



Types of Oral Communicative Activities in Language Learning

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Abstract: Communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, encompassing the transfer of information and meaning through verbal and nonverbal means. This paper explores the definitions and classifications of communication, highlighting the historical perspectives and contributions of scholars such as I.A. Richards, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf. It examines the distinction between verbal and nonverbal communication, emphasizing the importance of feedback and context in ensuring effective transmission of messages. Additionally, the role of communicative competence in language learning is discussed, outlining various linguistic models, including those proposed by Canale and Swain, Bachman and Palmer, and the Common European Framework. The study concludes by underscoring the significance of communication in educational settings, advocating for an interactive and context-driven approach to language acquisition.

Keywords: communication; verbal communication; nonverbal communication; communicative competence; linguistic competence; feedback; language learning; discourse analysis.

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1. Communication

One of the definitions of “communication” can be found on www.britannica.com.

Here “communication” is defined as the transfer of information, of meanings between people through a common system of symbols. It refers to an act of social behaviour, which exists in each act of our life, whether it is formal or informal.

The preoccupation for “communication” goes back to Ancient Greece until modern times. I.A. Richards seems to give one of the best definitions of “communication”. In 1928, he claimed that “<Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience>”. (“Communication social behaviour”, Web. 22 June 2023. <<https://www.britannica.com>>) Although his definition seemed to be too general and rough, it was taken into account when more recently there have been discovered at least 50 different ways of analysing communication.

Based on communication channels, there are two modes or types of communication:

1. *verbal or vocal mode of communication* and
2. *nonverbal or nonvocal mode of communication*.

1. *Verbal mode of communication* refers to the use of words to produce meaning, in a planned way, while nonverbal mode of communication refers to the use of body language and other means that belong to our body but they appear to be spontaneous. Feedback is also very important in order to see if the message was understood as it was sent. The origin of speech and the existence of so many languages represent unclear issues according to the experts. In the 1920s, Edward Sapir, an American linguist anthropologist and later Benjamin Lee Whorf showed that human language is a representation of the value system of each specific culture. (“Communication-social behaviour”, Web. 22 June 2023, <<https://www.britannica.com>>)

2. *Nonverbal mode of communication* consists of the three related components of communication processes: *signals*, *signs* and *symbols*.

A *signal* refers to an interruption in a field of constant energy transfer. The idea is to produce a change of an environmental factor so that to draw attention and to transfer meaning. Thus it can be created a code system easily by using dots, dashes, audio and visual articulations. They can refer to the appearance of someone in a certain place, an agreement or disagreement.

Signs are also components of communication that are full of meaning. Even the anthropologist, Ashley Montagu said that a sign means a “concrete denoter”. (“Communication-social behaviour”, Web. 22 June 2023, <

<https://www.britanica.com> >) There are many types of signs that we encounter every day, but the most common of all are pictures and drawings. We may also see signs that can be done by using hands or arms. The difference between a sign and a signal is determined by the type of the meaning which can be intrinsic, as in the case of the sign or extrinsic as it is for the signal. We may notice this difference if we observe the behaviour or response of some animals. While most of them are able to respond to any kind of signal, still there are few of them, really intelligent or well-trained, that are able to respond even to the simplest signs that are exposed to. All cultures have their own system of signs that is able to transmit simple messages. Their colours, shapes or position may generate their meaning. We may think of the colour of traffic lights, traffic signs on a road, uniforms etc.

The third component of communication, *symbol* is harder to define and understand, due to the fact that the perception of the world is different for each of us. It represents an abstraction that can be made by any kind of device. A symbol system can be noticed in every society which helps its members to communicate between them. Icons represent a set of interactive symbols that can be related or not. As examples, we may think of certain buildings like White House or a painting that belongs to a specific current. Gestures or body language is another category that belongs to nonverbal communication. Thus kinetics seems to contain the whole vocabulary of body language.

