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Detecting the development of language skills in current English language teaching in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The current English language teaching (ELT) is based on the communicative principle whose aim is not only the acquisition of language knowledge but mainly the acquisition of the ability to make oneself understood in everyday situation. However, this communicative method should not be overestimated because there should be always a balance between the acquisition and learning of foreign language knowledge and skills so that pupils could achieve corresponding communicative competences. In addition, the four language skills should be integrated in ELT classes so that pupils could focus more on functional use of language. Therefore, the purpose of this article is firstly to evaluate the use of communicative method in present ELT; secondly, to explain the importance of communicative competences; thirdly, to explore whether all four language skills are well-balanced and/or whether some of these skills are more preferred in ELT in the Czech Republic or not; and finally, to propose methodological approaches to the successful development of the productive language skills.

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1. Introduction

Although one speaks today about a post-communicative approach to English language teaching (ELT), the current teaching of English at Czech schools is still based on the communicative principle whose aim is not only the acquisition of language knowledge but mainly the acquisition of the ability to make oneself understood in everyday situation (Hymes, 1972). However, this communicative method should not be overestimated. For

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example, Pychova (1996/97) critically analyzes ten basic characteristic features of the communicative method with respect to new didactic findings and in this way she attempts to indicate the development of teaching foreign languages, particularly English. She thus emphasizes the language form besides its meaning; she claims that attention should be paid to accuracy, not only to speech fluency; she draws attention to reality of the language which is taught instead of to its authenticity; she points at the value of conscious learning and teaching besides its unconscious acquisition; she emphasizes the role of teacher in this educational process; she balances individual and group work; she supports the integration of all four language skills, not only speaking; she stresses knowledge of a foreign language, not only its communicative competences; and she understands language as an expression of social identity of a person, not only as a means of communication. As it can be seen from the critical analysis above, there should be always a balance between the acquisition and learning of foreign language knowledge and skills so that pupils could achieve corresponding communicative competences, which enable them to make themselves understood in a foreign language with respect to social situations and intercultural specifics.

2. Communicative Competences

Communicative competences have been classified for many times (e.g. Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 1991; Chodera, 2013; Pisova & Kostkova, 2011; or Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006). They are usually divided into five basic competences. In this article the classification of Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor (2006), as cited in Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik (2011), is preferred. They defined the following competences: linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, strategic and discourse.

The **linguistic competence** involves knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure, and linguistic competence. It is important to stress that the linguistic competence plays a crucial role in communicative competence as Faerch, Haastrup & Phillipson (1984) claim, *'It is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent.'* Higgs & Clifford (1982) add that if teachers start with communication too early, without considering language accuracy, students can permanently fix serious language errors.

The **pragmatic competence** comprises two abilities: illocutionary competence (knowing how to use language when achieving certain goals in communication) and sociolinguistic competence (knowing what language to use in different setting or with different people).

The **intercultural competence** involves knowledge of intercultural conditions of language use such as courtesies and other rules.

The **strategic competence** can be defined as the ability to cope in an authentic communicative situation, i.e. to be able to express oneself although there is a lack of the resources to do so successfully.

The **discourse competence** is the centre of all competences. Moreover, the other competences are carried out in it with the help of four language skills (Fig. 1).

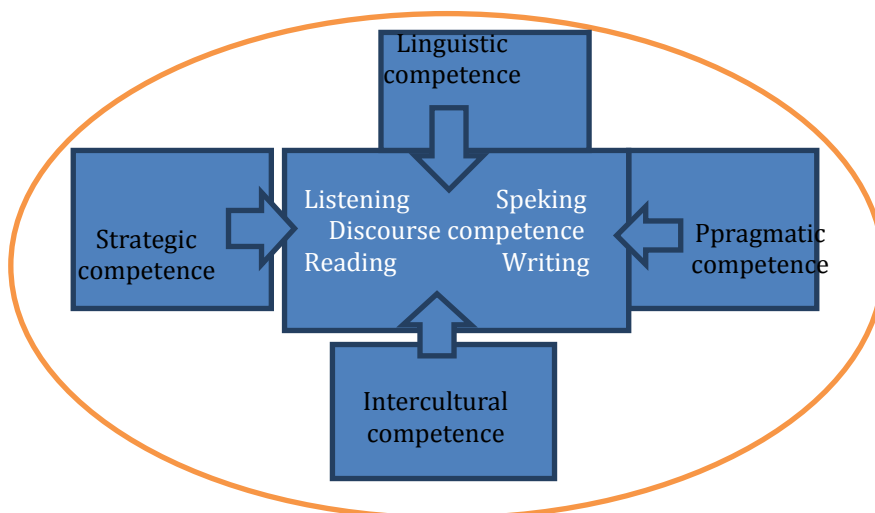


Fig. 1. The structure of communicative competences integrating the language skills (Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006, as cited in Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011, p. 325)

