

DIGITAL AND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN POLAND

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Abstract

Language education is directly related to the phenomenon of communication competence. This is important since the knowledge of foreign languages is intended to develop communication activities that are implemented in their nature. Communication competence is, however, a much broader concept, and in the context of language education, it not only refers to recipients (pupils) but also to broadcasters (teachers). This article presents the relationship between teachers' activity in the field of mass media, their communication competence and social media. The purpose of this study is also to indicate the correlations between the opinions of teachers surveyed and the features of communication competence of students, as well as to assess the level of teachers' competences. The methods used in this study included a questionnaire and interviews. A set of closed, open and mixed questions, as well as an in-depth interview based on a traditional questionnaire is included. It is difficult to prove the correlation between teachers' communication and media competences and the effects of their work. Nevertheless, the high self-assessment of teachers' competences seems to be related to the growing trend of English language skills in Polish society.

Keywords: educative communication, communication skills, didactic competence, teacher professional competence, mediated communication

Introduction

Communication competence is one of the key elements found in general social communication models. Although the concept of communication competence seems to be an ambiguous one, different research approaches consisting of a fairly uniform set of parameters applied are used to characterise it. Communication models distinguish the sender's communication competences and the recipient's communication competences; a common part is a specific area of effective communication (Mrozowski, 2001). In the field of social communication, communicative competence is most often understood as an ability expressed through interaction with other people and is the result of relational and communicative cooperation. A person with communication competence has the ability to participate in and create an interaction (Tucker, 2006).

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Having analysed the key definitions of the concept, Marcyński (2017) states that communication competence is not a simple sum of the terms 'competence' and 'communication', but is a construct expressing knowledge about it, the skills and motivation with which it is being acquired. Communication competence highlights the communication and interpersonal skills of individuals who participate in communication processes, expressed in their characteristic features, namely reading, writing or listening skills. Communication competence, by its nature, relates to interpersonal relationships and is a quality in communication which results from the creative tension between being relevant and effective. It is expressed in a wide range of communication behaviours. For a modern communication researcher, there is no universal definition of communication competence. It is an extensive and complex phenomenon, and thus it has many definitions (McCroskey, 1982, 1994; Rodrigues 2000).

Mrozowski (2001) suggests defining communication competence as "the ability to communicate, which includes knowledge, abilities and skills that define the scope of human communication with the environment - both from the position of the sender and the recipient of verbal and non-verbal messages". Thus, communication competence is important for several reasons. Firstly, the work of a teacher – in particular, a foreign language teacher – requires higher-than-average communication competence. This form of competence is required within the realm of effective teaching, which is based on relations and communication interactions. Secondly, education in the language teaching area is conditioned by the creation of an effective communication field constituted by the sum of the communication competences of the sender – a teacher - and the recipient – a student. Thirdly, language teaching aims to educate students in communicative competences (Hanney, 2005). Therefore, it generally takes some form of media education. Komorowska (2005) explicitly states that the purpose of teaching a foreign language is to provide the student with communicative competence, which manifests itself in the effective acquisition and transfer of information adequate to the current situation. Since teachers are the most important 'instruments' in didactic activities, they are critical in shaping the communication competence of different students. They can also freely use a wide range of methodical instruments (Jabłoński & Wojciechowska, 2013). In education, an emerging transitional trend from the idea of academic teaching towards the practical one has been observed. Therefore, emphasis is being increasingly placed on the training of practical skills - specific competences that translate into specific skills and therefore, repetitive activities. The practical profile of education expresses a new paradigm of education, and thus, it is more profiled not only in terms of content and subject matter but also in terms of the recipient.

The increasing presence of different media in the life of children (including preschool children) and adolescents is well-known and documented (Thorn, 2008). Traditional media and new media focused on language teaching and learning contain three profiles: subject matter, teaching methodology and the recipient. Contemporary education also shortens the time and distance between access to material and teachers. It therefore offers various forms of self-education, distance learning within the sphere of e-learning and m-learning (Söderström et al., 2006). In the context of modern education, it is, therefore, necessary to take its current challenges dictated by new forms of communication and the constantly evolving technology into account. These contemporary challenges are expressed through the ability to receive information, its acquisition and transmission, communication, the use of media and various types of technology in the education of students and their learning process. As Engen (2019) notices "Rapid technological developments and changes put great demands on the professional teacher. These demands are not only in relation to adopting the new digital technologies, as these are introduced and made available for education, but also for further understanding the political and cultural dimensions of digital technologies in relation to schools and society" (p. 11). Media industry has ignored academic education, while funding and

resource shortfalls have prevented media practice education from contributing more vocationally (Macdonald, 2000).