Now if we refer to teaching, we need to speak about communication in the classroom. It means the way symbols are selected and sent in order to help the listener to create in his or her mind his or her own meaning similar to that intended by the speaker. Each act of communication is based on some reasons. As Jeremy Harmer says in his “Practice of English Language Teaching”, that two people talk for some clear purposes like:

- 1) they want to say something ...
- 2) they have a communicative purpose ...
- 3) they select from their language store ...
- 4) they want to listen to something ...
- 5) they are interested in the communicative purpose of what is being said ...
- 6) they process a variety of language ...”. (Harmer, 1991, p. 45-46)

All these purposes are attributed to the speaker or writer to the listener or reader. They represent the two actors of the act of communication. Also important is the information gap. Real communication is based on such an information gap. Conversation will help to close this information gap and generate an efficient act of communication. In the classroom students should want to be involved in the act of communication or have a communicative purpose. The result of this situation is the effectiveness of communication. Thus, they use language to accomplish a purpose or fulfil an objective. Now the attention is focused on the content and not on the

language form. Teachers should pay attention to fluency in this case, in order to provide the communicative purpose of the activity. A teacher can appear as a participant, the one who supervises and listens to and also who conducts feedback. The free use of materials is also important. Students should be free to speak and not use materials that force them to use a certain language.

All these six features characterize the communicative activities. For each communicative activity we encounter a desire to communicate, a communicative purpose, a focus on content not on form, a variety of language, no teacher intervention and no materials control. Communicative ability represents the goal of foreign language teaching and William Littlewood said in his book, *Communicative Language Teaching*, “the systematic attention” (Littlewood, 1981, p. 1) that is paid to structural and functional aspects of language by the communicative language teaching is one of its main characteristics. Until the middle of the twentieth century it has been said that in order to use spoken and written English perfectly, full and grammatically correct sentences must be used. People wanted to use ‘Standard English’ and sound like native speakers, but two things changed these ideas. First, one of the reasons was that English became an international language in countries like America, Australia, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, Zambia, Pakistan etc. Secondly, people needed a common language in order to communicate with each other. (Baker and Westrup, 2000)

Linguists began to wonder more about how people use and learn to use language in order to communicate daily, in real life. So, language began to be seen from a “Structural View” or a grammatical one and from a “Functional View”, as it is said in Joana Baker and Heather Westrup’s book *The English Language. Teacher’s Handbook. How to teach classes with few resources*. Words and grammar are the basis of language according to *the Grammatical View*. Both have to obey some rules and students must know the words and the grammar rules in order to get the meaning. *The Functional View* refers to how people use language. The context of communication becomes really important, according to the actions for which language is being used. These two views have influenced the teaching methods. It is clear that the Grammatical View is connected to the Grammar Translation method, while the Functional View is connected to the Direct Method and Communicative Language Teaching.

2. Communicative Competence

Language is defined as a semiotic system, it represents a system of signs and when this system is shared by a community, communication appears. It was defined as a “<continuous encoding-decoding process>” by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), as it is said in *Metodica predării limbii engleze (Strategies of Teaching*

and Testing English, as a Foreign Language) by Adriana Vizental (2008). Two or more people who speak the same language have two roles during their communication process: one is the speaker or sender and the other one is the listener or the receiver. The speaker tries to send his or her thoughts (meanings) that are put into words which are arranged into structures and are given a physical form. The listener gets this physical form of the message, tries to decode it by analysing its structure in order to get the meaning.

To the three traditional branches of linguistics: phonetics, grammar and semantics apply these three levels: form, structure and meaning. During oral communication, the two roles can change fast and time pressure is higher, while in written communication the roles change slower, there is not any time pressure and the physical form of the message becomes graphical. The ability to decode and encode a message, based on the knowledge of the system of language is defined as linguistic competence. The acquisition of a language implies the acquisition of its vocabulary, structures and semantics. All these three components go hand in hand because they are learned all at the same time. If there are still teachers who consider vocabulary and grammar really important, now the tendency is to think that ordinary communication can take place without paying too much attention to all the specific rules of grammar, for example. This tendency determined the appearance of new branches of linguistics like pragmatics or discourse analysis, but also new approaches in teaching of foreign languages.

Pragmatic factors are at the basis of the ability to communicate. They refer to the communicator's knowledge of the world and the unwritten rules of human society. In communication, words or sentences do not appear alone. They are preceded or followed by some other words or sentences which create the linguistic context that influences them. In a discourse, we distinguish between the linguistic message and real-world context which influences the meaning of the text. It also generates a variety of discourse types such as: a telephone conversation, a political speech, a chat between friends.

