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Introduction: Key Competences in Foreign Language Learning

The article revisits some key issues in the development of the concept of competences in foreign language learning and teaching. More specifically, the concepts are examined in both historical and theoretical terms and their relevance to modern language learning, teaching and assessment is highlighted. A basic distinction is made between general and communicative language competences, following the guidelines suggested in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). General competences, not specific to any language, include declarative and socio-cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness and skills, while communicative language competences, empowering the individual to act using specific linguistic means, encompass linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. The article elaborates on the concept of both general and communicative language competences, giving a brief historical overview of the impact they had on language education (including EFL) in both theory and practice, and also the current state of affairs within relevant EU legislation and beyond.

1. Competence as a Linguistic and Pedagogical Notion

Historical Perspectives: Chomsky and Hymes

When Chomsky in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* introduced the concepts of linguistic competence and linguistic performance, what he had in mind was the distinction between “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language” and “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (Chomsky 1965: 4). What his theoretical framework, known as Generative Grammar, was subsequently going to focus on was knowledge of language structure necessary for understanding and performance. He noted that

[L]inguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965: 3)

According to this standpoint, therefore, linguistic theory is perceived as essentially mentalistic, “concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behaviour” (Chomsky 1965: 4). In other words, it is primarily interested

in identifying the speaker-listener’s actual knowledge, not what he or she reports about their knowledge (see Chomsky 1965: 8). By analysing the data of performance, the linguist’s task is confined to determining the underlying system of rules mastered by the native speaker of a language and employed in actual performance (Chomsky 1965: 8).

This rather limiting definition of the scope of linguistic theory and its central focus prompted the development of the theoretical framework known as the Ethnography of Speaking and subsequently of the theory of Communicative Competence, initiated by Dell Hymes. Hymes’ approach builds on the analytical framework known as the functions of language, which Roman Jakobson originally presented to the scholarly audience at the 1958 Conference on Style held at Indiana University. This theoretical viewpoint emphasises not just the importance of the speaker’s linguistic competence, but also his or her mastery of the contextual, pragmatic, socio-cultural and stylistic appropriateness of the utterance. In his seminal article “On Communicative Competence” Hymes asserted:

We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. (Hymes 1972: 277-8)

He goes on to introduce and elaborate on the notion of communicative competence, highlighting the limitations of the competence-performance dichotomy in Generative Grammar. If competence is only meant to deal with the criterion of grammaticality and disregard the criterion of appropriateness, as Chomsky’s linguistic theory suggests, it is necessary to revisit the notion and look more closely into its complexity. Hymes, therefore, pleads for a more integrated approach and suggests that linguistic theory should become much more unified with theories of communication and culture in order to address these questions appropriately. More specifically, he distinguishes four key questions on the research agenda of this integrated linguistic theory:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally *possible*;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* [...] in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually *performed*, and what its doing entails. (Hymes 1972: 281; emphasis original)

Hymes' redefined notion of competence is hierarchically the most general one and refers to the capabilities of a person. It depends on "both (tacit) *knowledge* and (ability for) *use*" (Hymes 1972: 282; emphasis original). Subsequently,

[...] the goal of a broad theory of communicative competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systemically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behaviour. (Hymes 1972: 286)

This theoretical framework and the research results it was about to yield had a groundbreaking impact on theoretical language teaching approaches and their practical applications. More specifically, it revolutionised language education by introducing the concept of language(s) for communication and giving rise to communicative language teaching.

Pedagogical Perspectives: Canale/Swain and Spolsky

Two basic criteria encompassing the notion of competence as defined by Hymes, grammaticality and appropriateness, were about to become widely accepted by language teaching professionals. Their methodological approach would enthusiastically embrace the postulate that the acquisition of lexico-grammatical fluency in a foreign language is not sufficient enough if it does not incorporate a thorough understanding of the underlying pragmatic and socio-cultural rules that govern successful communicative events. A competent foreign language speaker will not, therefore, only display a high level of accuracy in his or her choice of vocabulary and grammatical structures, but understanding of the contextual appropriateness of his or her utterances. These two major criteria, subsuming a range of complex skills, would become known as **communicative competence** in the theory and practice of language education.

