE LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE TO THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In the eighth decades of the last century, the American linguist Avram Noam Chomsky, through his studies in the area of generative linguistics, defined an ideal emitter/receiver's capacity of producing/understanding an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences as communicative competence. Thus, Chomsky did not account for the pragmatic dimension of communication, but he focused upon its semantic/syntactic projection. Consequently, he coined the phrase

“linguistic competence”, meaning, “*how language is used or acquired*” [3], and involving a linguistic acquisition, based on a universal grammar theory. In other words, the Chomskyan linguistic competence may define as an ideal speaker’s ability of using an abstract system of speech rules (the syntactic dimension), as soon as he/she has acquired the relationship between signs and the objects they represent (the semantic dimension). This ‘competence’ is the result of certain linear interactions between a deeper structure in which the linguistic faculty has already been encoded and a surface structure.

In the area of linguistics and communication, the phrase ‘communicative competence’ has suffered changes, in the meaning of its applicability to a fluid reference frame, especially through the studies of the American anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes. From this perspective, the phrase ‘competence’ refers to the knowledge the participants need in order to interact socially and to be successful in communication, or, the ability of adapting to different communicative situations. Since Hymes considers that communication cannot be studied isolated, but only from the perspective of the effects that it produces in people’s minds, similarly, the communication competence cannot be restricted to a mere construction, following the syntactic and semantic dimensions. Hymes believes it necessary for us to perceive communication as the practical application of certain specific competences. He follows a different theoretical path from the Chomskyan perspective, namely, of knowing the language and emitting grammatically correct messages. Hymes invokes a competence that is capable of considering the linguistic performance in various contexts, that is, the communication competence represents the knowledge the participants to communication need in order to interact, and their ability of applying it practically by using the language adequately, in various contexts. Hymes takes into consideration four aspects of this competence: possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and probability, by asking four questions:

a) *Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible*

b) *Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible*

c) *Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate*

d) *Whether (and to what degree) something is done* [4].

Hymes proposed the study of the communicative competence out of the necessity for it to include the social dimension as well, starting from the study of the interaction between singular linguistic systems and the individual’s psycholinguistic abilities, in the context of certain impositions with regard to the character of communication and its adjustment to the context. Consequently, Hymes took into account the knowledge of whatever is possible, doable and achievable or even given in the communication situation and he underlined the necessity of a theory concerning the communicative competence, starting from the four dimensions mentioned above.

### **3. THE CANALE AND SWAIN’S MODEL OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

Starting from Hymes’ s theory, Canale and Swain include the linguistic competence within the larger concept of the communicative competence, arguing that there are rules of using the language that are ineffective in the absence of grammar norms. The model Canale-Swain [5] distinguishes four areas of competence able to cover our study area: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discursive and strategic. Initially, starting from a piece of criticism to Hymes, Canale and Swain propose a communicative competence focused on the grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic dimensions, to which, later on the discursive competence as part of the sociolinguistic competence is added, together with the socio-cultural competence.

The grammatical competence entails knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, structure, word formation and sentence formation etc. The sociolinguistic competence involves knowledge of sociolinguistic norms of using the language, that is, the capacity of using the language in various sociolinguistic contexts, of

communicating within the limits imposed by a particular topic of discussion or of using adequate grammar forms for different communicative functions, in various sociolinguistic contexts.

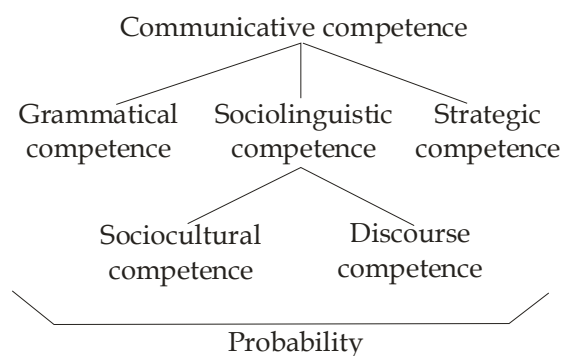


Fig. 1 Diagrammatic representation of Canale and Swain's components of communicative competence [6]

The discursive competence refers to the capacity of understanding and producing texts, in agreement with the general discursive requirements: cohesion/coherence, relevance and pertinence. The strategic competence, following the Canale-Swain model, involves the compensatory strategies used when speech difficulties occur (either of grammatical, sociolinguistic or discursive nature), such as: „the use of reference sources, grammatical and lexical paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or problem in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status or in finding the right cohesion devices.” [7].