3. The Current state of the Development of the Four Language Skills and its Analysis

The language skills are both the aim and the means for the implementation of the communicative goal. The language skills as the target categories have been elaborated in ELT in reliance with the purposes as they are used in everyday communicative situations. The language skills as a means are then used in ELT in the activities and exercises aimed at the acquisition of language means (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciations, orthography), or in activities and exercises which are primarily aimed at the development of a language skill or skills.

The language skills are usually divided according to the type of the communicative process into receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing). According to the form of the communicative process, they are then divided into spoken and written. The aim of ELT is not to use these language skills separately but in their integration (cf. Byrne, 1984; Kumaravadevelu, 2001; Selinker & Tomlin, 1986; Sebestova 2012/13; or Vesely, 1989/90). For example, Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik (2011) claim that in teaching it seems desirable for the teacher to use with their pupils such activities and exercises in which pupils can use more language skills at the same time. The teaching activities integrating more language skills are more complex because pupils use different types of the communicative process at the same time, i. e. receptive and productive skills. Therefore these activities are based more on the language meaning than on its form and thus, they provide a greater potential for the training of a functional use of language.

As it has been stated above, the productive language skills involve speaking and writing. Some research studies (cf. Djigunovic, 2006; or Weshah, 2011), however, show that the productive language skills are developed least in ELT. Recent bigger research done in the Czech Republic has confirmed this fact. See Fig. 2 below. The results of this research survey show the priority of pupils' receptive language skills over their productive language skills. The most representative skills are reading and listening; pupils have fewer opportunities to use speaking and writing.

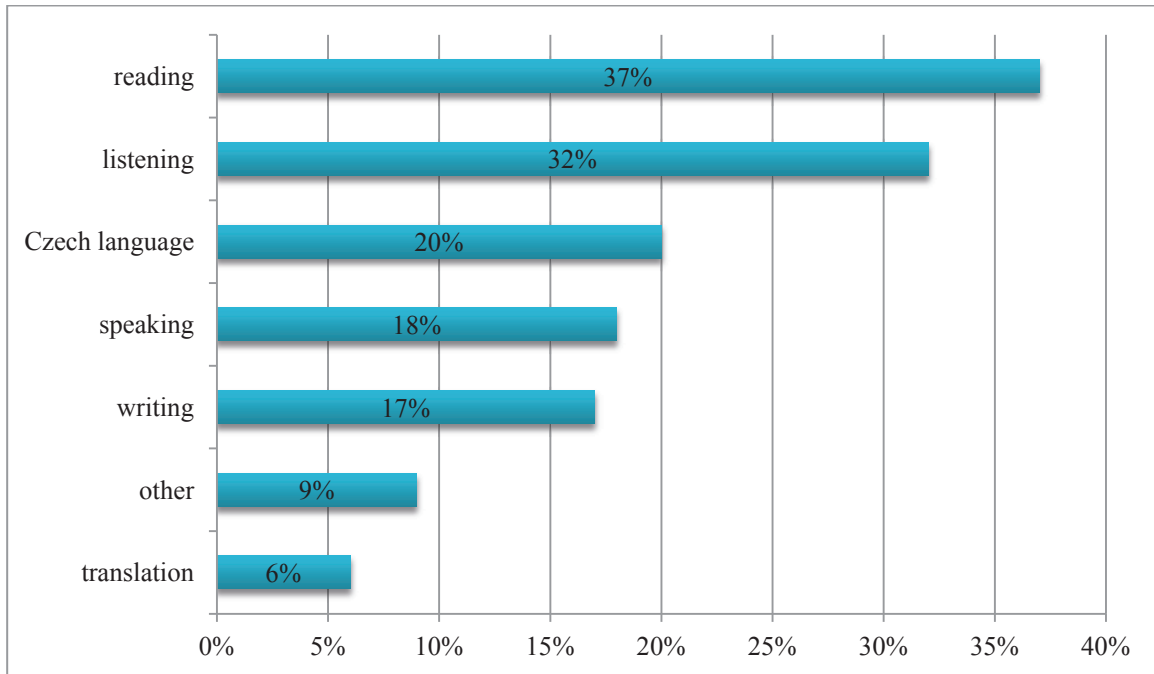


Fig. 2. Distribution of language skills, Czech language and translation in English classes at Czech elementary schools (Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011, p. 337)