The state of affairs in language pedagogy, particularly in reference to the notion of communicative competence, was reassessed and redefined in a number of publications, most notably in a highly influential position paper co-authored by two leading methodologists and language educators, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, published in *Applied Linguistics* in 1980:

[...] in this paper we have chosen to examine currently accepted principles of 'communicative approaches' to second language pedagogy by determining the extent to which they are grounded in theories of language, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and other language-related disciplines. The examination of the theoretical bases has led us to question some of the existing principles, and in turn to develop a somewhat modified set of principles which is consistent with a more comprehensive theoretical framework for the consideration of communicative competence. (Canale/Swain 1980: 1)

The authors looked closely into achievements of students of French as a foreign language, pointing out that traditional grammar-based tests were not able

to indicate the level of students' communicative competence acquired through the immersion language programmes they had attended. Students' linguistic competence, although undeniably playing a very important role, could only be properly assessed as part of their overall communicative competence, which Canale and Swain re-examined and developed into a four-part theoretical model (Canale/Swain 1980; Canale 1983).

Communicative competence thus defined encompasses four major interdependent categories: **grammatical competence** (i.e., mastery of the phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexico-semantic structure of a language), **sociolinguistic competence** (i.e., knowledge of the rules of language use), **discourse competence** (i.e., cohesiveness in form and coherence in meaning in both spoken and written domains), and finally **strategic competence** (verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed in order to compensate for gaps in knowledge or insufficient fluency). It is still necessary to maintain a basic distinction between communicative competence and communicative performance, the latter being "the actual demonstration of this knowledge in *real* second language situations and for *authentic* communicative purposes" (Canale/Swain 1980: 6, emphasis original), the successfulness of which will depend on various factors, such as volition, motivation, etc. In other words,

[...] we have [...] adopted the term 'communicative competence' to refer to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the use of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use. Communicative competence is to be distinguished from communicative performance, which is the realization of these competences and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances [...] (Canale/Swain 1980:1).

Canale and Swain's perspective is primarily pedagogical, which is why they put a strong emphasis on investigating the implications of their theoretical model on the four main areas of foreign language teaching: syllabus design, teaching methodology, teacher training and materials development.

With respect to syllabus design, Canale and Swain maintain that "a functionally organised communicative approach for all stages of second language learning" (Canale/Swain 1980: 32) is the most effective one, "with a highly useful and visible purpose of second language study, namely communication" (Canale/Swain 1980: 33). Furthermore, a functionally organised communicative approach allows for a better understanding of norms and values of the second language culture, an important aspect that was missing in the traditional grammar-based approaches to syllabus design.

Teaching methodology, on the other hand, should mainly be concerned with employing classroom activities that reflect in a more direct way "those communication activities that the learner is most likely to engage in"

(Canale/Swain 1980: 33). Authentic, real-life, purposeful classroom activities (progressing in complexity) raise the learner's awareness of the "aspects of genuine communication such as its basis in social interaction, the relative creativity and unpredictability of utterances [...]" (Canale/Swain 1980: 33).

When it comes to teacher training, however, it is evident that the traditional role of the teacher should be re-examined and re-defined if the communicative teaching methodology is to be implemented in foreign language classrooms. Is the teacher now meant to become just a facilitator, an instigator of such communicative situations that will prompt the development of adequate communicative skills of the learners? It is imperative, Canale and Swain maintain, that the teacher holds on to his or her original pedagogic role, particularly when dealing with students who are still at lower levels of language proficiency, and gradually adopt the role of a facilitator of the learning process. This role, however, should only be seen as complementary, never as alternative to the original didactic role of the teacher. Consequently, teacher training should put an emphasis on developing an adequate level of communicative competence of language teachers in order to enable them to carry out their role successfully (Canale/Swain 1980: 33).

Lastly, what does the model imply for the conceptual design of teaching materials? Functionally organised textbooks, the authors maintain, need to be based on a thorough empirical investigation on communicative syllabus design (Canale/Swain 1980: 34).

Closely related to the question of how the introduction of the communicative competence model impacted foreign language teaching and learning is the influence it had on language testing and test design. One of the most influential figures in the field of language testing, particularly in the implementation of innovative approaches in the theory and practice of language testing and assessment, is Bernard Spolsky. In his widely cited and highly influential article "Communicative Competence, Language Proficiency, and Beyond" he notes:

The relevance of a theory of communicative competence to language testing is obvious [...]. Language tests involve measuring a subject's knowledge of, and proficiency in, the use of language. A theory of communicative competence is a theory of the nature of such knowledge and proficiency. One cannot develop sound language tests without a method of defining what it means to know a language, for until you have decided what you are measuring, you cannot claim to have measured it [...] (Spolsky 1989: 140).

