

## COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES

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‘Careless talk costs lives’.  
(British propaganda during WWII)

**Abstract:** *In the last decades communicative competences in a foreign language have become a necessity. You need to speak a foreign language either to study abroad, to find a job or just watch a movie or understand the music you listen to. Learners are taught to be communicators. You do not simply become a communicator if you acquire vocabulary and grammar rules. Language learning is complex and difficult, especially when the language is acquired later in life as a second language. The learning process consists of acquiring a language system, rather than learning a series of disconnected components. Receptive comprehension becomes increasingly important with each grade level because students are required to do more reading and to integrate the information acquired with new knowledge presented by the teacher who has to find the best strategies to help students advance to more complex language structures.*

**Keywords:** learning process, disconnected components, language structures.

### 1. Introduction

English is the language of the military and sailors chosen as a medium for communication with multinational partners. Both at sea and ashore to function well or even to survive, effective communication is crucial as there is a need for a correlation between what the sender is thinking about and what the receiver is thinking about. Both the maritime world and the military one have a specialized language full of phrases of their own. Oral communication is a necessity for leaders because: ‘If you want people to follow you, you have to communicate effectively and clearly what followers should do’ [1] According to Bender, “Powerful leadership comes from knowing what matters to you.” [2] Oral language is about communicating with other people utilizing thinking, knowledge

and skills in order to speak and listen effectively.

### 2. Theoretical background

Communication in foreign languages as defined in the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council* of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006/962/EC) means: “sharing the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one's wants or needs. Communication in foreign languages also calls for skills such as mediation and intercultural understanding.

An individual's level of proficiency will vary between the four dimensions (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and between the different languages, and according to that individual's social and cultural background, environment, needs and/or interests” [3] In other words, what a teacher has to teach is a complex system of communication involving essential skills such as: the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, have and conclude conversations and to read, understand and produce texts appropriate to one's needs. It is not only grammar rules and rich vocabulary. It is the ability to communicate mainly in English when we study, travel or work in an international environment. In order to become communicatively competent students have to be able to actively take part in discussions on familiar and professional subjects and with the help of different strategies, communicate effectively.

When we plan our classes dedicated to oral communication we have as main objectives the following:

- the ability to use English to communicate in speech;
- the ability to actively take part in discussions and express thoughts in English, as well as understand the views and experiences of others ;

- the ability to use English orally in different contexts in order to relate, describe and explain, as well as give reasons for their point of views.

Brown considers that: ‘Second language learners need to be receptive both to those with whom they are communicating and to the language itself, responsive to persons and to the context of communication, and willing and able to place a certain value on the communicative act of interpersonal exchange.’ [4] In 1980, the applied linguists Canale and Swain [5] published an influential article in which they stated that the ability to communicate required four different sub-competencies:

- grammatical (ability to create grammatically correct utterances),
- sociolinguistic (ability to produce socio-linguistically appropriate utterances),
- discourse (ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances), and
- strategic (ability to solve communication problems as they arise).

Michael Halliday [6] proposed a list of 7 functions of language commonly known as “Halliday’s Functions of Language”. These are listed below:

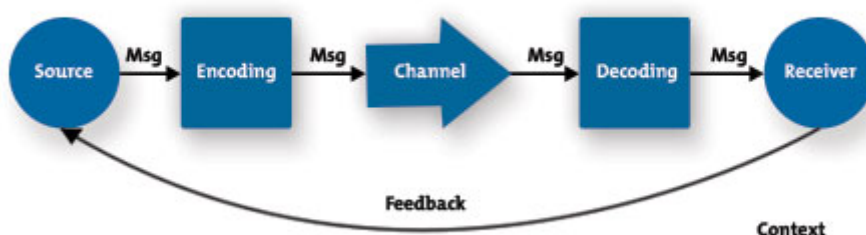
<i>Function</i>	<i>Used for</i>	<i>Demands language of</i>
Instrumental	Expressing needs/Getting things done	Asking, Requesting, Explaining
Regulatory Setting tasks,	Influencing the behaviour, feelings/attitudes of others	Setting tasks Managing, Negotiating, Instructing, Directing, Controlling
Interactional	Getting along with others	Initiating, Sympathising, Reconciling Arguing, Encouraging, Empathising
Personal	Expressing individuality and personal feelings	Stating opinions, Confronting, Expressing thoughts and feelings, Recounting experience
Heuristic	Seeking and learning about the social and physical environment	Interrogating, Discussing, Asking, Querying, Investigating, Clarifying
Imaginary	Creating stories, games, new worlds and new texts	Storytelling, Anticipating, Predicting, Imagining, Playing, Experimenting
Representational	Communicating Information	Telling, Lecturing, Stating facts, Sharing skills, Commenting, Imparting knowledge, Informing

On the other hand Richards and Rodgers [7] suggest at least four basic assumptions about language:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.

- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

In class students are taught to be communicators, not merely users of vocabulary and grammar.



From *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*

### 3. Activities in class

Oral communication is not a simple uttering of words and sentences. It also includes gestures, facial expressions, gestures, voice tone. The main objective is to make the listener/receiver understand the same thoughts and ideas. Only if one succeeds in passing the message across clearly, communication is successful. As future leaders our students must learn how to communicate effectively. To feel at ease speaking in public, to develop the ability to communicate clearly the teacher should practice tasks ranging from conversations, by answering questions and expressing opinions in class to preparing and delivering a “stand-up” speech.

Clear communication is the key in motivating and inspiring others, in maintaining discipline or accountability. Communication can be taught and practice in class by informative presentations to share your knowledge of a subject with your classmates or you may try to persuade them. By practicing free speaking in front of an audience help the students reduce the fear of public speaking and develop their leadership skills. The students simply learn what to say to whom and when. To do so

they have to practice so here are some of the activities that can take place in a classroom as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> year:

- Oral presentations planned during the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the 1<sup>st</sup> year: The students will have at least two rounds of presentations. The first one will be an individual oral presentation designed to serve as a pre-test, a kind of rehearsal for the final presentation. Students are instructed to make a five-minute presentation on a topic of their choice being given minimum instructions. The participation skills session begins with offering the information the student thought of in a well-structured way. The next activity is an informal discussion consisting in questions and answers on that particular topic followed by comments of the students in the audience or the teacher related to the presentation. The next semester students have to deliver a speech on a given topic: a historical personality from the Britain or American history worth talking about. At the same time they have to hand in the written assignment of the same topic. Again each presentation is followed by a question/answer period, and concluded by the presenter's wrap-up. During the courses

on history and culture they also have to 'play the teacher' and bring in information on certain topics given to them at the very beginning of the course. The teacher intervenes as little as possible during communicative activities.

1. Discussion/debate: It is planned in the 2nd semester of the 1st year when students have to prepare given topics of general interest. During these classes students play all the roles (conductor, observer, group presenter, and participating members. Following each discussion, both the students and the instructor provide feedback. To give students the opportunity to practice using communication strategies and language needed in discussions students can be asked to take part in pyramid discussions. This is a group activity with a number of four to six students who will be asked to suggest questions and agree on one to generate answers during the discussion. Once they agree on one topic they are asked to write on a piece of paper three words which come to mind when they think about the question or topic chosen. In their group each student should explain why he/she chose those words and ask their partners to come up with other related words. If you have small groups of students they can exchange the papers and come up with a single topic they should discuss about as a class. They can

agree or disagree using polite formal language. The teacher will note the students with a rich vocabulary, good grammar and appropriate communicative strategies as well as those who need to be guided as they do not master the techniques so well. If you have large classes you can divide them into performers and observers and in the end you ask the observers to provide a feedback asking them to highlight what the students involved in the discussion did well, what they could have done better and what they could improve or change next time.

