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Communicative Competences as a European Identity Instrument

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Abstract

Complex historical processes have generated national identities conditioned by sharing a common language, traditions, ethnic roots and often religion. Continuing processes are generating a new European identity, which will be possible only if the characteristic of language is shared for communication and cooperation. The status of English as a Language for International Communication is undisputed and rarely attracts critical scrutiny. But we often ignore the fact that not all European citizens are English speakers. We describe developing interdisciplinary and the quantitative analysis of results when the educational language environment is the basis for transdisciplinary cooperation.

Plugging the language into the European society

Complex historical processes have generated national identities conditioned by sharing a common language, traditions, ethnic roots and often religion. Historical processes going on at present are generating a new identity – a European identity, which is possible only on the grounds of sharing common characteristics – the language, in the first place, as a means of communication and cooperation. Language is not only a major aspect of culture, but also a means of access to a different cultural mindset, it is an imperative arising out of the needs, ties and interrelationships of people entering the ‘interdependence age’ within a new space – the integrated European society. The status of English as a ‘Language for International Communication’ is no longer in dispute and rarely attracts critical scrutiny. Unfortunately, talking about citizenship and European identity, we often ignore the fact that not all the European citizens are English-speaking people. Consequently, in developing European identity, serving the educational message and teaching English in particular, is a form of stakeholder involvement (Longworth, 2004). The pragmatic external world – employers, the market – dictate the needs and demands for education, hence its influence on the higher educational system, which responds to these, supplying learners with the ordered qualities, knowledge and skills which are forged by means of various academic disciplines and courses. Needs and demands of individuals are formed under the needs and demands of the competitive global marketplace and the job market – the society – the system which guarantees its citizens the main rights for education and employment.

The responsibility of contemporary educational providers is to yield to the new imperative of interdisciplinary connectedness of knowledge and skills, to work out educational modules which are in compliance with the tasks and demands of employers, particular businesses and the European job market. Integration of the European society very much depends on what instruments we will apply to promote the unity of science through improving the communication among young specialists to enhance cooperation

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and co-creation of a unified sustainable society. Integrated trans-disciplinary module cycles aim to ensure learning and assessment on the basis of the System approach so that individuals could understand and be given the competency, creativity and confidence to cope with the urgent professional tasks and changes, problem-solving and situation-specific reactions not only within the European society but also globally.

Information Systems Management University (ISMU), accredited by Education USA TC as an authorised testing language centre of Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in Riga (Latvia), has a certain experience in developing such interdisciplinary modules, as well as in quantitative analysis of the testing results of the TOEIC modular sections within the framework of Business English, when educational language environment serves as the basis for trans-disciplinary cooperation in Management and Information Technologies (Lobanova, 2006; Shunin, Lobanova, 2006). On the basis of the System approach the authors have worked out the criteria and quantitative indices of interim and final results of students' achievement in the target language acquisition in the course of trans-disciplinary modular learning. Using these data the authors have calculated and worked out the Learning Curve for the TOEIC test at Information Systems Management University, reflecting the necessary time and content modules to achieve higher levels of language proficiency.

The System approach in developing language communicative competence

The General System Theory (GST) developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s (Bertalanffy, 1968) gives primacy to interrelationships, emphasising shifts from constituent parts to the organisation of parts. It is from these dynamically managed communicative interrelationships that new properties of a learning system (a group of learners) emerge (Shunin, Lobanova, 2006). An example is the properties of these letters which, when put in order, can give rise to meaning which does not exist in the letters by themselves. This further explains the integration of tools, like language, that helps create a vibrant and innovative competence-based educational system – a system where students develop high-level competences, which include initiative, leadership, managerial ability, and the ability to communicate effectively.

The System Approach ideally serves language acquisition – developing language communicative competences – since it views a language user primarily as a 'social agent', i.e. a member of society who has tasks to accomplish in particular circumstances, in a specific environment. The GST, in its integrative role, brings together principles and concepts from general human competences (knowledge of the world, socio-cultural knowledge) with more specifically language-related communicative competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic competences). Still, communication cannot be about nothing. In its trans-disciplinary function it encompasses a lot of domains – historical, geographical, social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, and many others, demanding a certain amount of knowledge and awareness. In our case, the English language is the instrument for developing socio-cultural and occupational competences in international tourism, business, management and computer technologies.

English for international communication in the European speech community

Any education begins with the language. In the process of integration and citizenship education in Europe, our main aim as educational providers is to ensure every individual the ability to use English for international communication to guarantee everyone his share in the stakeholder involvement - education and employment in that country which one has consciously chosen to identify with the future profession or interest (e.g. sports clubs or societies for protecting environment) and not obligatory in the country that they themselves have not chosen to belong, depending on the place of birth and parents. Such multiple possibilities enhance the sense of European identity.

