Competency – based approach to teaching foreign languages in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: The article gives a brief review of competence-based approach to education today and its underlying principles. Following this overview is an appraisal of literature that illuminates the heritage of competence-based education and contains current works that offer further understanding of the research subject matter. This section analyses and distinguishes the concepts "competence" and "competency", identifies and defines integral structure and contents of the communicative language competence, substantiates the choice of the key competences necessary for everyone, and function-orientated competences, which in their unity stipulate the successful adaptation and self-realization of a young specialist in the modern fast changing world. Although competence is an important concept in human resource development and management, there is no precise theoretical framework for competence. This article explores the definitions and usage of competence, especially in the context of training and development initiatives in Kazakhstan, seeking to clarify the concept by incorporating knowledge, skills and competences within a competence typology. The exploration focuses on the development of cross – cultural and communicative competences. At the end of the article the authors offer an innovative exploitation of linguo-cultural competence contributing to the development of methodology to teaching foreign languages, its theoretical grounding with definitions of key concepts.

Key words: competence, cross-cultural and communicative competences, linguo-cultural subcompetence, toponymy.

Introduction

Nowadays education in a broad sense has been distinguished as the investment in the development of the society. The governments and the wide public are concerned about adequacy of quality of education, training and economic, social efficiency of the means invested in education. The matter of educational contents corresponding to future demands has become a vital issue in educational reforms all over the world. The significance of flexibility, adaptability, mobility, creativity of education and life-long learning in the global, changing world is the focal point of modern national and international discussions concerning higher education and vocational training. In the light of Bologna agreements assuming the academic and professional recognition of the state diplomas within the European space, graduation of qualified specialists, capable of life-long learning and performing professional work in conditions of multicultural environment, the problem of professionally orientated communicative language competence development acquires a special meaning (Jonnaert, Barrette, Masciotra, 2005).

The essential contribution to the theoretical analysis of concepts **"competence"**, **"competency"**, withreference to young specialists in conditions of a contemporary competitive market, was made by such scientists and researchers as Hymes D., Canale M and Swain M., Bremer C. and Kohl K., Schneckenberg D. and Wildt J., Rychen D. S. and Salganik L. H., Weinert F., Nunn R., Tiļļa I., Maslo I., Maslo E., Bolotov V. A., Shishov S. E., Novikov A. M., Zimnyaya I. A., Elkonin B. D., and others.

In a number of works the concept "competency" is defined as intellectual and personal ability of an individual to practical activities, and "competence" as a contents component of the given ability in the form of knowledge, skills and aptitudes (Zimnyaya, 2003).

In I. A. Zimnyaya's opinion, 'competency always displays the actual competence' (Zimnyaya, 2003). B. D. Elkonin believes that 'competency' is a degree of a person's involvement into activity (Elkonin,

2001). S. E. Shishov considers the category of competence as a general ability based on knowledge, values, aptitudes, enabling to establish relationship between knowledge and situation, to reveal a procedure (knowledge and action), suitable for a problem.I. Tiļļa defines competence as an individual combination of abilities and experiences stipulated by opportunities to gain these (Tiļļa, 2005).

According to F. E. Weinert, in the light of terminological and conceptual disorder connected with the concepts "competence", "skill", "professionalism" and so on, it is necessary to develop an explicit definition of the concept 'competence'. F. E. Weinert tries to lay a bridge between a psychological-pedagogical concept, on the one hand, and a sociological concept on the other. He defines "competence" as a "slightly specialized system of aptitudes, abilities or skills necessary for achievement of a specific goal. It can concern both the individual abilities and the distribution of abilities within a social group or establishment" (Weinert, 2001).

At the international level, the work in the field of competences began in 1990 under the aegis of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD with the International interdisciplinary programme DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies: theoretical and conceptual foundations). DeSeCo defines competence as a 'system of internal mental structures and abilities assuming mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills, and also social and behavioural components such as attitudes, emotions, values and ethics, motivations for successful realization of activity in a particular context' (Education – Lifelong Learning … , 2002).

Higher education institution as a social institute should prepare a graduate for life. And life as a circuit of consecutive objectives and responsible choices does not imply only academic knowledge. A. A. Rean and N. V. Bordovskaya argue that development of a person as a subject of activity necessarily includes the factors which form a socially-mature person:
- development of intelligence,
- development of positive thinking, positive attitude,
- development of autonomy, responsibility,
- development of motivation leading to self-development, self-realization (Бордовская, Реан, 2000).