■ Along the 2nd and 3rd years of study we continue with debates, this time on a given military topic, asking them to develop effective arguments using linking words, generalizing and summarizing, trying to be coherent in being persuasive, in other words structuring their debates, making them as clear as possible.

We chose the following checklist that might be used when evaluating oral presentations. The student should consider such basic criteria when preparing oral communications. The lists are handed over to students in advance so they all know what to have in view when they prepare their presentations as well as when they are in the audience.

<i>Organization and Content (45%):</i>	<i>Poor</i>		<i>Average</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	
Appropriate Introduction	1	2	3	4	5
Clear Thesis	1	2	3	4	5
Presentation Organization	1	2	3	4	5
Adequate Support for Ideas (Weighted 2x)	2	4	6	8	10
Definite Conclusion	1	2	3	4	5
Visual Aids (Appropriateness & Effectiveness)	1	2	3	4	5
Q & A Session-Knowledge of Topic	1	2	3	4	5
Use of Allotted Time	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Presence (15%):</i>					
Physical Appearance, Neatness, and Grooming	1	2	3	4	5
Posture, Gestures, and Movement	1	2	3	4	5
Eye Contact	1	2	3	4	5

<i>Delivery and Grammar (40%):</i>					
Enthusiasm and Vocal Variation (freedom from monotone)	1	2	3	4	5
Preparation and Knowledge of Materials	1	2	3	4	5
Effectiveness of Delivery Method	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary and Use of Appropriate Words	1	2	3	4	5
Freedom from Distracting "Uh"s & "Like"s, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
Pronunciation, Enunciation, Audibility, and Clarity	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar (Weighted 2x)	2	4	6	8	10

From College of Applied Science & Technology *Language Skills Handbook* On-line Edition[8]

These activities offer the teacher and the students a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of this skill.

In order to have a feedback of these activities we asked 87 students about the benefits of having these activities into class. 81% of them answered that they liked them and considered them beneficial while 10 % considered them just all right, while the rest did not like them at all. Those who did not like them are students with a low level of English, poor vocabulary and grammar.

The next question referred to their active participation in the discussions. 24% admitted to be very active in class especially if they have to speak in small groups during seminars, 17% said they are active again during seminars or lab classes. Most of them do not consider themselves as active, especially if the topic is not of interest to them.

We do all these activities to help them overcome oral communication anxiety or "stagefright" as well. It is difficult to speak in front of an audience and it becomes ten times more difficult if you speak in a foreign language you do not master well. It is both frustrating and frightening.

Daly explains why the students in foreign language class feel communication apprehension finding some reasons for it since "they are unprepared, uninterested, unwilling to disclose, alienated from the class, lacking confidence in their competence, or because they fear

communicating" [9] We also should mention another "fear" that of negative evaluation of both classmates and teacher. We think that it is the teachers 'job' to help the students function successfully academically and professionally by learning and practicing effective oral communication skills. Speaking activities best occur in classrooms in which learners feel comfortable and confident, free to choose their own fields of interest, and have plenty of opportunities to speak.

Students should be aware of the fact that communication is an exchange of meaning and understanding in which meaning is central to communication. They should be at ease when communicating knowing all the time 'how, when, and why to say what to whom.' [10]

### **Conclusion**

Communication in foreign languages is the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form in different contexts. If you master the language you will be able to listen and speak, read or write well. If you are aware of the cultural environment that language is used in you will also develop cultural understanding. As teachers it is our task to enable our students with communication strategies, to develop their communicative competences so as they should understand spoken messages, initiate, and carry on conversations as well as read, understand

and produce texts appropriate to their needs. If they communicate well in the foreign language they will be able to understand and share meaning with other individuals.

All language teachers should do their best choosing the right techniques and procedures in the process of teaching for students to become communicatively

competent. In the military environment communication involves the effective conveying of facts, ideas, thoughts, feelings and values in order to get information and understanding and function well in an English speaking international group as ‘careless talk costs lives’.

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