For English language educators the most problematic aspect of defining English as an international language remains the notion of competence for EIL. It is clearly inappropriate to teach language that is only applicable in limited situations in a target culture that may never be visited by students. It is obvious that what makes 'appropriateness' in international communication cannot be defined in terms of a single speech community. Still, there is not a single European speech community so far. In this early stage of the development of our European speech community, it is clear that there has to be an agreed body of standard international English to be learnt or taught for competent European communication. The notion of 'communicative language competence' has to be re-considered for the teaching of English for international communication. It cannot be reduced to a single, limited, mono-cultural concept.

'International' communication seems to require a set of interdependent competences that reinforce each other – linguistic competences (include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills), sociolinguistic competences (refer to the socio-cultural conditions of language use, especially between representatives of different cultures – rules of politeness, norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, certain fundamental rituals in a community), and pragmatic competences (focus on achieving mutual understanding - intelligibility - in spoken or written texts, concerning, as well, the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, irony and parody) (Canale and Swain, 1980). Strategic competence is also highlighted as an important component of 'communicative competence' (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997; Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

The System approach in piloting the TOEIC test for European workplace

From the point of view of language teaching-learning and in the persistence of a chronic lack of fixed norms of a standard EIL, the internationally recognised TOEIC test proves to be a good example of the System approach to language acquisition, since the test helps to define the competences on seven parameters required for a variety of types of work and to measure these competences effectively and fairly applying state-of-the-art assessment systems that meet professional testing standards. On the basis of the System approach the authors have worked out the criteria and quantitative indices of interim and final results of students' achievement in the target language acquisition in the course of trans-disciplinary modular learning. An empirical study was used to analyse the results of the English language Olympiad at Information Systems Management University (Latvia), where twenty-nine learners were offered the materials worked out on the basis

of the TOEIC test - a two-hour, multiple-choice test that consisted of 200 questions divided into two separately timed sections – Listening and Reading.

We got the results on seven types of task corresponding to certain communicative language competences and compared them with each other.

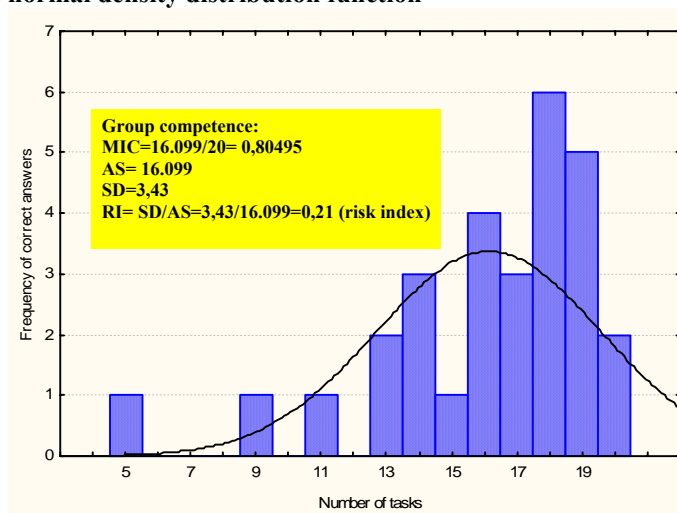
1. Phonological-Associative Competence. Involves skills in the perception of the sound units and their realisation in particular context.
2. Micro-Functional Competence. Knowledge of and ability to use the spoken discourse and written texts in communication for particular functional purposes.
3. Pragmatic-Discourse Competence. Listening comprehension of authentic spoken English.
4. Functional-Propositional Competence. Authentic examples of spoken English from workplace, travel and leisure situations. They vary in level of formality and include announcements, short speeches, and advertisements.
5. Lexical-Semantic Competence. Knowledge of and ability to use the vocabulary of a language and grammatical forms (of words and sentences).
6. Grammatical Competence. Knowledge of and ability to assemble language elements into meaningful messages and sentences using grammatical resources.
7. Pragmatic-Design Competence. Knowledge of and ability to control the ordering of sentences. Knowledge of design conventions, how information is structured, how written texts (formal letters, memos, advertisements, faxes, invitations, notices, schedules, e-mails etc) are laid out, signposted and sequenced.

The results on seven parameters allowed us to make measurement scales showing each student's level of competence and compare students with each other, as well as, to compare the levels of competences with each other. However, the format restrictions of this paper do not permit us to illustrate all the results. The purpose of this paper is to let you know what we are doing and give you a global impression of the students' achievements and the ways of coordinating the educational process.

