

## **DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY TEACHING STAFF: AN INTEGRATED-SKILL APPROACH**

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the integrated-skill approach applied in teaching English in the framework of the project *Lingva* launched in the South Ural State University (SUSU), Chelyabinsk, Russia, in January, 2006. The authors present the components of the communicative competence (linguistic, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic ones) which become the goal of any language acquisition and compare the integrated-skill approach with the segregated-skill approach or task-based education. The above-mentioned approaches seem ineffective and out-of-date. The integrated-skill approach applied in the project *Lingva* in the South Ural State University (2006 – 2012) is considered to be the most efficient method of language teaching in the modern world.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, integrated-skill approach, segregated-skill approach, task-based education.

### **Introduction**

Nowadays communicative competence is a highly topical linguistic term which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. The term appeared in 1966 thanks to Dell Hymes, a famous American linguist, sociolinguist and anthropologist. Since those times communicative competence has become the target of numerous hot debates among scholars.

Such debate has occurred regarding linguistic competence and communicative competence in the second and foreign language teaching literature, and scholars have found communicative competence as a superior model of language following Hymes' opposition to Chomsky's linguistic competence [1]. This opposition has been adopted by those who seek new directions toward a communicative era by taking for granted the basic motives and the appropriateness of this opposition behind the development of communicative competence.

Through the influence of communicative language teaching, it has become widely

accepted that communicative competence should be the goal of any language education, central to good classroom practice. Language teaching both in European countries and Russia is also based on the idea that the goal of language acquisition is communicative competence: the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals.

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components:

1. grammatical competence: words and rules;
2. sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness;
3. strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies [2].

Canale later refined the above model, adding discourse competence: cohesion and coherence. Communicative competence at present is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic.

- *Linguistic competence* is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence asks: What words do I use? How do I put them into phrases and sentences?

- *Sociolinguistic competence* is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence asks: Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?

- *Discourse competence* is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Discourse competence asks: How are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages, newspaper articles?

- *Strategic competence* is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context. Strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use?

Communicative competence is more than acquiring mastery of structure and form. It also involves acquiring the ability to interpret discourse in all its social and cultural contexts.

The complexity of learning to speak in another language is reflected in the range and type of subskills that are entailed in L2 (the Second Language) oral production. Learners must simultaneously attend to content, morphosyntax and lexis, discourse and information structuring, and the sound system and prosody, as well as appropriate register and pragmalinguistic features.

In the 1990s, many researchers concluded that exposure to and communicative interaction in an L2 enables learners to attain L2 speaking fluency.

In an age when English has become a primary medium for international communication, most cross-cultural interactions take place between non-native speakers of English rather than between native and non-native speakers.

### **The Project *Lingva***

Today's university world is undergoing rapid change which is caused by globalization process. The purposes for which people learn

English today have also evolved from a cultural and educational enterprise to that of international communication. This process affects all spheres of knowledge and human activities, giving rise to numerous projects concerning language acquisition and language proficiency and highlights the extreme importance of developing communicative competence.

There is an alternative way – the language-based approach according to which the language itself is the focus of instruction (language for language's sake). In this approach, the emphasis is made not on learning for authentic communication. Unfortunately, practice shows that this approach is out-of-date as it does not allow keeping up with the modern trends. Thousands of university teachers who attended numerous linguistic courses are able only to read and translate using dictionaries. They are not ready to communicate with native speakers at all as their speech abounds with out-of-date conversational clichés and obsolete words.

All university teachers need English to conduct their research, prepare papers for scientific journals, take part in international conferences and establish their international contacts. These objectives embrace all the four primary skills – listening, reading, speaking, and writing as well as associated or related skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning, and usage.

This necessity leads to optimal English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) communication when the skills are interwoven during instruction. This is known as the integrated-skill approach. If this weaving together does not occur, the strand consists merely of discrete, segregated skills – parallel threads that do not touch, support, or interact with each other.

That is why the South Ural State University (Chelyabinsk, Russia) launched a program aimed at university teaching staff called *Lingva* (2006 – 2012).

The goal of this program was to encourage the academic mobility and increase the number of publications in foreign journals in the framework of the integrated-skill approach. The program included several stages – placement tests, team distribution, and classes. There were formed several groups – from elementary to advanced learners. More than one thousand teachers participated in this project and

improved their English speaking and writing skills.

Among the particular goals of this program we can mention the following:

- increasing the competitiveness of the SUSU educational programs for foreign partners, post graduates and master students by means of enhancing international contacts and delivering lectures and classes in the English language;
- increasing the academic mobility of the teaching staff, post graduates, young scientists as regards attending training courses abroad and taking part in international conferences, preparing reports in the English language and applying for various grants and scholarships at various universities all over the world.

The program was also targeted at the following:

- providing linguistic assistance for the educational programs directed at preparing post graduates and master students with the combined forces of the SUSU faculty of Linguistics;
- providing linguistic assistance for the research activities of the SUSU teaching staff on the basis of developing their professional communicative competence;
- providing linguistic assistance for the top management of the SUSU university.