However, Rychtarova (2003/04, p. 105) in her study indicates that for teachers at elementary and secondary schools the development of speaking is the most important skill (94%), which is then followed by the development of listening (71%), reading (62%) and writing (49%). The reasons for a lack of the development of the productive language skills in ELT are as follows:

- Teachers in their teaching of English do not use the target language fully (cf. Betakova, 2010; Chodera, 2013; Rinvolucri, 1989); pupils then obviously have fewer opportunities to learn a foreign language and thus, they are disadvantaged in comparison with other students who are exposed to the target language in their language classes all the time.
- Teachers focus more on the development of the receptive language skills than the productive language skills (Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011).
- Teachers do not integrate all four language skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2001); they usually combine one language skill with another, for example listening – speaking; reading - writing (Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011).
- Teachers pay little attention to the development of language functions (Mothejzikova, 1989/90).
- Teachers do not develop pupil's learning strategies, which would help them in the process of learning a foreign language (cf. Hrozkova, 2014; Vlckova, 2007).
- Pupils can be frightened to speak in class because they fear teacher's inappropriate (negative) reaction or they fear being laughed at by other pupils (Spacilova, 1993/94), or they do not know what to say (Mullerova, 2006/07).
- Teachers pay the least attention to the development of writing skills (Frydrychova Klimova, 2012); the skill of writing is perceived as a skill of mastering grammar and spelling rules at elementary schools (cf. Cmejrkova, 1999); therefore writing can be perceived as a means, but not the aim of ELT.
- Pupils' negative approach to the target language; low motivation to learn English (for more information see Frydrychova Klimova, 2013a).
- There exist a low number of qualified Czech teachers of foreign languages who particularly teach at elementary schools (cf. Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011; Vojtkova, 2012/13).

4. Successful Ways of Teaching productive language skills at Czech Schools

When teaching both language skills (i.e. speaking and writing), it is necessary to consider the whole pupil's characteristics, particularly his age and his proficiency level set into present learning situations and conditions (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Speaking can be easily developed with pre-school children because it was proved that till the age of seven both right and left brains developed in the same way and a child has an opportunity to acquire a foreign language in the same way as his mother tongue. The Research Institute of Education in Prague in 2010 published *A Guide of Teaching English in Kindergartens I*, which describes ten basic principles on how to teach the English language in kindergartens (i.e. an ability to understand; using games and movement; changing of activities; indirect learning; development of one's fantasy; activation of all senses; consolidation; individual approach; using even a mother tongue; and applying positive motivation). As far as the methods are concerned, the most common are a method of practical activities, a method of drawing and conversation, a method of singing and reciting and particularly a method of total physical response (TPR). For more information see Frydrychova Klimova (2013b).

At elementary schools speaking is systematically taught and its teaching is divided into three stages (Bavora, 1984/85; Spacilova, 1993/94), and it is done, of course, in accordance with general phases (exposure to subject matter, consolidation of subject matter, implementation/application of subject matter, and checking of subject matter) of ELT and in accordance with Jan Amos Komensky's principle from *easier to more difficult*, i.e. to proceed from the receptive communication to the productive one by:

1. controlled speaking (it is repetition not only of the acquired vocabulary but also the learning of short dialogues or poems by heart);
2. guided speaking (pupil can retell content of the text or answer some questions);
3. free speaking (pupil uses a foreign language in a certain communicative situation and he determines the meaning of his own words and their form, for example, it can be a short monologue about his summer holiday).

In higher classes of elementary schools, at secondary schools and at universities the so-called method of task-based learning (TBLL) can be used since it enables pupils to solve *real-world* issues. A lesson usually has the following stages: pre-task activity, task, planning, report, analysis, and practice (cf. Willis & Willis, 2007).

On the one hand, this approach has indisputably many advantages for ELT such as:

- students can cooperate in groups and thus, develop cooperative learning in solving different tasks, for example, in the preparation of joint presentations;
- TBLL can encourage students' deeper understanding of the subject through, for example, their discussions;
- a TBLL approach develops students' metacognitive skills such as the skills of critical thinking and reflection; and
- a TBLL approach exposes students to varied language structures and collocations, e.g. while they are reading a text in order to complete the task.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that TBLL has been criticized as lacking in sensitivity to the social and cultural dimensions of language learning (Ortega, 2007). Furthermore, the naturalistic bias of TBLL has been deemed inefficient for teaching basic grammar and vocabulary for the beginning level (Swan, 2005).

