# Teaching through Technologies:
# Communicative and Information Competences

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## Abstract

Communicative and information competences are considered essential for the information society. The competence-developing approach was suggested by the Council of Europe (2001) and can be applied to learning and teaching any foreign language. The Global Understanding project, described in this paper, is a testing ground for this methodology. The experience gained in Moscow State University (Russia) showed that the preparation of students for communication with their foreign counterparts should be enhanced to achieve higher effectiveness of the Project. As a solution the creation of a supporting site with resources and tasks for students is suggested and discussed.

## Introduction

The process of globalization of the contemporary world is intensively and extensively going on. Interactions in economic and political spheres, in the field of education, science and culture are deepening; the area of interaction is broadening, covering new spheres of activities and new regions of the world.

Millions of people are involved in communicating with others, willingly or under the force of circumstances. They all need the tools for communication, the skills to handle it, and to be able to express themselves and achieve their goals in a world with a new configuration and new characteristics.

The main tool of communication is language. For communication in a multilingual world a common language, a lingua franca, is necessary. Today the English language is recognized to be the language of international communication. So, nowadays, knowledge of English is more or less a must.

## Competence-developing Approach

But we also know very well that for successful communication with a foreigner it is not enough to have a shared language. It is also necessary to know the cultural peculiarities of his/her country or region. And vice-versa. As Ter-Minasova (2004) emphasizes in her book, *Language and cross-cultural communication*, "To ensure cross-cultural communication one should not only know the language but also be

aware of the system of communicational culture, rules of etiquette, forms of nonverbal communication and have deep background knowledge of values and perceptions accepted in other cultures" (for example, of religious beliefs, taboos, public and historic facts, etc.) (p. 34)

This statement is in agreement with the concept of "*plurilinguisme*" which has recently become dominant in the approach of the Council of Europe (2001) to the issue of studying languages and which, certainly, can be extended to non-European parts of the world, due to the overall tendency to integration in a globalized world.

According to the Council of Europe (2001), *plurilinguisme* is not *multilinguisme,* which can be understood as knowing several languages or the co-existence of several languages within a given community. *Plurilinguisme* occurs with the extending, in a cultural aspect, of the linguistic experience of an individual from the language used in the family to the language used in the society and further to mastering languages of other peoples (learnt at school, in college or in a genuine language environment); an individual does not 'store' these languages and cultures separately but shapes a communicative competence on the basis of  his/her total knowledge and the whole of his/her linguistic experience, where all languages are interconnected and interacting. According to the situation an individual uses a part of this competence to ensure successful communication with a certain counterpart.

From the point of view of these ideas, the goal of linguistic education changes. Now a "perfect command" of one or two, or even three languages, taken separately from each other, is not any more the goal. The goal is the development of a linguistic repertoire where all linguistic skills are presented. In other words, the development of *communicative competence* is now considered to be one of the main categories of communicative linguistics and foreign language teaching.

The analysis of contemporary scientific and academic literature makes it possible to conclude that communicative competence is an interdisciplinary phenomenon which does not have a clear-cut definition. In the most general way it can be defined as the creative ability of an individual to make use of an inventory of  language means (in the form of statements and discourses) which is the combination of his/her knowledge and readiness for their adequate application.

It is also emphasized that while communicating in a foreign language one uses a number of competences, including both language competences proper and non-language ones. Language competences proper are well known to all involved in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) and comprise linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

Non-language or general competences include one's awareness of the outside world, obtained from life experience, education or from some other sources, such as socio-cultural and intercultural knowledge and skills. The latter is usually described as the ability and capacity to compare one's native and foreign cultures, the ability to flexibly use various strategies to establish and maintain contacts with representatives of other cultures and efficiently avoid misleading and conflicting situations, caused/provoked by cultural differences. And also to overcome existing stereotypes.

## The GU Project as a Touchstone of a Competence Theory

All these seemingly theoretical and purely didactic aspects came to the fore in a very pragmatic way in a cross-cultural project "Global Understanding" initiated by East Carolina University (USA) (http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/globalinitiatives/course.cfm), in which Moscow University has been participating for over 5 years.