The program had the following three stages:

- The first stage – the selection of the participants by the expert commission.
- The second stage – the educational process itself arranged in several directions.
- The third stage – the assessment of the effectiveness.

The participants of the program included promising post graduates, doctoral candidates, young scientists, lecturers and tutors working in the framework of the most demanded at present scientific directions and having the best references of their departments.

The requirements for the candidates were the following:

- language requirements necessary for their proposed study (from Pre-Intermediate);
- ability to discuss the professional subjects;
- ability to prepare the draft of the scientific articles, provide its abstract;
- ability to write the review in the English language, applications for grants etc.

All these requirements coincide with the requirements of the international exams in English that is why participating in the program candidates could prepare for such universally

acknowledged exams like Cambridge ESOL exams or TOEFL.

### Segregated Vs Integrated-Skill Approach

When the program *Lingva* was launched it became clear to the English teachers that they were to solve the task of great importance. There were two possible ways to grasp the project: by means of segregated-skill approach which has another title for this mode of instruction – the language-based approach, because the language itself is the focus of instruction (language for language's sake), and the second variant was integrated-skill approach, in which the emphasis was not on learning for authentic communication.

Let us analyze the first option as far as by examining segregated-skill instruction, we can see the advantages of integrating the skills and move toward improving teaching for English language learners.

In the segregated-skill approach, the mastery of discrete language skills such as reading and speaking is seen as the key to successful learning, and language learning is typically separate from content learning [3]. This is contrary to the integrated way that people use language skills in normal communication, and it clashes with the direction in which language teaching experts have been moving in recent years.

Skill segregation is reflected in traditional language programs that offer classes focusing on segregated language skills. Why do they offer such classes? Perhaps teachers and administrators think it is logically easier to present courses on writing divorced from speaking, or on listening isolated from reading. They may believe that it is instructionally impossible to concentrate on more than one skill at a time.

Even if it were possible to fully develop one or two skills in the absence of all the others, such an approach would not ensure adequate preparation for later success in academic communication, career-related language use, or everyday interaction in the language. An extreme example is the grammar-translation method, which teaches students to analyze grammar and to translate (usually in writing) from one language to another. This method restricts language learning to a very narrow, non-communicative range that does not prepare students to use the language in everyday life.

Frequently, segregated-skill ESL/EFL classes present instruction in terms of skill-linked learning strategies: reading strategies, listening strategies, speaking strategies, and writing strategies [4]. Learning strategies are strategies that students employ, most often consciously, to improve their learning. Examples are guessing meaning based on context, breaking a sentence or word down into parts to understand the meaning, and practicing the language with someone else.

Very frequently, experts demonstrate strategies as though they were linked to only one particular skill, such as reading or writing [4]. However, it can be confusing or misleading to believe that a given strategy is associated with only one specific language skill. Many strategies, such as paying selective attention, self-evaluating, asking questions, analyzing, synthesizing, planning, and predicting, are applicable across skill areas [5]. Common strategies help weave the skills together. Teaching students to improve their learning strategies in one skill area can often enhance performance in all language skills [5].

Fortunately, in many instances where an ESL or EFL course is labeled by a single skill, the segregation of language skills might be only partial or even illusory. If the teacher is creative, a course bearing a discrete-skill title might actually involve multiple, integrated skills.

For example, in a course on intermediate reading, the teacher probably gives all of the directions orally in English, thus causing students to use their listening ability to understand the assignment. In this course, students might discuss their readings, thus employing speaking and listening skills and certain associated skills, such as pronunciation, syntax, and social usage. Students might be asked to summarize or analyze readings in written form, thus activating their writing skills. In a real sense, then, some courses that are labeled according to one specific skill might actually reflect an integrated-skill approach after all.

The same can be said for ESL/EFL textbooks. A particular series might highlight certain skills in one book or another, but all the language skills might nevertheless be present in the tasks in each book. In this way, students have the benefit of practicing all the language skills in an integrated, natural, communicative way, even if one skill is the main focus of a given volume.

In contrast to segregated-skill instruction, both actual and apparent, there are at least two forms of instruction that are clearly oriented toward integrating the skills.

These two types of integrated-skill instruction are content-based language instruction and task-based instruction. The first of these emphasizes learning content through language, while the second stresses doing tasks that require communicative language use. Both of these benefit from a diverse range of materials, textbooks, and technologies for the ESL or EFL classroom.

In content-based instruction, students practice all the language skills in a highly integrated, communicative fashion while learning content such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Content-based language instruction is valuable at all levels of proficiency, but the nature of the content might differ by proficiency level. For beginners, the content often involves basic social and interpersonal communication skills, but past the beginning level, the content can become increasingly academic and complex.

At least three general models of content-based language instruction exist: theme-based, adjunct, and sheltered [6]. The theme-based model integrates the language skills into the study of a theme (e.g., urban violence, cross-cultural differences in marriage practices, natural wonders of the world, or a broad topic such as change). The theme must be very interesting to students and must allow a wide variety of language skills to be practiced, always in the service of communicating about the theme.