Educational results are, in fact, measurable, demonstrated by students (graduates) knowledge, skills and abilities after the accomplishment of an educational process, which can be expressed by means of competence.

It goes without saying that competence is not a static characteristic. Since it is inseparably connected with socialization –communication and joint activities of people, the process of its development goes on during the whole life as life-long learning and self-education, as aspiration to self-development and self-realization in the fast changing world. Professional successes, achievement of professional blossoming, and also professional longevity have already been confirmed by lots of experimental data (Rychen, Salganik …, 2001).

Methodology

This framework was proposed in the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in December 2006 after five years of work by experts and civil servants collaborating within the Open Method of Cooperation. It defines eight key competences:
- communication in the mother tongue;
- communication in a foreign language;
- mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- digital competence;
- learning to learn;
- social and civic competence;
- sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- cultural awareness and expression. (The European Parliament …, 2006).

There are significant differences between countries in their way of interpreting the notion of competence and of translating it according to their national contexts. The other aspects of the implementation of the Recommendation also show great diversity. Countries differ not only in the strength of the commitment of key policy actors to the idea of competence-based education, but also in their capacities to implement complex curriculum reforms aimed at altering school level pedagogical approaches. Successful implementation can be only in those countries where there is coordinated action in the following four areas: (1) the definition of competence development-related goals and standards in national curriculum documents, (2) the alignment of national and school level assessment and evaluation approaches with these goals and standards, (3) intensive capacity building among teachers so that they become capable of adapting their classroom level practices to the new goals and standards and, particularly, (4) massive support for school level pedagogical innovations that enhance the renewal of learning environments. This also requires investing in the development of school leadership and national educational innovation systems. National assessment and evaluation systems must also be developed so that they better support educational level innovations (Halász, Michel, 2011).

An invaluable contribution to investigation and implementation of competency – based approach to teaching foreign languages in Kazakhstan was made by Salima Kunanbayeva, the rector of Kazakh Ablaikhan University of International Relations and World Languages. Her work is characterized by immensity, efficiency and in-depth content understanding of modern tasks. She is a leading expert on problems of the content and structure of foreign-language formation in Kazakhstan, the representative of education reforming programs, the coordinator of a number of European Union international programs. Author of more than 100 scientific works.

According to her investigation cross-cultural and communicative competences contain a key aspect as

linguo-cultural orientation of functionally substantial vector of competences. Within the meaning of component structure **"cross-cultural and communicative competences"**, in terms of basic theoretical principles "cognitive – linguo-cultural methodology", we consider it's fair to point out "cross-cultural-communicative competence" as an independent competence. The structure of "cross-cultural and communicative competences" that we assumed is presented by the following subcompetences reflecting the training system, forming cross-cultural competence-based level of linguistic skills (Figure 1).
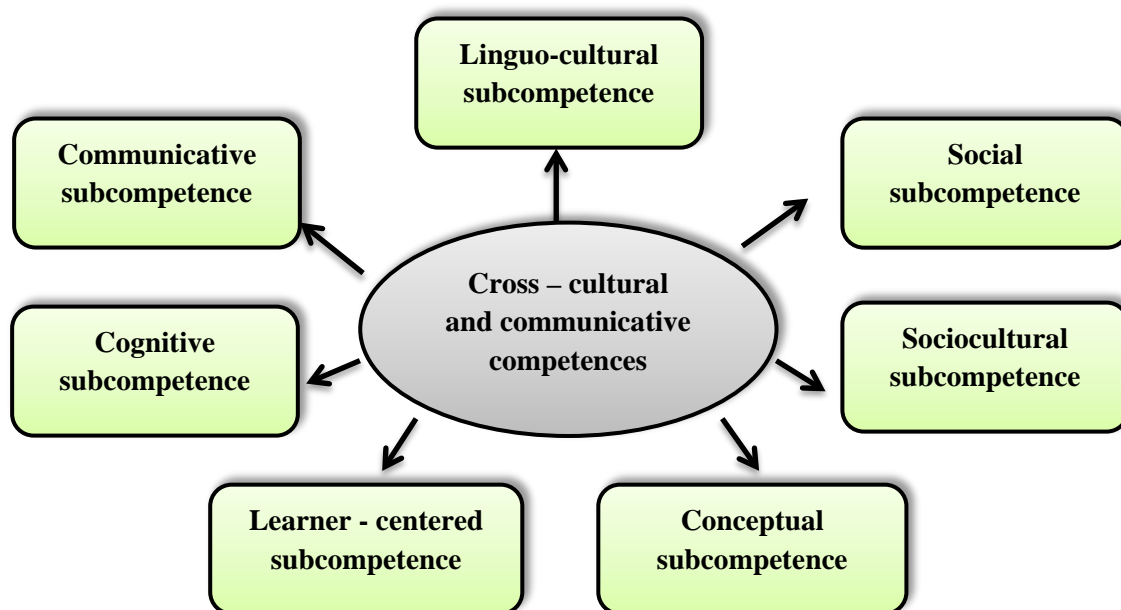

