TACKLING THE CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN LANGUAGE EDUCAITON: DO WE DEVELOP SKILLS OR COMPETENCES?

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Abstract: The article examines the sometimes confusing use of the terms competence and skills in the Moldovan language education context. Teachers of English as a foreign language seem to closely follow the guidelines of the national curriculum, which does not seem to facilitate the teachers' work in their design process. The fact that the term competence is opposed to that of skill in TEFL literature seems to be ignored by the authors of the curriculum. Thus, teachers feel forced to use the exact terminology from the curriculum, even if it can cause confusion.

Keywords: competence, skill, communicative competence, CEFR, lesson plan

The language education process is above all a process meant to enable learners to efficiently use the foreign language in real life contexts. Nowadays, language educators seem to be more and more aware of the importance of designing their education process in such a way as to enable the learners to appropriately (inter)act in real life contexts, being aware of all the factors influencing the communication process. The Moldovan education context is no exception, the idea being stipulated in the national curriculum at all levels (Curriculum national: Învățământul primar, 2018; Curriculum national pentru învățământul gimnazial, 2010; Curriculum national pentru clasele a X-a – a XI-a, 2010).

The Moldovan national curriculum is a competence-based curriculum, the authors of which emphasize the importance of identifying the concrete learning outcomes in the language education process. Thus, language educators are expected to design their education process in such a way as to enable learners to use the language appropriately in real life.

It should be signalled out that the Moldovan foreign language curriculum closely follows the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (hereafter, CEFR), which offers the language to describe a person's language proficiency level.

There are three main tiers: basic, independent, and proficient. These levels provide a scale of six levels (basic - A1 and A2, independent - B1 and B2, and proficient - C1 and C2). Each level describes what a person can do with the language at that particular level. It should be noted that the descriptions are associated with the four basic skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which are not called competeces.

Indeed, the description given for every level may help the language educators trace the learners' progress form the lowest level to the highest. According to the Curriculum national pentru clasele a X-a – a XI-a, Moldovan students are expected to be independent users of English (B1 level) when they leave high school. This means that learners can fluently communicate without effort with native speakers. In particular, the CEFR specifies that the learner:

- Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken.
- Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.
- Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans (Common Reference levels).

The language educators should bear in mind the concrete descriptions for every level in order to be able to design their education process appropriately. Thus, while designing such a process the teacher should know its concrete outcome, i.e. what the learners will be able to do with the language in a particular context. Yet, while planning a course, a unit or a lesson language educators should consider other factors as well, such as: the learners, the context, the materials, the theories in language education, etc.

Penny Ur (2017) argues that teachers should make localised decisions based on the evidence they get from their practice. The scholar also mentions that these decisions should be 'informed choices that are right for their own classrooms' (Ur, 2017). It implies that teachers should rely above all on their concrete teaching/learning experience and make decisions not according to the latest trend in language education but according to what is most suitable for their

learners' progress. However, these decisions should also be based on the existing models and theories in language education.

The question that one might ask oneself deals with teacher autonomy, i.e. 'To what extent does the National Curriculum allow Moldovan teachers to make localised decisions?' From my experience, I often hear teachers complain about the constraints imposed by the national curriculum. Yet, there appears to be a contradiction as the curriculum stipulates that it should be viewed as a recommendation meant to guide the teachers while designing the education process.

Another important issue confronted by Moldovan teachers still deals with the shift from an objective-based curriculum to a competence-based curriculum, especially when it comes to lesson design. In the past, the Curriculum recommended designing the education process according to the concrete objectives the teachers wanted to realize at the lesson. It happens so that what in the past was formulated with the help of the infinitive, now it is formulated with the help of the gerund. For example, the objective 'the learner will be able to define unknown vocabulary in context' has turned into the competence 'defining unknown vocabulary in context.' Consequently, planning a lesson has turned into a time consuming and tedious process, sometimes with no realistic practical application.

It should also be emphasized that teaching English as a foreign language would defer from teaching French as a foreign language. While making their 'informed choices' language educators will rely on their teaching experience on the one hand, and on the existing models and theories in foreign language teaching, on the other. Teaching English as a foreign language will thus differ from teaching French as a foreign language. However, it seems that the recommendations made in the Moldovan national curriculum heavily rely on the theories of teaching French as a foreign language. Moreover, French seemed to have influenced the CEFR as well.

Figure 1

The definition of the term competence is 'the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions' (CEFR: 9). Thus, it appears that such notions as knowledge, and skill are embedded in

the broader notion of competence. Whereas the notion of 'characteristics that allow a person to perform actions' seems rather vague. It appears that competence is used to encompass every feature a person might need to act in real life.