The starting point for any language testing professional inevitably remains the perennial question of what knowing a language actually means. A more practical and pragmatic aspect of that issue would certainly be how to design an effective testing model and integrate it into the wider postmodern education paradigm of our day.

In an attempt to offer a possible solution to this problem, Spolsky makes a case for the introduction of the functional approach to language testing, arguing that it "starts at a more holistic level" (Spolsky 1989: 141), putting forward a possible model (e.g. drawing from speech act theory, ethnography of communication, or perhaps a pragmatic inventory of notions and functions characteristic of a certain domain). Such a model is capable of providing "a heuristic device for making a list of communication tasks that a language learner might need to accomplish" (Spolsky 1989: 141). Devising it is a complex endeavour that has to be informed by a thorough theoretical clarification of the relationship between function and structure, as well as a comprehensive account of the components of language proficiency and the boundaries that delimit them (Spolsky 1989: 144).

The following can be offered as a brief recapitulation of the topics discussed so far. From the theoretical point of view, competence is a technical term introduced and used by some of the most influential linguistic theories of the 20th century. In Chomsky's Generative Grammar, linguistic competence denotes knowledge of language structure that the native speaker possesses and employs in actual performance (the use of language in concrete situations). Hymes' theory of Communicative Competence, on the other hand, maintains that the speaker's linguistic competence cannot be divorced from his or her mastery of the contextual, pragmatic, socio-cultural and stylistic appropriateness of the utterance.

Hymes' theoretical framework had a groundbreaking impact on the theory and practice of language learning, teaching and assessment. It revolutionised language education by introducing the concept of language(s) for communication and giving rise to the communicative teaching approach. Communicative competence as a notion was enthusiastically embraced by the language teaching profession and redefined further by Canale and Swain. In practical terms, a functionally organised communicative approach proved itself very effective in foreign language classrooms, putting an emphasis on authentic communicative situations that the learners are likely to find themselves in. Lastly, a functional approach to language testing and assessment puts forward a model capable of producing a comprehensive list of communication tasks that a language learner needs to accomplish. It relies on empirical investigations on the nature of language proficiency and its components.

2. Current Approaches to Competences in Language Education: *Common European Framework and Beyond*

Language(s) for Communication: *Common European Framework*...

After the meeting held on the 24th September 1982, The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe put forward a document outlining recommendations to the member states concerning modern languages policy. In the preamble to the document three basic principles were highlighted as a starting point based on which the recommendations were made and presented to the governments of the member states. Namely, the Committee acknowledged the fact

that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;

[...] that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;

[and] that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level, by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies [...] (*Recommendation R (82)18*).

Over the years the Council of Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe carried out a number of initiatives promoting the principles outlined above. More precisely, Council's own activities, and in particular the Modern Languages Section of the Committee for Education, were "concerned to encourage, support and co-ordinate the efforts of member governments and nongovernmental institutions to improve language learning" (CEF 2001: 2). Their activities covered a range of areas with a view to ensuring

that all sections of [the] populations have access to effective means of acquiring a knowledge of the languages of other member states (or of other communities within their own country) as well as the skills in the use of those languages that will enable them to satisfy their communicative needs (CEFR 2001: 3).

and, perhaps more importantly, to promoting

research and development programmes leading to the introduction, at all educational levels, of methods and materials best suited to enabling different classes and types of student to acquire a communicative proficiency appropriate to their specific needs. (CEFR 2001: 3)

One of the most concrete results of these efforts and activities is the creation of the *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (2001), a comprehensive document providing "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (CEFR 2001: 1). It outlines in a detailed manner "what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a **language for communication** and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act **effectively**" (CEFR 2001: 1, own emphasis). The framework, therefore, takes onboard key concepts of the theoretical and methodological frameworks that the communicative approach to foreign language learning and teaching has to offer, without openly pledging its allegiance to any of them specifically. Furthermore, it explicitly positions itself as a context-free document, non-prescriptive and flexible enough to stand side by side with various frameworks, approaches and provenances:

In accordance with the basic principles of pluralist democracy, the Framework aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic. For that reason it cannot take up a position on one side or another of current theoretical disputes on the nature of language acquisition and its relation to language learning, nor should it embody any one particular approach to language teaching to the exclusion of all others. (CEFR 2001: 18)

The framework's target readership are professionals and policy-makers in the area of language and intercultural education. Therefore, it is primarily usage- and, perhaps even more so, action-oriented, designed

to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. (CEFR 2001: 1).