We calculated the average score of the group's task performance – AS. It gave us the possibility to define the mean index of communicative language competence – MIC (the ratio of the average score to the number of tasks). This is a very important parameter since it reflects not only how successfully students managed to cope with the task, but also the level of their competence in a particular language area. On the one hand, the average score (AS) might demonstrate the level of the group's particular language competence. On the other hand, the AS on its own cannot be considered as totally objective since it does not reflect the scope of results dispersion in the group, which might result in neglecting weaker students in the educational process. This would turn up a major pedagogical and methodical mistake. To get the objective evaluation, it is vital to take into consideration the standard deviation – SD. If the index of the standard deviation is reasonably low, the homogeneity of results in the group is sufficiently high. Our pedagogical and methodical objective is to secure the decrease of the results deviation – SD – and the increase of the average score – AS, demonstrating the students' group performance.

Therefore, to control the quality of student achievement and verify the dynamics of its progress, another component – risk index – RI – has been introduced (a ratio of the standard deviation to the average score – SD/AS), which demonstrates the degree of confidence in the average score – to what extent this figure is objective and reliable. If RI is relatively low, approaching $\rightarrow 0$, it means that the level of mistakes dispersion is rather low and the average score might be quite high and reliable. Thus, relying only on the average score might lead to tough pedagogical mistakes, which in fact constitute risk. It might turn out that half of the group showed very good results and another half demonstrated rather low results, but the average score appeared to be quite satisfying. Therefore, if test results in a group are approximately homogeneous, risk function – RI – will be relatively low, which presupposes that the average score might be considered quite objective, worth confidence and the applied teaching methods work efficiently.

Figure 1. Phonological-Associative Competence: Answers Distribution Density in comparison with the normal density distribution function



Teaching groups with a high risk coefficient and a small risk coefficient demand different methods, otherwise more successful students will move rapidly forward in language acquisition, while weaker students might fall out of the process due to inability to succeed in coping with high-level tasks. As an example, the bar graph below shows the Phonological-Associative Competence: Answers Distribution Density in comparison with the normal density distribution function. The total number of tasks is 20, the mean index of competence $MIC=0,80495$ (80,495%), the average score $AS=16,099$, the standard deviation $SD=3,43$ and the risk index $RI=0,21$ (see Figure 1)

If we consider that the given set of answers has a normal distribution, we see the graph where most of the answers are close to the average index – AS. SD shows how the answers are distributed in relation to the AS. We know that about 68% of answers are found within one SD and about 95% within two SDs. Thus, knowing the average index – AS, we can interpret individual results. Analogically, the graphs were drawn corresponding to the rest of the six competences. They showed different levels of

students' competences, but more importantly, they demonstrated different degrees of mistakes dispersion – SD. The most problematic competences appeared to be the 4th - Functional-Propositional Competence, the 6th - Grammatical Competence and the 7th - Pragmatic-Design Competence. The analysis of the obtained data helped the authors to work out educational modules with a special emphasis on problematic areas (e.g., modal verbs, conditional sentences, phrasal verbs, prepositions).

Figure 2. Overall communicative competences

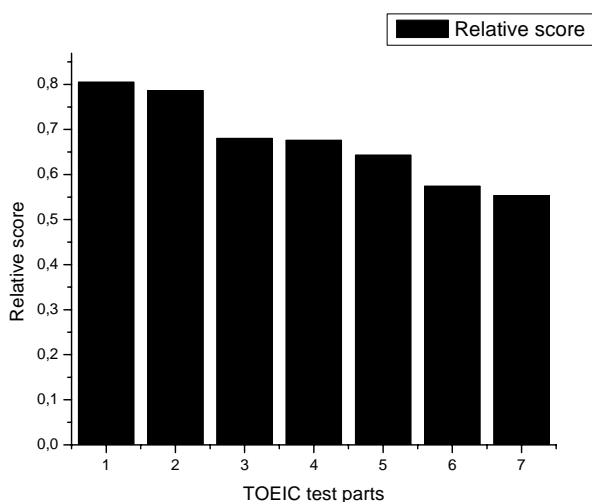
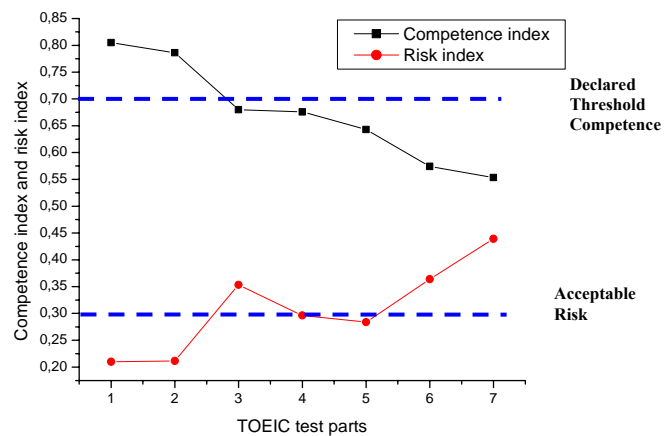


Figure 2 shows overall communicative competences demonstrated by the students involved. We can observe a strong tendency to decreasing towards the reading tasks. The results for Listening Comprehension are better than for Reading English. About 73% of the spoken questions have been solved by more than 80% of the students. Understanding written English is more difficult: the main part of the questions has been solved by 40%-50% of the students. There might be possible objective and subjective reasons for the situation observed. Most of the time during the classes is spent regularly on exercises for listening spoken English and speaking it. 95% of instruction is given in English. In addition, lots of Latvian students listen to music, watch TV channels, especially musical ones, in English. They often are highly motivated to understand those messages. Understanding written English is given less attention.

