

# STRATEGIC AND SOCIAL COMPETENCES IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

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## ABSTRACT

*Nowadays, teaching grammar and lexis to students is undoubtedly necessary but not enough. The new approaches to language teaching place a great emphasis on developing learners' communicative competency. Besides the professional skills, essential to a successful career, individuals also need to acquire the communicative competency, which is equally important as it includes various other competencies, such as: linguistic, social, socio-cultural, or strategic competences in order to communicate and interact with each other. Our paper aims at discussing the different ways and methods teachers can use in the language classroom to build and enhance students' social and strategic competencies.*

## KEYWORDS:

*Communicative competence, social competence, strategic competence*

### 1. Introduction

Today one of the most accepted frameworks of teaching foreign languages is the communicative language teaching, which aims to develop students' communicative competence. The communicative competence represents the linguistic system that students should use effectively and appropriately in the target language and culture, in other words, the ability to understand and use the language to communicate successfully in authentic environments.

*Competence*, one of the most controversial notions in linguistics, has been introduced by the American linguist Noam Chomsky in 1965, in his influential book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. He makes the distinction between competence seen as the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language and performance, which is the use of language in real situations. This distinction has led to attempts to broaden the concept of linguistic competence by taking into account the sociolinguistic aspects of the language. Thus, the notion of

communicative competence has been coined starting with Hymes (1972), the anthropologist who argued that besides the linguistic forms one needs to learn when, how and to whom it is appropriate to use these forms. Other scholars such as Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), and Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) brought their contribution to the development of the term.

Scholars agree and distinguish several components of the communicative competence, such as: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence and social competence.

The new communicative approaches to foreign languages determine teachers to reconsider their conception on the language, supporting the views of linguists who advocate a more dynamic conception of language, according to which there is no language without discourse or discourse without language. The discourse is based on what the speaker intends to communicate in a conscious or an unconscious way. In short, the discourse is the expression of his views of the world and conveys information and emotions.

In this sense, the language should be taught and understood in its three-part role: to build both individual and collective identity; to express the speaker's communicative intentions that corresponds to his beliefs and attitudes in a social exchange situation; to implement discourse strategies that emphasize the type of relationship that the speaker establishes with his interlocutor, and the type of influence (seduction, persuasion, authority) he tries to exert on the latter.

## **2. Defining the social and the strategic competence**

The three aspects previously mentioned are directly related to the strategic competence and social competence, and our role as teachers of foreign languages is also to teach the language in all its strategic and social complexity, as these reflect the

functional language. The two components of the ability to communicate differ from others to the extent that they are more oriented towards the learner and not so much towards the language. We will therefore focus on the strategic competence and social competence that in our opinion is fundamental to the acquisition of communicative competence in foreign languages.

### **2.1. The social competence**

Genutė Gedvilienė (2012) argues that “*social competence is the behavior, which in specific social situations leads to either positive or negative interaction of a teacher or student, social environment and society*”, therefore the social competence involves both the will and the ability to engage in interaction with others. Thus, the social competence involves expressing one's ideas, understanding other people's feelings and needs, showing emotions, cooperating and negotiating, solving problems and establishing friendships (Kostelnik et al., 2002; Odom et al., 2002).

Communicating is more than just transmitting information and ideas, it is a mutual process, it is also a medium of expressing feelings and understanding what other people desire to convey, it means socializing. Because each language is differently structured, when we learn a foreign language we acquire new categorizations, for example by learning varied structures of vocabulary, and not mere foreign forms that express the categorizations of their mother tongue. Being able to communicate in a foreign language means addressing to a particular interlocutor appropriate statements and not just uttering correct sentences. For instance, learning how to correctly formulate the *wh* questions does not necessarily ensure the appropriate usage in a certain context. One may address a taboo question that can make the interlocutor feel uncomfortable.

For these reasons, acquiring a language is more than learning or memorizing

elements of the target language, such as lexical elements and rules of grammar, it means to rebuild and internalize the systems of discourse production, because language is a communication tool and communicating is acting upon the other. Consequently, communication has a social dimension given by the use of language in social interactions. Since society is governed by rules and conventions, there are certain rules that define how we use the language in different contexts with different people, in other words what is appropriate to say to whom, when and where.

In our opinion, there is a close relationship between language learning and its use, the two elements being interconnected. This requires that any method should be communicative in the sense that it must assign a central role to learning through communication. Teachers need to provide students with real communication situations, like negotiating before making a decision, an exchanging of opinions before a vote, a conference, an interview, etc., where the intervention of the student is absolutely necessary. However, the learner is not abandoned to his fate. The intervention to be carried out is guided and facilitated through the provision of the necessary linguistic resources. This approach develops the learner's autonomy and strategic competence: teaching how to tackle a problem, how to solve it and how to learn from the resolution of the problem.

## **2.2. The strategic competence**

Canale and Swain defines strategic competence as *“verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence”* (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Due to the fact that the strategic competence is used to overcome difficult situations and to communicate successfully it is of high importance for foreign language learners. The strategic competence is the cognitive

ability that allows to intervene in all sorts of research solutions to concrete problems (these are planned sequences of activities that the subject goes through for the purpose of learning).