Various perspectives are adopted within the scope of communication competence related to the media, and it could be agreed that there are two different tendencies. Firstly, studies that refer to media literacy as building bridges between traditional media and new technologies. Secondly, studies that describe digital competence or information and digital competence, including those which focus on the development of digital competence: content, abilities and attitudes related to searching for and comprehension, communication, creation and dissemination of information using technologies (Pérez-Rodríguez & Delgado Ponce, 2012; Sixto-García & Duarte-Melo, 2020). The importance of professional digital competences of teachers in classrooms is growing as digital resources and digital media are becoming essential parts of teachers' everyday practice (Gudmundsdottir & Hatlevik, 2018). Learning a new language and learning to write in that language are social practices (Gilliland, 2015), but implementing meaning in social interaction is considerably more complex and vague than it had been envisaged in theoretical models of communicative competence (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2013).

The use of mass media and social media, both constituting foreign didactic material (foreign language press) and those oriented towards supplementing didactics in language education (language press), can be present both in the traditional model of education as well as in its modern variants. The traditional approach refers to the use of the press in language education – a trend that has been developing for over a hundred years (Bowman, 1916) and is still being used today, although not always in the correct form (Pickard, 1996; Magnusson & Godhe 2019).

The use of British or American magazines in the Polish teaching environment is combined with the dominating method of education – the traditional form of 'English as a foreign language' (EFL). The language press published in Poland but aimed at teaching English and other languages to Polish recipients seems to fit instead into the concept of 'English as a Lingua Franca' (ELF) as proposed by Swan (2012). Of course, observing the dominance of English in the world, according to Perez-Llantada (2010), it can be stated that the universality of English almost achieving the status of lingua franca ensures uniformity in the field of communication. However, education based on a specific EFL methodology can also be conducted in relation to other foreign languages. It is mainly about teaching a foreign language as an international language, i.e. a language that ceases to be identified with a particular culture and community.

Adopting this model of education is not popular in Poland due to the fact that technologies, as well as access to it, are still being developed. At the same time, however, it is conditioned by numerous factors that require professional education of teachers and their preparation for this form of teaching (Matsuda, 2017), currently not executed by leading Polish centres for foreign language teachers. The use of language magazines can be a passive form of reception on the part of a student; it can also take a form of a part of activities activating project-based learning, including an attempt to independently edit articles and publication experiments (Eguchi & Eguchi, 2006).

The extensive research into the communication competence of teachers focused on three key components of communication competence: knowledge, skills and motivation (Rubin & Feezel, 1986; Morreale et al. 2000; Balkic-Tomic et al., 2015). Published works are often examples of applied research giving practical recommendations for teachers' development (Ogienko & Rolyak, 2009; Zlatić et al., 2014). Regarding the communication competence of foreign language teachers, the attention of research tends to relate to intercultural differences and intercultural competences that affect the effectiveness of a teachers' work (Sercu & Bandura, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2013; Qiao, 2017).

Most of these studies, however, do not refer specifically to the relationship between communicative competence and media competence of teachers. This article tries to

contribute to filling this gap in research. The main purpose of the considerations presented in this study is based on the results of representative research. This research attempted to determine the relationship between media competence (manifested in the use of language magazines) and communication competence (related to didactic forms of teaching activity) of foreign language teachers in Poland. The aim of the research was to diagnose the demonstrative involvement of foreign language teachers in Poland through the use of a non-standard tool. This tool was based on traditional medium – printed magazines for learning foreign languages. The scale of this activity was also determined.

A dynamic development of information technologies, which has also had an impact on methodology of education, including foreign language teaching has been observed for years. Multimedia tools are commonplace in today's education, because they are not only an attractive form of transferring teaching content, but also use appropriate and varied stimuli. They increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process by adjusting to the needs and capabilities of the student. They are also an interesting form of individualisation and personalisation, particularly of educational messages (Gruza & Pabińczyk, 2016).

The common access and use of modern technologies imply a progressive process of the mediatisation of social life. This is understood as the process of creating and spreading new media forms and channels over time, with their penetration into various spheres of everyday life. This also includes their growing use in various types of public institutions (Goban-Klas, 2012). It also applies to the increasing necessity of changes in methodology, including foreign language teaching (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Most of the teaching methods that are still popular today were developed at least several decades ago, and thus, at the moment, they do not always meet the requirements of the realities of the present time and the educational needs of class participants (Ziółkowski, 2016).