Figure 3 shows the upper descending line of the group Competence Index and the lower ascending line of the Risk Index. It can vividly assure us that with the decrease of the AS and MIC, the risk index – RI increases, revealing no trust in the AS. Figure 3 shows the total competence values for the tested group where the MIC index is less than 70% which does not correspond to the predetermined goal (80%-90%) and the RI is more than 20% (paying attention to Pareto's principle). This is an alarming signal which demands a critical analysis of the adequacy of the materials, the methods of teaching, and other components of the educational process. At the same time, the main problem area mentioned concerns the link between the English classes in the secondary school and high school. Most Latvian high school teachers feel that the knowledge students gain

at secondary school is not sufficient for a higher educational institution. Students come from different regions of the country from schools which are sometimes very poorly equipped, where there are almost no special teachers of English and lots of teachers have had no special training in teaching English.

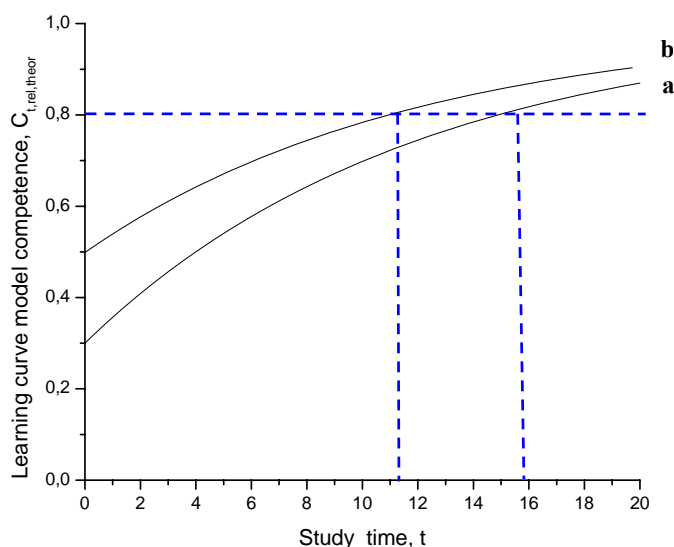
Figure 3. Comparison of Competence Index and Risk Index for different TOEIC test parts



Learning Curve Model for the TOEIC test

To control the dynamics of communicative competence development, the authors have worked out the Learning Curve model: $C(t) = C_0 + (1 - C_0)(1 - \exp(-\lambda t))$ which encompasses the initial level of a relative competence C_0 , the rate of the learning progress λ , as well as permits to define the characteristic time necessary for the achievement of a target competence level $1/\lambda$. Thus, if we know the initial level of a competence and the characteristic rate of the learning progress (according to the model), we can define the necessary time to attain the target (predetermined) level of competence (see Figure 4). The authors have worked out a typical, chronologically applicable set of educational modules, including methodical materials, which allow to start the educational process at any level of competence, as well as, to control the interim results and the quality of student achievement after each module to guarantee each learner tangible, efficient results in language acquisition.

Figure 4. The typical Learning Curves based on the data of educational experiment. The initial levels of a relative competence $C_0=0,3$ (a); $C_0=0,5$ (b); the rate of the learning progress $\lambda=0,084$ (experiment); a characteristic time for the target level attainment ~ 12 .



Conclusion

The comprehensive System approach to language acquisition not only provides a scaling of overall language proficiency in a target language in the course of trans-disciplinary modular learning, but also a breakdown of language use and language competences which makes it easier to specify objectives and describe achievements of the most diverse kinds in accordance with the varying needs, characteristics, resources of learners and demands of the European job market.

The quantitative indices worked out by the authors on the basis of the System approach allows the controlling of the quality of student achievement. The Learning Curve model gives the possibility to coordinate the dynamics of communicative competence development helping students become skilful manipulators, synthesisers and creators of knowledge.

A language is part of the identity of anyone who is able to use it and the level of competence reveals the degree of this 'sameness'. The new paradigm of the European society brings to the agenda the new paradigm of language education. This new paradigm envisages that language teachers become pluricultural trans-disciplinary mediators promoting constructive solutions to overcoming the barriers to effective communication among young professionals on the way of co-creating a successful and functioning model for harmonious integration and common European identity.

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