

UNIT 4. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE. ANALYSIS OF ITS COMPONENTS.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Origins and Definitions of Communicative Competence
3. Components of Communicative Competence
4. Implications for Language Teaching and Assessment
5. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The concept of communicative competence has become central in modern language teaching and curriculum development. It represents a shift from traditional structuralist approaches focused on grammatical accuracy to an understanding of language as a social and functional tool. Coined by Hymes in the early 1970s as a response to Chomsky's abstract notion of linguistic competence, communicative competence incorporates the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real-life situations.

This unit draws on seminal and contemporary studies in applied linguistics and second language pedagogy, including *Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing* (Canale and Swain, 1980), *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* (Bachman, 1990), and *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching* (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; 2007), which offer a comprehensive view of the components and development of communicative competence. It also incorporates pedagogical insights from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001), which frames language use as action-oriented and task-based.

2. Origins and Definitions of Communicative Competence

The notion of communicative competence emerged from sociolinguistic criticism of Noam Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence, the ideal speaker-listener's knowledge of grammar, and performance, the actual language use. Hymes (1972) argued that linguistic competence alone was insufficient to account for the contextualised and purposeful use of language. He proposed that language proficiency must encompass not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately according to sociocultural norms.

In this sense, communicative competence involves knowing what to say, how to say it, when to say it and to whom. It integrates linguistic knowledge with pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic elements. The concept has evolved significantly since its inception, particularly through the influential model developed by Canale and Swain (1980), later expanded by Canale (1983) and by Bachman (1990), whose communicative language ability framework included both knowledge and cognitive skills. These models form the foundation of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and are embedded in the CEFR and national curricula.

3. Components of Communicative Competence

The most widely accepted model of communicative competence is that of Canale and Swain (1980), later refined by Canale (1983). It comprises four interrelated components:

- **Grammatical Competence:** This refers to knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology. It enables the speaker to produce and understand grammatically correct utterances. It is foundational, but not sufficient, for effective communication.
- **Sociolinguistic Competence:** This involves the ability to use and interpret language appropriately in different sociocultural contexts. It includes sensitivity to roles, social conventions, politeness strategies and norms of interaction. For instance, choosing formal or informal language based on the situation.
- **Discourse Competence:** This refers to the ability to produce coherent and cohesive texts, both spoken and written. It involves managing cohesion devices, such as connectors or anaphora; and coherence, including logical sequencing, or topic development. Learners must learn how to structure discourse for different genres and purposes.
- **Strategic Competence:** This encompasses the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies to overcome communication breakdowns, compensate for gaps in knowledge and enhance effectiveness. Examples include paraphrasing, asking for clarification and using gestures or fillers.

An alternative but complementary model is that of Bachman (1990), who framed communicative language ability as composed of language competence, including organisational and pragmatic competence; strategic competence; and psychophysiological mechanisms. Bachman distinguishes between formal knowledge of language and its functional use, placing greater emphasis on pragmatic aspects.

More recently, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995; 2007) proposed a pedagogically-oriented model that integrates six components: linguistic, sociocultural, actional, discourse, strategic and formulaic competence. This model aligns well with classroom practices as it allows teachers to plan instruction that integrates multiple dimensions of communication.

In European contexts, the CEFR (2001) and its Companion Volume (2020) offer a descriptive framework that operationalises communicative competence in terms of communicative language activities (e.g. reception, interaction, production, mediation) and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic). These are the basis for curriculum design, teaching objectives and assessment in Spain.

4. Implications for Language Teaching and Assessment

Communicative competence has deeply influenced language teaching methodologies. The shift from structural approaches to communicative approaches, such as CLT and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), is rooted in the desire to develop learners' ability to function in real-life situations, beyond grammatical accuracy. In the Spanish

curriculum, the development of communicative competence is considered the main objective in foreign language instruction.

In the classroom, developing communicative competence implies designing learning situations that foster interaction, meaningful communication and integration of skills. Activities should simulate authentic contexts (e.g. role-plays, debates, problem-solving tasks), use real-world materials (videos, articles, infographics) and promote mediation and collaboration. Grammar is still important, but it should be taught in context, through inductive or deductive strategies that support communicative goals.

Assessment practices must also align with communicative principles. Instead of focusing exclusively on discrete-point grammar tests, teachers should implement performance-based assessment, such as oral presentations, portfolios, written productions and interaction tasks. The CEFR levels provide clear descriptors that help assess learners' communicative competence in a progressive and holistic manner.

In Aragón, the LOMLOE and its curricular development promote inclusive and competence-based education, emphasising multilingualism and intercultural understanding. Communicative competence in English is developed across all key competences, especially linguistic competence (CCL), multilingual competence (CML), and personal, social, and learning to learn competence (CPSAA).

From a methodological perspective, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator of communication, a provider of input and feedback and a guide in learners' strategy development. Learners are expected to become autonomous users of language who can adapt their discourse to different contexts and tasks.

5. Conclusion

Communicative competence is the cornerstone of modern foreign language education. It encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language meaningfully and appropriately in a variety of contexts. Through the models proposed by Hymes, Canale and Swain, Bachman and Celce-Murcia, communicative competence has been conceptualised as a multidimensional construct integrating linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, pragmatic and strategic components.

Its influence is evident in major language policy documents such as the CEFR and in national and regional curricula, the Organic Law 3/2020, known as LOMLOE, and the Order ECD/1172/2022, comprising the Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education, which advocate for learner-centred, task-based and communicative approaches.

From a didactic standpoint, teachers must provide rich input, promote meaningful interaction, and assess learners' competence holistically. By doing so, they help students develop their ability to understand, express and mediate in English in authentic situations, thus fostering their communicative, intercultural and cognitive development. This vision is fully aligned with the principles of the LOMLOE, which prioritises the

development of key competences through inclusive, meaningful and competency-based learning.