While defining general competences, the CEFR authors appear to struggle to find their appropriate equivalent in English, offering the French term within brackets (CEFR: 11 – 12). The general competences are:
• Declarative knowledge (savoir);
• Skills and know-how (savoir-faire);
• Existential competence (savoir-être);
• Ability to learn (savoir apprendre).

It can be seen that the notions in French and those in English refer to different phenomena. Even 'declarative knowledge' does not refer to the same as 'savoir' in French. Moreover, 'to know' does not imply 'to act'. Being aware of something is not the same as being able to do something. It happens that a person has the necessary knowledge to do something, but is not able to transfer that knowledge in real life situations. Knowing does not necessarily mean doing. It appears that these issues could be interpreted taking into consideration Chomskyan competence-performance distinction.

We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-learner's knowledge of the language) and *performance*, the actual use of language in concrete situations (Chomsky, 1965: 4)

While discussing the use of the terms competence and performance Gillian Brown mentions the existing 'wide range of interpretation' (Brown, 1996: 1) of these terms, which might lead various scholars to use them to mean quite different phenomena. John Lyons (1996) compares Chomskyan dichotomy with Saussure's dichotomy langue/parole. While competence is viewed as ideal knowledge of the language, performance mostly relates to the product of the use of the language.

Chomsky's initial use of the competence/performance dichotomy was not related to language acquisition. However, it is viewed as a starting point in TEFL as scholars started considering its implications in the field of language education. However, they focused primarily on the notion of linguistic competence, pointing to its limitations as language cannot be reduced to the mere idealized knowledge of its structure and grammar rules. That is why they introduced the concept

of communicative competence as developed by Hymes who claimed that

…the goal of a broad theory of communication can be said to be to show the ways in which the systematically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behavior (Hymes, 1972: 286).

This perspective on human communication helped scholars review the previous models and theories in language education and develop the communicative approach to language teaching. As they agreed that linguistic competence is not enough to define the intricate nature of human communication, they preferred instead to use the term communicative competence which consisted not only of linguistic competence, but also of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell, 1995):

1. Grammatical or linguistic competence, which is close to Noam Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence and which deals with the formal links used in the process of communication. It namely includes knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology.
2. Sociolinguistic competence, which consists of the social and cultural knowledge affecting the communication process. It enables the student to communicate appropriately, and thus make his/her intention clear.
3. Discourse competence, which implies the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive and coherent texts (e.g. formal letter, political speech, poetry, academic essay, cooking recipe).
4. Strategic competence, which involves the knowledge of both linguistic and exralinguistic communication strategies which enhance the efficiency of communication and, where necessary, enable the learner to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur.

The CEFR defines communicative competence as consisting of such features as: linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences, and pragmatic competences. The CEFR authors used three components instead of four. It can be said that the pragmatic competences would refer to both discourse and strategic competences.

Thus teachers of English as a foreign language are expected to develop the communicative competence in their learners. Yet, the questions which should be addressed are the following:

- Will this enable the learners to actually use the language appropriately in real life situations?
- What do the existing models and theories on language education suggest?

The problem is that in the specialized literature the emphasis is not put on competence development but on skill development (Harmer, 1991; Ur, 2012). This can be explained by the fact that in English skill is the term meant to designate the learner's concrete ability to use the language, whereas competence is viewed as 'subconscious knowledge of language use' (Harmer, 1991: 14).

While defining the term skill, Harmer (1991: 16) states:

Literate people who use language have a number of different abilities. They will be able to speak on the telephone, write letters, listen to the radio or read books. In other words they possess the basic language skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading.

Harmer (1991: 18) also argues that in order for the learners to use the language appropriately, they need to develop a number of sub-skills to process the language that they use and are faced with. For example, the scholar states that the reading skill (also called a macro skill) is very broad. Whereas, the learners would use sub-skills (also called micro skills) to process the language they use and receive, e.g. reading for gist, reading to extract specific information, reading for detailed understanding, reading for information transfer, etc.

As seen, the TEFL literature actually opposes the terms *competence* and *skill*. The development of the first raises the learners' language awareness, which is extremely important in language education, whereas, the second enables the learners to use that knowledge in real life situations. Moreover, the latest concepts introduced in language education evolve around the term *skill*, e.g. higher order thinking skills, lower order thinking skills, 21st century skills.

When it comes to the Moldovan education context, teachers of English as a foreign language seem to develop competences in their learners, such as producing written messages and interactions, producing oral messages and interactions, etc. Figure 2 displays the heading of an actual lesson plan designed by a teacher of English. It

should be pointed out that this is the traditional way of writing the heading to the lesson plan.