In consequence, linguists claim that language is only one mode of communication while other modes can carry the meaning so that communicative competence implies the knowledge of other systems too. In the case of this common knowledge of the world shared by the speakers, it appears the use of "indirectness of communicative exchanges". (Vizental, 2008, p. 20) This "indirectness" refers to the fact that not all the words are said in order to communicate something due to this common knowledge of the world, shared by the two interlocutors. It also appears cooperation between the interlocutors, in their exchange of ideas and a negotiation of meaning too. In the case of cooperation, the two interlocutors seem to complete the other one's ideas while in the case of negotiation of meaning, one of the two

interlocutors may need additional information in order to understand the correct meaning.

Another use of language is related to speech acts. People can use language not only to say something, but also to do something. For example, if we say “Congratulations!”, actually we perform the act of congratulating that person. Many of the speech acts are indirect due to their imperative form which sounds like a command. In order to avoid such situations there are used constructions like questions which actually represent an indirect form to do something. All these indirect expressions and the use of more complex structures of language show that people use a kind of “linguistic strategies”, as Adriana Vizental called them in her book, *Metodica predării limbii engleze (Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language)*. These “linguistic strategies” (Vizental, 22-23) refer to the fact that people prefer an indirect way of expressing than the use of a direct path. The complex sentences seem the result of this indirect use of language. They are also used as a kind of tact or in order to be more polite, not to offend someone’s feelings, for example. The advantages obtained as a result of using such “linguistic strategies” is another reason to use them. These types of expressions can also make the sentences become more interesting and irony can be generated by them too.

According to Leech, 1981, mentioned by Adriana Vizental in *Metodica predării limbii engleze (Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language)*, language has five basic functions: informational, directive, expressive, aesthetic and phatic. The informational function refers to the fact that people give and get information. The directive function shows the fact that we tell the others what to do, the language is used in order to control the others’ behaviour. By the expressive function people try to express feelings and attitudes while by the aesthetic function of language the use of information becomes less important and the beautiful expressions come in front of everything. If what we try to express becomes more important than the fact that we say it, the result is the use of phatic function.

Besides the knowledge of the system of language, the language skills are also necessary in communication, so that the people can interact with each other. There are the listening skills, when we need to understand what the speaker says to us, the speaking skill which we must owe in order to be able to express ourselves. If we refer to communication in its written form, we need to owe our reading skills. We need to be able to decode messages in order to understand them. The last category of language skills refers to writing skills. In order to be able to express ourselves in writing, we need to have these types of skills. Thus all these language skills, according to the type of communication are grouped into two categories:

- 1) listening and speaking skills for the oral communication
- 2) reading and writing skills for written communication.

If the speaker is a recipient, the listening and reading skills can be grouped into receptive skills, but if the speaker is the producer, the speaking and writing skills can be grouped into productive skills. Each of these skills has several subskills too. The goal of teaching a foreign language is to determine the development of communicative skills and cultural skills too. They refer to communicative competence. These skills refer to the use of language correctly, appropriately, functionally, strategically and competently. The foreign language teacher's mission is to provide activities that simulate real-world situations and transform the class into a kind of laboratory, where can create this entire real environment, just in order that students can exercise language in a realistic and interactive way.

Communicative competence refers to the ability of using the “knowledge code” or the “system of language“, it means grammatically correct but in various and appropriate contexts. It is the use of communication in an effective way. Noam Chomsky (1965) made the difference between “competence” and “performance”. In his opinion “competence” refers to that “knowledge of language” which belongs to an idealized speaker and “performance” represents the use of this “knowledge of language” in real situations. A response to Noam Chomsky's view came from Dell Hathaway Hymes (1972), who introduced the term “communicative” near “competence”. In his opinion, the “knowledge of language” should be known when to be used. It represents the speaker's ability to communicate in appropriate context.

In 1983, Widdowson made the difference between “competence” and “capacity”, as it is said in *Defining Communicative Competence*, an article by Vesna Bagarić and Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović in *Metodika*. (“Defining Communicative Competence”, Web. 29 June 2023. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/42651>) For Widdowson, “communicative competence” seems to be defined “in terms of the knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions”. To him “capacity” means to create “meaning in a language” by the ability to use knowledge.