This is the most useful and widespread form of content-based instruction today, and it is found in many innovative ESL and EFL textbooks. In the adjunct model, language and content courses are taught separately but are carefully coordinated. In the sheltered model, the subject matter is taught in simplified English tailored to students' English proficiency level.

In task-based instruction, students participate in communicative tasks in English. Tasks are defined as activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that require comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form [7].

The task-based model is beginning to influence the measurement of learning strategies, not just

the teaching of ESL and EFL. In task-based instruction, basic pair work and group work are often used to increase student interaction and collaboration. For instance, students work together to write and edit a class newspaper, develop a television commercial, enact scenes from a play, or take part in other joint tasks. More structured cooperative learning formats can also be used in task-based instruction. Task-based instruction is relevant to all levels of language proficiency, but the nature of the task varies from one level to the other. Tasks become increasingly complex at higher proficiency levels. For instance, beginners might be asked to introduce each other and share one item of information about each other. More advanced students might do more intricate and demanding tasks, such as taking a public opinion poll at school, the university, or a shopping mall.

As for the advantages of this approach, as contrasted with the purely segregated approach, it exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language. Learners rapidly gain a true picture of the richness and complexity of the English language as employed for communication. Moreover, this approach stresses that English is not just an object of academic interest nor merely a key to passing an examination; instead, English becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people.

This approach allows teachers to track students' progress in multiple skills at the same time. Integrating the language skills also promotes the learning of real content, not just the dissection of language forms. Finally, the integrated-skill approach, whether found in content-based or task-based language instruction or some hybrid form, can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds.

In order to integrate the language skills in ESL/EFL instruction, teachers should consider taking these steps:

- they should learn more about the various ways to integrate language skills in the classroom (e.g., content-based, task-based, or a combination);
- they should reflect on their current approach and evaluate the extent to which the skills are integrated;
- they should choose instructional materials, textbooks, and technologies that promote the

integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as the associated skills of syntax, vocabulary, and so on. Even if a given course is labeled according to just one skill, one should remember that it is possible to integrate the other language skills through appropriate tasks;

- they should teach language learning strategies and emphasize that a given strategy can often enhance performance in multiple skills.

We present here part of the plan for a content-based unit on Architecture using the unit plan inventory.

#### **Step 1.**

*Language in Use.* Describing, giving information, asking for information.

*Subject Content.* Architecture, geography, seasons, weather.

*Culture.* Doors and windows of a target country and students' home town.

*Vocabulary.* Colors, shapes, sizes, materials (wood, stone), architectural details (ironwork, balcony, ornate), geographical terms (snow, rain, sun, clouds).

#### *Grammatical Structures*

Verbs in command form--open, close, touch, point to.

Verbs in present tense--to be, to see, to think, to paint.

#### **Step 2**

##### *Essential Materials*

Photographs from both target and home cultures of doors and windows, geographical landmarks, and seasons.

Paper, ruler, tape measures, paints, markers.

Map of target country.

#### **Step 3**

##### *Activities*

Introduce vocabulary through Total Physical Response (TPR) sequence with photos of classroom doors and windows.

Sort photos by doors/windows, target country/home town, size, shape, material, color. In pairs, estimate then measure doors and windows in classroom.

Use TPR sequence of map geography, seasons, and weather of target country and home town.

In small groups, paint the original window with a view in the target country or home town.

Describe a window in writing or orally.

Display windows in the classroom, have students choose the window they like the best and write why they like it.

#### **Step 4**

##### *Assessment*

Observe students' participation, assess for understanding.

Observe students' participation, assess for accuracy and pronunciation.

Assess for participation, use of target language, and accuracy.

Assess for inclusion of all elements, presentation, and participation in group project. All the above-mentioned educational strategies were taken into consideration by the teaching staff working in the framework of the project *Lingva*. The main goal of these classes was to simulate the real conditions of language practice, as well as to prepare language learners for attending real international conferences and maintaining international communication by means of Internet messengers and specific software programs.

## Conclusion

Thus, the integrated-skill approach became the leading mode of instruction in the project *Lingva*. All the participants were to pass a final test which involved various ways of checking communicative competence. The test included 5 sections: listening, reading, use of English, writing and speaking. Besides all the

participants were to prepare the report with the PPT presentation devoted to their recent scientific results. The so-called conference was held at the end of the academic year and all the participants made their reports there and took part in the scientific discussion afterwards.

One more requirement of final assessment was connected with the preparation of the paper for the International scientific journal with the abstract written according to the standard. The expert commission checked a great amount of professionally written articles which are being published all over the world at the present moment.

These fruitful results of the program *Lingva* in the South Ural State University proved the effectiveness of new approaches in the field of language teaching. The speed of the modern world development forces English teachers to apply new methods of teaching improving the old, tried and tested ones.

With careful reflection and planning, any teacher can integrate the language skills and strengthen “the tapestry of language teaching and learning”. When the tapestry is woven well, learners can use English effectively for communication.

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