Figure 1 The structure of cross – cultural and communicative competences
(adapted from Кунанбаева, 2010)

Linguo-cultural subcompetence forms personal conceptualization of the world on the basis of a peculiar culture, as linguo-cultural reflection of national language, consciousness and mentality, which puts the ground for "reconceptualisation" (Кунанбаева, 2010).

At the lessons we also can use country study material, as well as national features of geographical names and which is more interesting, even to connect them with native folklore. The country study is understood as a cultural study focused on tasks and requirements of learning a foreign language (Швейцер, 1976). Toponyms are the integral part of background knowledge of native speakers and culture bearers, within the national history, history of settling and development of the territory, which is reflected like in the mirror. Therefore, this branch of linguistics traditionally draws attention not only philologists, but also historians, ethnographers, geographers etc. (Никонов, Тащицкий 1961). **Toponymy** is the study of place names (toponyms), their origins, meanings, use and typology. Toponym is the general term for any place or geographical entity. Related, more specific types of toponym include hydronym for a body of water and oronym for a mountain or hill. Place names provide the most useful geographical reference system in the world (Томахин, 1982).

Toponyms and hydronyms carry different linguistic, cultural and historical information. For example, at the lesson we can choose themes dealing with space, spaceships or cosmodromes. We know for certain that Baikonur is a city of republic and world significance, which is located in Kazakhstan on the right bank of the Syr-Darya river, rented and administered by the Russian Federation. It was constructed to service the Baikonur Cosmodrome. According to various sources the name means in Kazakh either "the master with the light brown hair", or "brown-rich" (the area was known to be rich in brownish copper). But if we refer to **toponymic folklore**, there's a story we inherit for generation:

once upon a time the settlement, which inhabited the banks of the river Syr-Darya, was overtaken by great Famine, all the cattle died out. That's why the leader decided to marry his daughter Konur to a rich man. Her husband was very prosperous man and the land where she was sent was very fertile. She helped her dear land to get over the disastrous Famine, as she was very generous, kind and devoted to her people. According to the rich land and the name of the girl, this place was called "Baikonur", as the word "bai" means "rich" in the Kazakh language and we can translate this toponym as "rich Konur". Each learner separately, and all our state as a whole are interested today in the practical mastering of a foreign language providing expansion into the world market and uniting with world culture (Халықтық ономастика, 2005).

Results and Discussion

According to the conception of developing educational system of Kazakhstan on modern lines, such issues as communicative teaching of foreign languages, which are oriented to reach practical effects, are of paramount importance. All branches of professional state education standard involve a foreign subject, which aims to form and develop communicative competence of an expert. Future professional is a graduate, who extensively has a hand in vocational training in a foreign language which covers the spheres of science, technology, production and education. Mastering the communicative competence means for the student not just having a better command of language, but breaking of communicative barriers. The achievement of language competence helps to realize personal and business contacts in order to satisfy professional necessities, self – education and self – improvement.

In our opinion the more appropriate and shorter definitions to the terms are as following: "competency" is an ability of a person to do practical activities, and "competence" is a substantial component of this ability in the form of knowledge and skills. The term "communicative competence" was entered into scientific use of linguodidactics by scientist M.N. Vyatyutnev. The scientist suggested to assume communicative competence "as a choice and implementation of programs of speech behavior depending on the ability of a person to be guided in different communicative situations; ability to classify situations depending on the subject, tasks, communicative sets arising beforehand and also during the conversation in the course of adaptation" (Вятютнев, 1977). Specifying the essence of communicative competence, N.I. Gez gives the following definition: ability of coherent use of the language in various socially determined situations (Гез, 1985).