Structurally, it is presented as a taxonomic list of thematically inter-related units, in an attempt "to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components" (CEFR 2001: 1). The framework asserts that "[c]ompetences are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions" (CEFR 2001: 9), and makes a basic distinction between the general ones, "those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities" (CEFR 2001: 9), and communicative language competences, "empower[ing] the individual to act using specifically linguistic means" (CEFR 2001: 9).

The **general competences** comprise notions such as declarative knowledge (*savoir*), skills (*savoir-faire*) and existential competence (*savoir-être*), as well as the general ability to learn (*savoir apprendre*) (CEFR 2001: 11). They are to be seen as a prerequisite for any language learning activity.

Knowledge as one of the key and perhaps most complex general competences comes as a result of the person's day-to-day experience of the world (empirical knowledge), as well as his or her formal learning activities (academic knowledge). Both play a very important role in the process of language learning and teaching. More specifically, empirical knowledge, encompassing both universal concepts commonly known and shared by humankind, as well as those culture-specific values and norms, characteristic of individual communities, groups, societies, etc., is an essential element in intercultural communicative events and instrument in managing language activities in a foreign language. When it comes to academic knowledge, however, its importance becomes immediately obvious when using a language for professional and subject-specific purposes (see CEFR 2001: 11-12).

Skills, ("know-how"), "depend more on the ability to carry out procedures than on declarative knowledge, but this skill may be facilitated by the acquisition of 'forgettable' knowledge and be accompanied by forms of existential competence" (CEFR 2001: 11), while existential competence is to be understood "as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes" (CEFR 2001: 11). Lastly, the ability to learn activates a range of skills, competences and knowledge and can be "conceived as knowing how, or being disposed, to discover "otherness" – whether the other is another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge" (CEFR 2001: 12).

Even though it does not explicitly endorse any theoretical model, the framework largely draws from the legacy of major communicative-functional approaches (see Hymes 1972; Canale/Swain 1980; Canale 1983) when defining **communicative language competence** as a notion comprising three main components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic, each of which involves a range of skills, knowledge and abilities. Communicative language competence is instrumental in the performance of all language activities, such as reception, production, interaction and mediation.

Linguistic competences encompass elements of lexical, phonological, syntactic knowledge and skills of other relevant dimensions of language as a system, excluding its sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions.

Sociolinguistic competences, on the other hand, define "the sociocultural conditions of language use" (CEFR 2001: 13), and as such are crucial in communicative events in intercultural settings. Promoting the development of the learners' ability to decode these culture specific conditions and master the rules of their usage remains as high as ever on the list of language teaching priorities.

Pragmatic competences refer to "the functional use of linguistic resources [...], drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges" (CEFR 2001: 13). It involves both written and spoken domains, cohesion and coherence, contextual appropriateness of the utterance, etc. The culture-specific component

lies at the heart of pragmatic competences, the mastery of which assures a much more successful communicative exchange in a range of intercultural settings.

The document outlines levels of language proficiency both "vertically", i.e. specifies the actual levels in an ascending order (A1-C2), and "horizontally", that is, across different domains describing parameters of communicative activity. The levels are divided into three broad categories (A – Basic User; B – Independent User; C – Proficient User), each of which is further subcategorised. Basic User thus includes Breakthrough (A1) and Waystage (A2) levels; Independent User comprises Threshold (B1) and Vantage (B2) levels; while, finally, Proficient User subsumes the two highest levels: Effective Operational Proficiency (C1) and Mastery (C2). The framework goes on to specify each level by offering a comprehensive list of function-oriented "can-do" descriptors, meant to cover reception, production and interaction (CEFR 2001: 22f).

No matter how precisely defined each level is expected to be, however, there is still a certain amount of arbitrariness about it, caused by factors such as how individual education systems are set up and for what purpose the proposed scales are meant to be used (see CEFR 2001: 17). Moreover, the CEFR levels almost exclusively observe the vertical progress in language proficiency, while the horizontal aspect of it largely remains out of focus. Language learning is a process that does not involve the learners making their way up the scale only; progress is also lateral, achieved "by broadening their performance capabilities rather than increasing their proficiency in terms of the same category" (CEFR 2001: 17).