The process of language education as a sphere of media education due to the use of media in foreign language teaching—both traditional and new ones—can therefore be discussed. The status of media education is still not as strong as it should be. Awareness of the influence of the media and the belief that audiences should be given the skills to become more cognisant of this influence have been promoted in many documents about media education (Lauri et al., 2010). Media education is sometimes defined not only as teaching about the media but also teaching for the media and through the media (Pisarek, 2006). Mobile applications and websites, as well as social media, are the most commonly used media today in foreign language teaching. However, this does not change the fact that traditional media are still being used, and the language press (for the purposes of this discussion, the press aimed at (self) language education will be described) is a phenomenon that is typical in a Polish teaching environment. In 2009, the first edition of the famous book by Poulet (2011) was launched. The author announced the death of newspapers and he tried to predict the distant—at the time— future of information in the book.

In the epilogue to the Polish edition of the book in 2011, Poulet wrote: "The first edition of this book was published two years ago, and newspapers are still going on. Some consider this to be a confirmation that the situation was not really that serious at all" (p. 258). He then pointed out numerous pieces of evidence of a deepening crisis affecting the entire press sector on a global scale (Poulet, 2011). The contemporary press is losing its significance every year, but there are areas – specific niches – in which press publishers are doing remarkably well. In Poland, one of these areas is the language press. More than 20 titles of language press were published in Poland in 2018-2019, and the fact that the Ringier Axel Springer Polska publishing house entered this part of the market successfully is an additional confirmation of the development potential in the market. Ringier Axel Springer Polska is the publisher of the Newsweek Learning En-

glish magazine. As its creators write – it is an opinion-forming bi-monthly magazine for learning English language. It is prepared on the basis of original texts from the American Newsweek edition, together with dedicated modern methodology and functional exercises. The methodological part is designed by a team of methodologists and teachers specialising in teaching adults working professionally with the English language.

The variety and openness of the market for press titles in such a specific market segment as the language press proves the existing possibilities for readers seeking tools for independent improvement of competences in the field of foreign language skills, as well as for foreign language teachers. Language magazines are an excellent tool for self-education, but at the same time, they have significant potential in the field of glot-todidactics (Gawroński & Bajorek, 2018)

The question arises, however, how much and to what extent do foreign language teachers consciously use these opportunities?

Methodology

The field research method implementing a questionnaire interview consisting of standardised questions was used in the research project. It is one of the most frequently used methods in social research, allowing the diagnosis of the characteristics, opinions, attitudes and values of a given population by means of interviews with the target group, which constitutes the most accurate reflection of that population sector (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993). The field research method, in the form of a questionnaire interview, was chosen and used as the best available method to collect original data to describe a population sector (foreign language teachers) which is too large to be directly observed. Purposeful selection of the sample was assumed (teachers participating in voice-over symposiums), from which the study participants were selected, preserving the randomization of the sample selection. Due to a careful, randomised process a group of respondents was selected and questioned. Thus, it can be assumed that their characteristics reflect the features and attributes of a wider population of foreign language teachers, while carefully constructed questionnaire questions provide data in the same form from all the respondents (Babbie, 2013). The choice of the research method was based on strong points, namely the fact that surveys are inclusive in the types and numbers of variables that can be studied, require low investment to develop and administer, and are relatively easy for making generalisations (Bell, 1996). Of course, the fact that surveys only provide estimates for the true population, not exact measurements, should be taken into consideration (Salant & Dillman, 1994). The survey questionnaire consisted of 26 standardised questions, 6 of which were metric, while the others concerned the didactic and media aspects of the work of foreign language teachers. Questions were formulated to obtain the most accurate assessment possible, following the self-assessment methodology used in measuring communication competence (Duran 1983; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1998).

This study about the scale of mediation in foreign language education was conducted in March and September-October 2019. It included 380 participants, including English and German language teachers employed in various types of schools (primary schools, junior high schools, high schools and colleges). The sample size quantitatively meets the criteria of survey representation for the entire population of foreign language teachers in Poland (there are over 100,000 foreign language teachers in Poland). However, the selection of the sample makes it impossible to extrapolate the results to the entire surveyed population of foreign language teachers in the country. The purposive sampling was used, taking into account several criteria. The requirement of a foreign language teacher with at least three years of professional experience of work in the field of education was applied.

Thus, the lack of a suitable and available size of a sample to be tested violates

the quantitative standard of the representation. Although the theoretical sample is not randomly selected, individual respondents from that sample can be selected at random order so that an approximate effect is achieved.