The structure of a foreign-language communicative competence is both compounding and difficult. In obedience to the Council of Europe document (1997) the following model of communicative competence is reflected: communicative competence consists of three components – linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. The linguistic component includes phonologic, lexical, grammatical knowledge and abilities. The sociolinguistic component is determined by sociocultural conditions of the language usage and represents a link between communicative and other competences as well. Sociocultural competence assumes awareness of national specifics and cultural thought patterns of native speakers' social and speech behavior (their customs, etiquette, social stereotypes, culture and history of the country) and the ways to use them in the course of communication (Hutmacher, 1997).

In Kazakhstan in the course of foreign language teaching it is possible to use the following competency-based technologies:
- project – based learning;
- developing critical thinking through reading and writing;
- debates method, sometimes called Socratic method;
- game technology (language games, role-playing, dramatization);
- problem – solving discussions;
- interactive teaching technology (in pairs, in small groups);
- scenario and context based technology;
- module technology
- dual lessons (two teachers).

If we take the teaching goal (ability to communicate in foreign languages) as a basis, the categories of the traditional language description (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.) will be insufficient. The functional aspect of the language system is of higher priority. For example:
- realization strategy (what, how much and with what reason should one realize or understand?);
- speech intentions (assessment of speech situation and selection of language means);
- types of texts (what types of texts are characteristic for understanding?);
- non – language means (gestures, facial expression, accents and intonations as "bearing some meaning").

In Kazakhstan teaching of foreign languages as a means of international communication is of great tendency. It can be reached by the virtue of:
- formation and development of basic communicative abilities in the main types of speech activity;
- implementation of communicative - speech skills within foreign-language environment of the countries of a learning language (in the frame of studying themes and situations);
- improvement of all components of a foreign-language communicative competence;
- sociocultural development of students in the context of European and world culture by means of cross - cultural, cultural and linguo-cultural material.

Communicative competence involves the following major abilities:
- to read and understand simple, authentic texts (understanding the main idea together with a full comprehension);
- to communicate orally in standard situations, such as educational, cultural, household matters;
- briefly introduce oneself, describe environment, retell, express opinion;
- to express some simple information in the written form (e.g. letter).

The minimum level of communicative competence of the state educational standard for foreign languages is determined in this way (Кулибаева, 2006).

Conclusion

- In modern methodology there is no universal method of teaching a foreign language. Thus, it is necessary to combine various techniques depending on the purposes, conditions of training

and other factors. The preference is given to the learner – centered approach, which stimulate creative activity and increase motivation to foreign language learning.

- The main goal of teaching becomes the ability "to communicate in a foreign language". The content of teaching a foreign language is focused on the formation and development of all components of communicative competence: speaking skills and abilities, which are created on the basis of language, linguo-cultural knowledge and country studies.

- Language competence and its making part, such as grammatical skills and abilities, take a leading place in the course of achievement of the main goal of teaching a foreign language is that the ability to communicate in a foreign language. It is indisputable that communication is possible only with the presence of the language competence, which is based on mastering grammatical skills and abilities.

- Communicative competence appears to be of prior purpose. At the same time foreign language is just a mean, which gives an opportunity to get and show ones cultural level, an ability to think, create, evaluate another person's thought, creativity or in other words to make communication possible. Therefore, among different techniques of mastering a foreign language, the preference is given to the ones which possess a developing potential: provoking thoughts, enriching feelings, improving the culture of communication and social behavior as a whole.

- Linguo-cultural subcompetence as a part of cross-cultural and communicative competences makes personal conceptualization of the world on the basis of a certain culture, as linguo-cultural reflection of national language, consciousness and mentality. That is why it is also important to use some country study material, as well as national peculiarities of geographical names (toponyms) and which is more entertaining is the connection with native folklore (toponymic folklore). Place names provide the most useful geographical reference system in the world. Toponyms and hydronyms carry different linguistic, cultural and historical information. That will make the lessons more interesting, stimulate the students to learn a foreign language independently, motivate them to travel a lot and use the language for communication.

We can judge about the efficiency, effectiveness and success of the educational process only by the final result, by students' level of achievement. If one of the individual results is lacking behind, it will pull backwards the success of the whole group and, eventually, show a lower functional level of the learning system. The educational process is distinguished by its functional mobility and flexibility, which allows at any time to introduce a regulating factor by changing any functional element of the process. Comparing a predetermined purposeful result with an actual interim result, the system can rearrange its activities at any stage, at any time to amend individual intermediate deflections or deviations to avoid the destruction of the whole system.

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