Students of different cultural backgrounds come to "meet" their counterparts from various regions of the world, having no special socio-cultural or cross-cultural knowledge of their partners' society. They usually have only general ideas about the "other" cultures, based on information obtained by them from various sources and these ideas could vary very widely. Due to direct communication with their partners in the project they extend and correct their perception of their counterparts' countries and cultures and acquire special socio-cultural and cross-cultural knowledge. They use their partner-students as a learning resource. Precisely because of this, the resource (or source of information) must be adequate, relevant and reliable.

It is equally true for both parties involved in communication.

However, our 5-year experience has taught us that, without special preparation, Russian students rather frequently can not provide *reliable* information about their own culture and country (Nazarenko & Sizykh, 2009). This might be the result of a faulty school education (the Russian system of secondary education is still in a state of flux after the collapse of the Soviet Union) or because usually the students enrolled in the course at our university were only in their second year and lacked the necessary knowledge.

Anyway, their partners might have been given less than adequate ideas about the cultural uniqueness of our country on the basis of the information they received from our students. (Perhaps this was a two-way street?)

Consequently we introduced some changes to the program to prepare our students for more efficient and fruitful participation in the project. It was decided to enforce the cognitive side of it by including purposeful self-preparation for every class, guided by a teacher. A special "supporting" resource-site was created in the MOODLE system.

The learning content is organized on a modular principle, each module containing an informative text on the subject to be discussed, sample questions for students to ask their partners during the link, tasks aimed at mastering thematic vocabulary and preparation of a short text/essay providing additional interesting information (found on the Internet) about their own country and pertaining to the subject under discussion. Sometimes the task would include making a Power Point presentation, which would visually demonstrate this or that fact about Russian culture and life on which the student should comment.

Thus, the students get reliable information from the text, which they could use as reference material and as an initial basis for their discussion, where they will be able to operate with facts and checked information. In other words, they get socio-cultural knowledge about their own culture which could prompt them on what to concentrate on when asking their partners about their native culture. That is, it can provide them

with a starting point for acquiring similar knowledge about the culture explored. This sort of "mirror reflection" can help see more clearly the similarities and differences in the cultural backgrounds of the communicating parties.

Besides, it contributes to their improving their English, which for them is a second language. They acquire knowledge of semantic fields of the words referring to certain spheres of human activity and they plan and design their speech strategies according to various situations of communication. They purposefully extend their linguistic knowledge to fulfill their communicative task, which promotes the development of language competences proper, and which, together with general competences, develops the communicative competence of the participants of the project.

Shaping and developing communicative competence is recognized to be the final goal of linguistic education. The ability to communicate in a native and foreign language(s) is defined as a basic, key competence of a human being living in the XXI century, in a globalized world, in the information society.

It should be noted that the Global Understanding project brings together participants from all continents with the help of and via information and communication technologies (ICT). The spread of ICT is another world tendency of our time and awareness in the field of information technologies or information competence is also qualified by the Council of Europe as one of the key competences.

Information competence is a combination of readiness and necessity to work with modern sources of information in professional and everyday spheres of human activities and also the skills:

- to find needed information using various sources, including contemporary multimedia means;
- to find out the level of the information's reliability/novelty/significance;
- to process information in accordance with the situation and tasks;
- to archive and store information;
- to use information found to solve a wide range of tasks.

Studying in a virtual classroom students acquire information competence by definition. They are actually immersed in an information environment. They permanently work with technologies. They get connected with their counterparts via chat, they work with search engines looking for information which they need to perform their tasks, they process the obtained information in accordance with the task, they save it, transfer it via e-mail, they know how to work with a word processor, navigation system and programs for creating presentations.

## Conclusion

Due to the course Moscow State University students of English as a Foreign Language specializing in Cross-Cultural Communication have a wonderful opportunity to use their theoretical knowledge and improve their language skills in virtual (looking like real!) communication via videoconference with their foreign partners. But it seems that they need more purposeful preparation for the project to

be really effective. Introducing additional work via technologies made it possible to intensify students' acquisition of all competences relevant for effective communication. These competences are considered to be the basic ones for the people of the Information Society.

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