The synthesis of the system of knowledge and skills represents the idea of “communicative competence” for Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). In their opinion “knowledge” refers to a person's knowledge of language while “skill” represents the way a person can use his or her knowledge in real situations of communication. They also identified three types of knowledge: “knowledge of the underlying grammatical principles, knowledge of how to use language in a social context in order to fulfil communicative functions and knowledge of how to combine utterances and communicative functions with respect to discourse principles”. (“Defining Communicative Competence”, Web. 29 June 2023. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/42651>)

In 1972, Savignon and later on more theoreticians described “communicative competence” as more interactive, interpersonal and relative. Later, Taylor referred to “communicative competence” using the terms of “communicative proficiency”. It is

also necessary to mention the fact that there are three models of communicative competence. There is the model of Canale and Swain, the model of Bachman and Palmer and the third model which refers to the description of components of communicative language competence that appears in the Common European Framework. ("Defining Communicative Competence", Web. 29 June 2023. <<https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/42651> >)

According to Adriana Vizental in *Metodica predării limbii engleze (Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language)* the model, proposed by Canale and Swain has five components that comprising: *linguistic competence*, *sociolinguistics competence*, *discourse competence*, *strategic competence* and *cultural competence*.

Linguistic competence makes reference to the speaker's ability to use the "knowledge of language". Vocabulary and grammar should be well known, the utterances should be produced correctly, so accuracy dominates the speaker's communication.

The sociolinguistics competence has in its centre the speaker's ability to use language according to the appropriate context, social environment, the way the speaker adapts the message to the social conventions of the community where he or she lives.

The ability to use language according to the discourse type or to use the appropriate style or register, or certain formulae according to a specific type of message or conversation, all refer to *the discourse competence*.

The speaker's ability to use language functionally (in order to do some actions) or strategically (linguistic strategies are used) refers to *the strategic competence*.

The cultural competence makes reference to the speaker's knowledge about the native speaker's culture, type of society, history, country, people and many other elements of the foreign language environment.

In 1996, the model Bachman and Palmer referred to communicative language ability. It is a model based on the language ability which makes reference to language knowledge and strategic competence. Organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge are the two components of language knowledge. Grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge are related to the formal language structures that need to be controlled and the way they are controlled refers to the organizational knowledge. The way it is created and interpreted discourse makes reference to pragmatic knowledge, which has two components of knowledge: the knowledge of pragmatic conventions and the knowledge of sociolinguistics conventions ("Defining Communicative Competence", Web. 29 June 2023. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/42651>). A set of metacognitive components create the

strategic knowledge of this model. They help the speaker to be involved in “the goal setting, assessment of communicative sources and planning”. (“Defining Communicative Competence”, Web. 29 June 2023. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/42651>)

The third model refers to the description of communicative language competence in the Common European Framework (2001). This model was created for the assessment, learning and teaching languages. It has three components: language competence, sociolinguistics competence and pragmatic competence. Knowledge and ability to use it are defined for each part of language knowledge. For the language competence there are sub components like: grammatical, lexical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences. The use of the appropriate language for a social context and knowledge and skills that belong to a person in order to do such a thing refers to the sociolinguistics competence. The discourse competence and functional competence are the two components for pragmatic competence.

Although along the time “communicative competence” has suffered changes in terms or definitions, the common notions that have appeared all the time were “knowledge”, “ability” or “skills”. Thus, in the end “communicative competence” seems to refer not only to the “knowledge of code” but also to abilities and skills that are needed in order to be able for the competent language user to manage in a communicative situation. If defining “communicative competence” seemed a simple thing, it seemed more difficult to apply the ability or skills for use of language. Regarding communicative competence, special attention should be paid to two aspects: the way learners’ communicative performance is observed and tested and the fact that not all the components of communicative competence can be measured and it is not necessary to do it.

3. Conclusion

Communication is an essential element of human society, facilitating interaction and understanding across different cultures and disciplines. The study of communication has evolved significantly, incorporating various linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives. Understanding the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as the role of feedback, enhances effective message transmission.

Additionally, communicative competence plays a vital role in language education, helping learners navigate real-life communication scenarios. By integrating theoretical insights with practical applications, educators can foster better language acquisition and intercultural communication skills.

4. References

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