This final dimension implies, thus, compensation in communication, as a result of a limitation of the performing variables of an individual's or as a result of a certain insufficiency with regard to competence. Unlike Chomsky, Hymes introduced, within the communicative competence concept, the ability of using the language. Canale and Swain remarked that researchers had ignored the phrase “ability for use” and that there weren't theories concerning the human action able to adequately explain the phrase, its explanation depending on social classes. Therefore, American scientists have transferred the phrase “ability for use” to the area of communicative performance.

#### 4. WIDDOWSON 'S MODEL OF THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The above scientists' attempt has been continued by the studies of the British Henry G. Widdowson, who distinguished between the concepts of *knowledge* and *ability*. The former refers to an understanding of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions, the latter regards the ability of using knowledge to create meanings within a language. This involves, in Widdowson's further studies, that knowing a language means much more than knowing its linguistic structures, „it also involves knowing how they interact syntactically as carriers of meaning being determined by the functions a language has evolved to serve” [8].

While in case of the first dimension, knowledge, there is need for the analysis and application of certain rules, named by the British linguist the internal function of the linguistic code structures, the use of language implies the knowledge of the grammar approach to adequate meanings in various contexts, that is, an external function. Competence, thus, stands for more than mere knowledge, it represents the ability of using the knowledge in accordance with conventions. Furthermore, Widdowson's model is shaped as shown below:

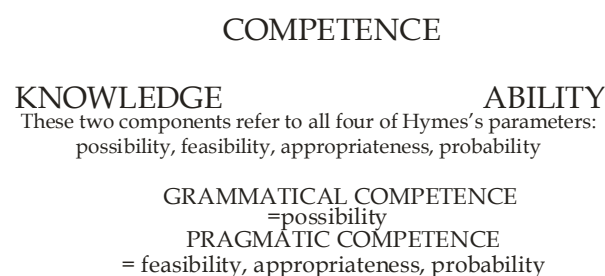


Fig. 2 Widdowson's model of communicative competence

For Widdowson, knowledge may be characterized in terms of degree of *analyzability*, while the ability of using the language is measured in terms of *accessibility*. Whereas analyzability refers to the manner in which the mental representation of knowledge are built, structured and made explicit, accessibility regards the ease and rapidity with

which knowledge may be accessed for using the language. Analyzability becomes, accordingly, the reference parameter for learning a language, while accessibility represents the reference parameter of the communicative act. From such a perspective, it is obvious that both knowledge and the ability of using the language are inseparable and become a prerequisite for each other.

### 5. BACHMAN'S INTEGRATIVE MODEL

In his attempt to incorporate the ideas concerning the communicative competence from the models of Michael Canale, Merrill Swain and Sandy Savignon, so as to design language tests, while considering the Canale-Swain model a static one, Lyle F. Bachman (1990) proposes a communicative competence model, named the *communicative language ability* (CLA). The components of this model are as follows [9]:

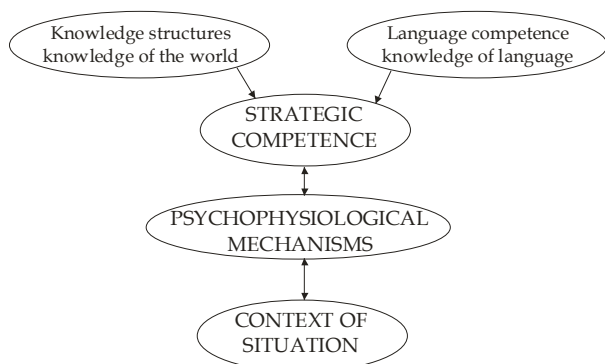


Fig. 3 Components of communicative language ability in communicative language use