... And Beyond

The *Common European Framework* has ushered in a new era in language education policy within the member states of the Council of Europe. It has given them an opportunity to reform and standardise their national foreign language curricula and make transparent and explicit what learning outcomes are to be striven for as a result of this newly implemented Europe-wide language policy.

The Council of Europe, for its part, continues to lead and inspire initiatives that are meant to take the Framework from its language-neutral generality to language-specific reference level descriptions, defining finely and precisely the lexico-grammatical and functional repertoire the learner needs to possess in order to be able to perform at a certain level of language proficiency.

One such initiative, known as the *Reference Level Description (RLD) for National and Regional Languages*, uses the framework as its anchor point in an attempt to define the CEFR levels for specific languages (Council of Europe's *Guide* 2005: 3f). A number of countries have already joined the initiative, working on RLDs for languages such as Czech, German, English, French, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese.

Another important initiative, emanating from the framework and the results of its implementation, is the *European Indicator of Language Competence*, proposed by the EU member states' officials at the European Council meeting held in Barcelona in March 2002. The main purpose of the initiative is to measure foreign language skills in each member state. The results, once fully obtained and analysed, will inform future endeavours to improve plurilingual competences of the citizens of Europe. The first round of the project focuses on reading and listening comprehension skills, as well as writing skills of secondary school students in the participating countries, and currently includes languages most commonly taught as foreign languages in the Union (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish).

To conclude, the *Common European Framework*, a document commissioned by the Council of Europe, outlines "what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication" (CEFR 2001: 1) and gives a detailed taxonomic list of function-oriented descriptors, specifying the levels of language proficiency (A1-C2). The framework makes a basic distinction between general competences, not specific to any language, and communicative language competences, empowering the individual to act using specific linguistic means.

A number of initiatives, led and inspired by the Council of Europe and its mission, are currently underway. Their results are expected to inform future directions of research and development in language education policy in the Wider Europe.

3. Implications for EFL Teaching and Ways Forward

Since the advent of communicative approaches, the EFL teaching profession has readily embraced its ethos and welcomed the impact it had on all key areas of its activity, including curricular innovations, EFL classroom methodology, teacher training and materials design. The shift from grammar-based EFL pedagogy to the communicative-functional one coincided with the spread of the English language, leading to its global geographical dispersion. This, in turn, gave rise to a growing number of regional and national varieties of the language, with unique and complex sociolinguistic profiles (see Leung 2005: 133f. and further literature recommended therein). Latest estimates suggest that there are approximately 350 million native speakers of English, up to 500 million speakers of English as a second/additional language and potentially up to 1000 million people around the world who use it for a variety of purposes and for whom it is neither their native/first or second/additional language (Leung 2005: 133). Moreover, "English seems to have joined the list of basic skills" (Graddol

2006: 72), requiring a serious reconsideration of its traditional 'foreign language' status in the curricula worldwide.

Challenges posed to the EFL teaching profession today are equally unique and complex. They essentially all cluster around one single question – which model of teaching English is the most effective one and, subsequently, which criteria should it be chosen. At the very first attempt to offer a possible answer to this, one might stumble over the question of which model of English is the "right" one and how it should be chosen. A possible answer, however open-ended, could be found in the fact that "[t]here is no single way of teaching English, no single way of learning it, no single motive for doing so, no single syllabus or textbook, [...] and, indeed, no single variety of English which provides the target of learning" (Graddol 2006: 82).

Language education is instrumental in creating a competent communicator able to function effectively in intercultural settings. Being an integral part of the wider postmodern education paradigm, it is imperative that it stays as alert as ever in order to understand current trends and predict future requirements. The concept of "language(s) for communication" revolutionised the language teaching profession of the 20th century. It is time to take it further and welcome in the new "language(s) for intercultural communication" era.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the article was twofold: to give an introductory overview of the notion of competence both diachronically and synchronically and to discuss the current state of affairs within the EU policies and activities. This was achieved by elaborating on the notion of competence from the linguistic and pedagogical viewpoints, revisiting the relevant chapters of some of the most influential theoretical frameworks of the 20th century. Finally, the *Common European Framework* and other initiatives inspired by the Council of Europe and its mission to improve plurilingual competences of the citizens of Europe were briefly presented and discussed.

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