The strategic competence is not directly related to the language proficiency, thus one may be a proficient user of a certain language and still not be able to participate in a discussion because he is not acquainted with the topic. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1995) argue that the strategic competence enables people to overcome these breakdowns in communication. Nevertheless, the breakdowns in communication are not regarded as a negative aspect but rather as an opportunity to develop the strategic competence. In order to gain knowledge and skills one has to accept losing, that is, not understanding, making mistakes, being wrong, etc.; all journeys are made of hesitations, and errors that must be exploited to better achieve the goal. Teachers need to exploit these barriers in communication, even provoke them and then offer strategies to repair the difficult situations.

## **3. Strategies of developing the social and the strategic competence**

### **3.1. Working in groups**

Group skills play an important role in social success and Shapiro (2004) mentions that in order to be successful in school, group skills are as important as intellectual abilities. However, it is not easy to prevail in a group, students need many subtle skills such as give-and-take or asserting themselves. These skills require time to develop and improve. Shapiro presents several advantages of working in a group that help students: to build and enhance relationships with their colleagues, to understand the importance of asking questions during a conversation, to understand the value of sharing with others and the meaning and importance of cooperating to achieve a common goal, to weigh options and make decisions as a

group, to foster cohesiveness through the development of group identity and to promote appreciation of individual differences.

Since group work proves to be a particularly favorable framework for working the social and emotional dimension of the learner (social competence), and to prioritize a problem to be solved (strategic competence), we propose working in groups by tasks and projects as a useful activity in the foreign language class. Students may be required to organize a conference attended by English/ French or German guests, depending on the language studied; they may also be asked to interview them. This project includes several tasks that could be divided into several instructions and strategies meant to solve the problems that arise. For instance, within the groups created, students have to exchange opinions and take the floor, give consent, express disagreement or give the floor to another student. As it has been previously mentioned, teachers should support students' activity by offering them all the linguistic means necessary to accomplish these tasks. Likewise, teachers should offer students the opportunity to speak in order to choose a guest or invite someone to speak; to identify the subject of a written text; to choose a subject, to make a choice in a big group; to distinguish facts, opinions and feelings; to formulate a question; to present a topic; or to make a synthesis. The strategies offered make it possible to tackle the various problems to successfully organize a conference, that is to say, the proposed project. This approach to the successive problems to be overcome allows the learner to find a solution in each case and to develop his own personalized strategies.

Working in groups on a project helps students to realize the number of difficulties that this entails and at the same time it allows them to build a space where they can express their creativity. It is also a space where interpersonal exchanges of all kinds take place out of the necessity to solve

problems. Thus, all the proposed tasks involve their decomposition into operational elements in order to enable the learner to adopt the most appropriate solution within that particular context.

### ***3.2. Other strategies***

There are many strategies that the teacher, as a facilitator, may use in order to improve the language environment and to develop the students' communicative competence. However, they are only suggestions and teachers need to adapt these strategies to deliver the content. Since neither the individual characteristics of the learners are considered in a stable way, nor the educational process appears as something pre-established, it seems that the most effective is the adaptation of the teaching strategies. Starting from the premises that each person is unique and different and any system of classification of individual differences is arbitrary, we should always adapt the educational strategies, which should be designed in interaction.

One strategy that should be considered is the game, due to the fact that it gives the learner the opportunity to laugh at other things than clumsiness in language production. It favors humorous pressure at the verbal and situational level and thus constitutes an important means of valorization. Songs can be considered another modality of play since they present playful, strategic and discovery aspects with an adequate treatment, therefore they should be integrated in the educational approach. Obviously, one way to take advantage of this situation is to offer students a sociological research because songs are cultural objects. Nonetheless, one must not be obsessed with the didactic exploitation of songs; they are valuable from the point of view of the rhythm, phonetics and intonation of the target language and the socio-cultural aspects they contain.

Another important integral part of the communicative competence, which can be

observed and experienced in a communicative activity, is the nonverbal communication. In recent years, research on the non-verbal communication has considerably enriched, including in the field of education, especially in that of the foreign language classes. It is certainly neither possible nor desirable to offer a model of good nonverbal communication. However, a better knowledge of the nonverbal communication, of the fundamental role it plays in interaction, can produce some positive changes for the learner and the teacher. For this reason, from the tongue-twisters to practicing pronunciation, we invite the learner to observe the way he looks when he speaks, what part of his body expresses joy, sadness, worry, tenderness, authority, etc.

Despite the fact that it has not been clearly demonstrated that humor has a positive impact on learning (Bolkan et al., 2018), humor has many benefits, it entertains students, releases anxiety and creates an enjoyable climate for learning (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015). Due to the above mentioned benefits, and to the fact that it strengthens the relations between the members of a group and keeps students engaged, we believe that the foreign language class is a great environment for the implementation of humor. Even though

there are certain drawbacks in using laughter, teachers should not consider it as a source of disturbance in pedagogical situations, but rather an integral part of certain moments and activities in the foreign language class. In accordance with the different theories about laughter, humor plays a role of facilitator and regulator of communication. Moreover, humor releases the psychological tension inherent in a somewhat frustrating situation, and it is also an excellent defense mechanism that the teacher should respect as such.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has brought into attention two important competences, namely the social and the strategic one, that are an integral part of the communicative competence, which is crucially important for the successful acquisition of the foreign language. Our intention was to offer a brief overview and to remind teachers of useful strategies necessary for developing the students' communicative skills that enables them to cope with the unpredicted that appears in real life situations. Teachers should be creative and use a variety of strategies, such as group working, games, songs and, last but not least, humor to improve students' social and strategic competences.

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