- the linguistic competence, representing a set of elements used in communication via language;
- the strategic competence, characterizing the mental capacity of implementing the components of the communicative competence in the contextualized use of the language, aiming at relating the language with the context in which it is produced and with the cognitive structure of the user and regarding the socio-cultural component and the one referring to knowledge of the real world;
- the individual's psycho-physiological mechanisms, regarding the neurological and

psychological processes, seen as physical phenomena, necessary for the use of language.

The linguistic competence entails two major dimensions [10]: organizational and pragmatic.

The organizational competence comprises elements related to the formal structure of the language, including the grammatical competence and the textual one. The grammatical competence focuses on aspects such as vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology/ graphology etc., while the textual competence involves knowledge of conventions necessary for putting together the discourse elements so as they can make up a text, written or uttered, following the rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization.

The pragmatic competence aims at the relations between the discursive unities and acts or functions, which users of the language try to achieve through these discursive unities. These unities and highlight the illocutionary dimension, respectively, the characteristics of the context for using the language, which determines the appropriateness degree of the latter. It includes the illocutionary and the sociolinguistic competences. The illocutionary competence, originating in the speech acts' theory, focuses both on the use of language with illocutionary force and the interpretation of the illocutionary force of the communication partner, and sends to the existence and activation of a set of four functions:

- the ideational function, via which we express ourselves in terms of our own experience in relation with the real world;
- the manipulation function, by which we aim at influencing, this function comprising the instrumental function, regarding the use of performatives, that is performing actions at the same time with utterances, the regulatory function, necessary for controlling others' behavior and influencing the medium, and, respectively, the interactional function, aiming at using the language to form, maintain or change interpersonal relationships;
- the heuristic function, regarding the use of language for the extension of knowledge through teaching acts, learning, problem solving or conscious memorization;

- the imaginative function, dealing with the expansion of its own production medium for aesthetical or comical/ironical purposes;

The sociolinguistic competence covers the control over the conventions for using the language, established by the production context. It also implies the sensitivity to dialect/sub-dialect/idiom, sensitivity to register – concerning the variations within a single dialect, sub-dialect or idiom, sensitivity to naturalness – concerning the manner in which

elements of the language are formulated and interpreted, not in the sense of linguistic accuracy, but in the sense of belonging, by birth, to that particular language (*nativelike way*), and, respectively, the use and interpretation of cultural references and of speech figures.

In a schematic representation, the components of the linguistic competence in Bachman's CLA model are structured as follows:

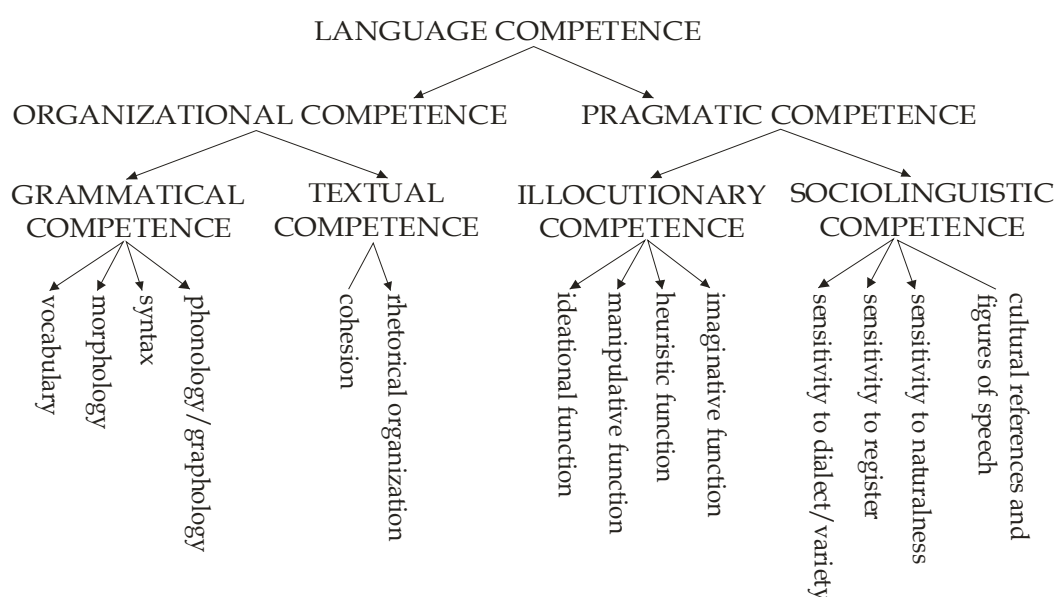


Fig. 4 Components of language competence

The strategic competence preserves the same meaning as in the studies of Canale and Swain. It represents the mental capacity of participants in the act of speech to compensate for the lacks of the components of the linguistic competence in using the language in various communicative contexts, as long as the communicative strategy, generally speaking, sees the interlocutors' attempt to agree upon a meaning. The components of this competence are: *assessment, planning, execution* [11].

The evaluative component involves relating to a communicative scope in a given mental context, identification of the requested information and of available language resources, respectively, the interlocutor's evaluation. In a systematized manner, „*the assessment component enables us to (1) identify the information – including the language variety, or dialogue – that is needed for realizing a particular communicative goal*

*in a given context; (2) determine what language competences (native language, second or foreign language) are at our disposal for effectively bringing that information to bear in achieving the communicative goal; (3) ascertain the abilities and knowledge that are shared, by our interlocutor; and (4) following the communication attempt, evaluate the extent to which the communicative goal has been achieved*” [12].

The planning component regards the rectification of relevant elements of the linguistic competence, of various natures, such as: grammar, textual, illocutionary or sociolinguistic and designing a plan able to lead to the accomplishment of the communicative goal.

The executive component implies psychophysiological mechanisms in the plan implementation, in accordance with the

manner and channel adequate to the communicative goal and production context.

In a schematic representation, the use of language, according to CLA components, requires an inter-relating of the strategic competence with the linguistic competence, with the psycho-physiological mechanisms and the context, as follows [13]:

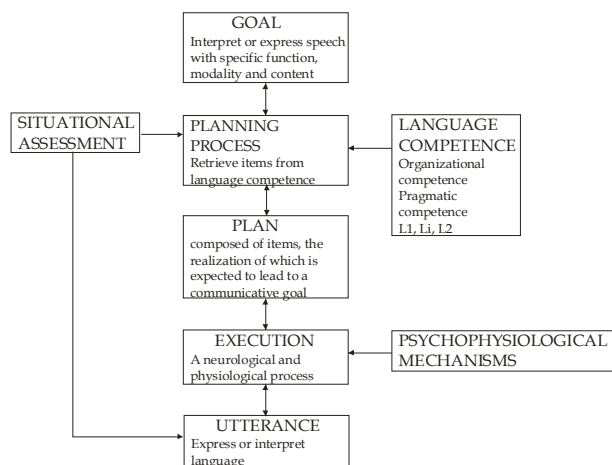


Fig. 5 A model for the use of language, an extension of the Færch-Kasper model

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The sensible projection of the communicative competence formation in the educational area does no longer represent a ‘caprice’, but a necessity.

The very normative defining framework asks for reconsideration, and this starts from the European recommendation with regard to key competences for life-long learning. According to it, the first two projected competences are: communication in the mother tongue and communication in foreign languages [14].

The projection of the communicative competence in Romania becomes compulsory for the adequate formation within the institutionalized educational system adjusted to the society’s demands.

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