Thus, the successful mastering of the skill of speaking can be achieved in the following ways (cf. Harmer, 2012; Pychova, 1996/97; Spacilova, 1993/94; or Ur, 1996):

- teacher uses such language means which pupils have already consolidated;
- teacher develops speaking skills at each lesson;
- teacher supports pair or group work;
- teacher gives clear and comprehensible instructions; and
- teacher makes pupils speak the target language and of course, he is an advocate of it himself.

Ur (1996) provides four basic characteristics of a successful speaking activity:

1. *Learners talk a lot* (students speak most of the time while doing the activity).

2. *Pupils' participation is even* (classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants; all get chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed).
3. *Motivation is high* (learners are eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to a task objective of the given activity).
4. *Language is of an acceptable level* (pupils express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy).

In comparison with speaking and other language skills, writing undoubtedly is one of the most important but also the most difficult skill which a non-native speaker of English must acquire (Richards & Renandya, 2002). According to Chappel (2011), like speaking, it helps to express one's personality; foster communication; develop thinking skills; make logical and persuasive arguments; provide and receive feedback; or prepare for school and employment. But unlike speaking, writing gives a person a chance to later reflect on his/her ideas and re-evaluate them.

One of the ways of motivating pupils to write is an exploitation of creative writing, which brings many benefits (cf. Maley, 2009):

- it aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse; it requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways as they attempt to express uniquely personal meanings;
- it requires a willingness to play with the language; and
- it concentrates more on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition and musicality; it also affords scope for learners who in the usual processes of formal instruction are therefore often at a disadvantage.

In the Czech Republic the issues of teaching creative writing has been researched, for example, by Janikova (2005/06) or Zajicova (2011).

The teaching of this skill like the teaching of speaking is done in three stages (cf. Broughton et al., 1980):

1. controlled writing (for example, copying of sentences or gap-filling);
2. guided writing (for example, writing a short story with the help of prompts, such as pictures);
3. free writing (for example, writing a description of a person or writing an article for Wikipedia).

Broughton et al. (1980, p.121) suggests several strategies in order to master a writing task successfully:

- to limit the length of the written material to be produced;
- to increase the amount of class preparation for the task;
- to provide guidance on the final form of the written work, for example with picture prompts or memory prompts;
- to encourage students to collaborate in the actual process of writing;
- to allow cross-checking between the draft stage and the writing of the final product;
- to limit the complexity of the writing task itself; and
- to demand that the task be completed either slowly or quickly.

As the nature of both productive language skills shows, the successful development of these skills is quite demanding and their mastering depends on a number of factors. However, in the process of their development the key role is undoubtedly taken by motivation, and particularly by intrinsic motivation (i.e. a desire to invest one's effort into learning). According to Harmer (1991), the intrinsic motivation is influenced by the following factors:

- physical conditions, in which the target language is taught;
- methods which teacher uses;
- personality of the teacher himself; the person who creates pleasant atmosphere and good rapport with his pupils; shows his enthusiasm for teaching and his subject;
- success of completing the task.

In addition, Dorney in his book *Motivational strategies in the language teaching* (2001) presents different strategies for the development and sustainability of motivation. He proposes, for example, to make learning stimulating and enjoyable by increasing the attractiveness of tasks; or by breaking the monotony of classroom events; to build learners' confidence by providing regular encouragement; or to increase student motivation by promoting cooperation among the learners.

5. Conclusion

The teaching of the productive language skills in the integration with the receptive language skills is undoubtedly one of the priorities of ELT. However, as the research performed within the framework of ELT shows, there is not still the balance in the development of these four language skills and thus, the principle of complexity cannot function in ELT although there exist a number of books on methodology which deal with the development of the productive language skills.

Therefore, for example, the research on expertise of Czech teachers of foreign languages conducted by leading Czech methodologists could contribute to the improvement of this situation (cf. Hanusova, Pisova, Kostkova, Janikova, & Najvar, 2013). In addition, the teaching by CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*) can be also a solution. Moreover, in the Czech Republic experts on didactics publish journal *Komensky*, which is a perfect example of a good practice (cf. Janik & Najvar, 2012). In this journal teachers, including the ELT teachers, present their authentic lessons which are analyzed and possible recommendations for the improvement of teaching situations are suggested.

Finally, it is the personality of ELT teacher, his qualification, expertise, enthusiasm and willingness to further educate in the field of ELT.

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