Subject: English
Form: XI
Date:
Teacher.
Topic: Unit II, Lesson 5   *Literary Focus   Communication Is More Than a Monologue*
Type of the lesson: mixed

Specific Competences:
Communicative and Pragmatic Competence – Producing oral messages and interactions (Spoken Interaction)
Communicative Competence – Receiving written messages (Reading)
Communicative Competence – Receiving oral messages (Listening)
Communicative and Pragmatic Competence – Producing written messages and interactions (Writing)

Sub-Competences:
3.1. Defining unknown vocabulary in context, determining the basic, secondary or figurative meaning of the unknown words.
3.2. Deducing and wording the theme and the main idea of a written message.
2.1. Presenting orally some ideas, opinions and viewpoints found in an oral message, through expressing personal attitudes and using arguments.
2.2. Providing oral answers to a questionnaire / survey / an interview on topics of interest, using appropriate language and respecting soc cultural norms according to the role and relationships with interlocutors.

Operational Objectives:
  1. Knowledge – Students will be able to decode unknown phrases; will learn short instructions and directions related to classrc activities.
  2. Skills – Students will be able to communicate effectively utilizing verbal and nonverbal skills.
     build their communication skills though simple speaking opportunities.
  3. Attitudes – Students will form positive attitudes toward productive communication.

First, it should be noted the distinction between competence and sub-competence, the latter being a term used solely in Moldovan context (most probably the term sub-competences is the equivalent of Harmer's sub-skills). Second, the objectives seem to be the ones to actually enabling learners to perform/act, i.e. use the language appropriately. Third, the term operational objectives is again used exclusively in the Moldovan context, while the way they are formulated is rather confusing. Finally, there seems to be a discrepancy between the sub-competences and the objectives the teacher aims to realize at the lesson. It can be said that such a heading would not be of great help for both teachers and learners.

Unlike the lesson heading presented in Figure 2, the one in Figure 3 seems to be more specific, although it does not mention any competences. Yet, it can be seen that the teacher aims to both extend the learners' knowledge and develop some skills, enabling them to apply that gained knowledge in real life situations.

Figure 3

Form	11th
Unit	2
Lesson	4
Topic	Communication is More than a Monologue
Objectives	By the end of this lesson the student will be aware of: ✓ characteristics of effective communication and will be able to: ✓ distinguish key features of effective communication as opposed to communication failure.
Time	45 minutes
Material	Handouts, projector, laptop, spidergram

One should bear in mind that the lesson plan should guide the teacher throughout the lesson. It should reflect the specific sub-skills a teacher aims to develop in his/her students. Its primary aim is to serve as a reference point enabling the teacher to ensure a smooth transition from one activity to another. The purpose of the activities should be clear and related to the objectives of the lesson.

From my discussion with teachers, I noticed that they are afraid of making those localised and informed decisions as defined by Penny Ur. Although they complain about not having the autonomy to design the lessons as they would like to, they do not appear to want to make a change and defend their right to choose what is best for their learners. It is not totally clear though who exactly imposes the norm, as the national curriculum says that its purpose is to offer some guidelines as to how to design a lesson. The authors do not say that teachers must use the exact lesson plan suggested in the curriculum. Moreover, the teachers seem to be unaware of the fact that the curriculum suggests two ways of writing a lesson plan. The first one recommends Gagne's model consisting of nine events of instruction, the second suggests the ERR(E) model, which involves the following stages: evocation, realization of meaning, reflection, and extension.

The Moldovan teachers appear to use the ERR(E) model in their practice, writing long, sometimes incoherent, headings to their lesson plans, and totally ignore the other possibilities of designing their lessons. Thus, the process of designing a lesson has turned into a bureaucratic endeavour, where teachers would write something which might look good on the paper, but be devoid of any pedagogical value. Although they complain about it they seem to be reluctant to take responsibility for their design process.

In conclusion, teachers should be encouraged to be more autonomous and set realistic goals in their language education process. They should understand the difference between competence and skill in the TEFL literature, the theories and models of which they would use while designing their instruction. They should become more aware of the actual use of a lesson plan as an instrument meant to guide them throughout the lesson, and not as a sheet of paper which must be written only to be included in their portfolio. Finally, they should be able to defend their informed choices to have the lesson proceed in the way which they find best fitting their learners' needs. They should always remember that every lesson is to enable the learners to use the language appropriately in real life situations, something which can be achieved by developing/using/improving the learners' skills.

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