The study was conducted during two of the most popular Polish national conferences in the field of teaching methodology (IATEFL Poland Conference – International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language and the National Congress of German Language Teachers). It was assumed that the concentration and presence of educators at such an event would provide a guaranteed sample group to be surveyed. This included a group of teachers representing high involvement in self-education and educators focused on improving their methodological skills. It was believed, therefore, that this would constitute a specific example for the whole teaching environment, whereby creating a model of good language teaching practices in Poland.

The distribution of the research sample ensured the diversity of the answers obtained. However the group defined does not constitute a statistical representation of the whole foreign language teaching environment: the majority of the respondents were women (65.7%), and the respondents' degrees were as follows: teachers with a Doctor of Philosophy degree – 2.2%, teachers with a Master of Arts degree – 86.6%, teachers with a Bachelor of Arts degree – 11.2%. Therefore, the possibility of drawing conclusions that can be implemented in all foreign language teachers environments is limited.

Table 1. Workplaces of respondents

Type of school	Percentage of respondents
Primary school	37.3%
Middle school	21.6%
Secondary school	19.4%
Higher/tertiary education institution	19.4%
Other	2.3%

Results

Of the teachers surveyed, an overwhelming majority (97.2%) declared that they use various media (both mass media and social media) in their work with students. As could be expected, the Internet was the most frequently and intensively used medium – 92.1%. It is worth noting that in this context, the Internet is difficult to define, as it has a very broad meaning, including websites, published audio-visual materials, information services and social media content. Some 80.5% of respondents used traditional materials, such as audio and audio-visual materials. However, a most surprising conclusion drawn from the study was the declared use of language press by 70.5% of respondents. This could be due to the fact that the respondents were not asked about the regularity and systematic use of language press but the general use, including incidental ones.

The highest-rated subjects within the assessed parameters of the language press were the informative value of articles (72.5%), followed by the ease of obtaining content (70%), and finally, the topics presented (65%). According to the respondents, the main features affecting the high value of materials derived from the language press were the contemporary and current subject matters and the content's authenticity. These traits are indeed an imminent value in language education, which is confirmed by numerous studies and recommendations (Aptekin, 1993; Mishan, 2005; Gilmore, 2007). Foreign language teachers used the language press as support primarily for their two didactic methods in teaching: Natural Language Learning (55% of responses) and Grammatical and Translation method (41.7% of responses). The language press was most rarely used within didactic methods such as 'The SilentWay' (5%), Whole Body Response meth-

od (5%), Suggestopedia (6.7%) and the CLL method – Community Language Learning (11.7%).

The most frequently used language magazines published in Poland are English language learning magazines. This is not only a result of the popularity and usefulness of this language, but it also derives from the specifics of the organisation of language teaching in the Polish education system. The three most popular magazines are English Matters, Newsweek Learning English and Business English Magazine, but teachers declare their widespread use of foreign-language information and thematic press that does not fit into the concept of language magazines. The relatively high communication competence level of foreign language teachers in Poland - proved by opinions - refers not only to quantitative data illustrating the scale of language press and other media categories used in a classroom but also to determine the causes of this phenomenon.

The dominating positive opinions of the sample group, who support the use of the press in language education, include the subject matter (76.7%), the availability of Mp3 files and videos with audio scripts for texts (47.5%), the differentiation of the level of advancement of articles (43.3%), the innovation beyond the core curriculum (38.3%), and the glossaries attached to articles (37.5%). The teachers surveyed stated that they adapt the media materials not only to the language level but also to their students' interests. The most frequently used media content concerned 'lifestyle' (80%), business (78.3%), health (35.8%) and tourism (30.8%). The least eagerly discussed topics included politics (6.7%), nature (6.7%) and culture and art (10%).

The sample group of teachers pointed out the usefulness of innovative methods and didactic aids used by language press publishers. The main advantage of this form of press was viewed as the possibility and ease of copying articles (94.2%). This, they felt, enabled independent and group work with the text, translation, and constructing descriptive statements and dialogue. Visual materials (58.3%), word lists to download in pdf files (57.5%) and QR codes facilitating access to additional materials (50%) were also appreciated. Although it might seem that the use of the language press stimulates only the ability to read in a foreign language, the sample group also pointed towards other skills that improved with the use of this tool. This was due to the fact that this medium was enriched with additional functions, usually involving cross- or multimedia.

According to the respondents, the language press primarily developed reading (96.7%) and listening (55.8%); however, 19.2% of the respondents pointed to the development of writing skills and 12.5% – speaking. The respondents emphasised the effectiveness of working with language press at the academic level. As many as 56.7% of the respondents believed that this is a tool dedicated towards this level of education (including: high school teachers indicated 50%, while primary school teachers were the least correlated with the possibilities of using language press).

The key arguments of the respondents in favour of using language magazines included:

- Elements in the language press that facilitated the self-studying process (glossaries, mp3 files, extra gadgets).
- Easy access to the language press, as the foreign language press is easily and commercially available in both retail and online locations.
- Low price in comparison with textbooks or other language books – language magazines do not burden the budget of either the teacher or the student.
- Variety of topics which generate student interest, increasing their motivation to learn. At the same time, it was seen as being very important for the teacher to be able to choose topics suitable for a given group of students.
- Authentic language, illustrations, the richness of styles used and development of students general knowledge about the world and the countries of a given language area.

The awareness and knowledge of the press titles, their competitive advantages over many other didactic tools, as well as the ability to use them in didactic work, constitute evidence of relatively high communication competence and media competence among the surveyed teachers. It could also be assumed that this competence could improve the effectiveness of the language teaching process and result in better communication competence among students. This is an important research challenge - enabling the verification of such a hypothesis and simultaneously contrasting the results of the obtained research with the opinions of students. It would also be worth verifying a cross-examination of results which observe different teaching methodologies, which include the implementation of both language magazines and other teaching methods.

Discussion and conclusions

At present foreign language teachers have many didactic instruments at their disposal; this allows the selection of resources believed to be the most effective in the didactic process of foreign language teaching and learning. The teacher, however, is the most important 'instrument' in all teaching activities. This applies not only to teaching of children and adolescents but also to adult learners. Therefore, teachers must have a certain set of competences that will allow the achievement of chosen objectives and modelling of classes so that they are creative and inspiring. Building a clear communication model and enforcing the implemented program's substantive goals (regardless of the choice of teaching methods) is equally important. In the core curriculum of the Polish education system, particular emphasis in the didactic process is placed primarily on shaping the so-called key competences. This is particularly desirable because of their universalism, which combines theoretical knowledge with the practical ability to use them based on substantive assumptions related to individual teaching subjects. This tendency is complementary to the education systems of the Member States of the European Union, based on the guidelines of competent EU bodies in this respect (Łoś & Reszka, 2010; 2006/962 / EC).

Appreciation of the didactic potential in the press and other media is proof of the existence of a field for further developed communication competence in the environment of foreign language teachers. This is justified and correct because in both education (including language education) and in the sphere of communication competences, the same components are indicated, namely: knowledge, skills and motivation. Marcyński (2017) even defines these components as essential conditions of communicative competence, and asserts that they should also be treated like that in the area of education.

The obtained research results could confirm, on the one hand, awareness in foreign language teachers of the importance of improving their own communication competence and shaping student competencies in this field. On the other hand, the collected evidence of the progressing mediation of language education, not necessarily directed exclusively at new media, is a measurable confirmation of the thesis. At the same time, these optimistic survey results lead to questions about the reality and truthfulness of answers obtained from the respondents. Research based on declarative responses does not provide such verification, which is a prompt for the research to be continued. A continuation in this research thread could include the collection of feedback from pupils and students concerning the scale of media usage in the language education that they participate in and its perceived effectiveness. The research project in this regard will be continued by the authors of the article.

In the context of university education in Poland, the competence framework has been developed and operationalised as institutional responses towards concerns for the quality of teaching and learning and also to prepare students for changing conditions in the labour market, based on international standards (Klein-Collins, 2012; Rasmussen et

al., 2017). According to Spady (1994), the growing focus on results and competences in education is partly the result of an epochal transition from the age of industrialisation to the information age. In this transformation, the complicated, technology-dominated, multicultural, ever-changing world demands schools to give much higher learning outcomes than they used to.

Communication competence primarily refers to teacher competencies (workshop and substantive competencies). It also refers to the education process, which depends on teacher competence, on the school (as an educational unit), as well as on the educational system of a particular country (Gawroński, 2010; Gawroński et al., 2009). In education, competence translates into quality (Strykowski, 2003). It seems that the communication competencies diagnosed among Polish foreign language teachers have a positive impact on didactic effectiveness. Education First (EF) research (<https://bit.ly/2QUli3q>; 15/03/2020) demonstrates that Polish people develop linguistically every year: in 2016, the EF EPI result for Poland was 61.49; in 2017 it was 62.07, in 2018 - 62.45 and in 2019 63.76. Current result (2021) places Poland on 13th place among European countries. This means that Poland has entered the group of countries with a very high level of language proficiency. It is difficult to prove a correlation between the mediatisation of language education, the degree of communicative competence of language teachers and the knowledge of foreign languages in society without conducting relevant research in this area. However, the hypothesis about the existing relationship between these variables seems justified.

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