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Research Article

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN FRENCH LANGUAGE DIDACTICS: ILLUSTRATION OF THE LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPONENTS THROUGH THE THEME OF WORK

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Abstract

Communication competence has become a central concept in French language didactics. It extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include the ability to use language appropriately according to social and cultural contexts. From this perspective, the theme of work provides a meaningful pedagogical framework because it simultaneously engages linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive and pragmatic dimensions of communication. This article examines the linguistic and sociolinguistic components of communicative competence through classroom activities based on the theme of work. Using a qualitative documentary approach, the study highlights the complementarity of these two components in the development of learners' communicative skills. The findings indicate that professional communication tasks enhance both linguistic proficiency and the ability to adapt language to different social situations. The study concludes that an integrated didactic approach is essential for preparing learners to communicate effectively in authentic professional contexts.

Keywords: Communicative competence, French language didactics, Linguistic competence, Sociolinguistic competence, Work, Language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Tudy Context

For several decades, language didactics has undergone profound changes under the influence of research in linguistics, sociolinguistics and educational sciences. Whereas traditional methods mainly emphasized the acquisition of grammatical structures, contemporary approaches attach particular importance to learners' ability to communicate effectively in everyday and professional situations. This development has led to the emergence of the notion of communicative competence, which has now become a central objective of French language teaching. Introduced notably [1] in response to the strictly linguistic conception of competence developed by [2], this notion emphasizes that a competent speaker does not merely produce grammatically correct sentences. The speaker must also know how to choose appropriate linguistic forms according to the interlocutor, context, communicative intention and social norms governing exchanges. This broader conception of competence has profoundly renewed teaching practices and the objectives of French language instruction. From this perspective, the theme of work appears to be a privileged field for developing the different components of communicative competence. Professional situations require a variety of language resources: understanding a job advertisement, writing a curriculum vitae, writing a cover letter, taking part in a job interview, communicating with a supervisor, negotiating with a colleague, or presenting a project. Each of these situations requires simultaneous mastery of linguistic knowledge and the sociocultural rules governing interaction.

Literature Review

It consists of identifying, critically analyzing and synthesizing existing studies dealing with the same topic. We therefore examined, in turn:

- Dell Hymes, for whom communicative competence constitutes the main objective of language learning.
- Canale and Swain, who classified the components of communicative competence into linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

We differ from them in that this research illustrates a topic included in the French language teaching curriculum in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, namely work.

Research problem

Based on this observation, the present study revolves around the following main question:

How does the theme of work make it possible to jointly develop the linguistic and sociolinguistic components of communicative competence in French language didactics?

This question leads to several specific questions:

- What does linguistic competence consist of from a communicative perspective?
- What role does sociolinguistic competence play in interactions related to the world of work?
- How can teachers exploit the theme of work to simultaneously develop these two components in learners?

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Hypothesis

Linguistic competence enables learners to mobilize the lexical, grammatical, phonological and syntactic resources necessary to produce correct discourse. However, this mastery remains insufficient if it is not accompanied by sociolinguistic competence, which makes it possible to adapt discourse to the status of interlocutors, the degree of formality of the situation, and conventions specific to the professional world. A grammatically impeccable formulation may therefore be judged inappropriate when it does not comply with prevailing social usages.

In French classes, the pedagogical use of the theme of work helps bring school learning closer to the social realities learners will encounter. It develops skills that can be directly mobilized in further studies, professional integration and participation in civic life. This orientation is also consistent with the recommendations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which emphasizes the accomplishment of authentic tasks in varied communication contexts [3]. Despite the recognized importance of communicative competence, several observations show that teaching practices sometimes continue to prioritize grammatical knowledge at the expense of the sociolinguistic dimensions of language. Learners may master certain rules governing French while still experiencing difficulties adapting their language to the demands of different professional situations. This reality raises the question of how linguistic and sociolinguistic competence can be articulated in French language teaching.

Objective and significance of the study

The general objective of this research is to analyze the contribution of the theme of work to the development of communicative competence in French language didactics.

More specifically, it aims to:

- Present the theoretical foundations of communicative competence;
- Characterize the linguistic and sociolinguistic components;
- Show how communication situations related to work promote their acquisition;
- Propose didactic approaches likely to improve teaching practices.

The scientific significance of this study lies in linking two complementary fields: French language didactics and professional communication. Pedagogically, it provides teachers with guidelines for designing activities that promote contextualized learning of French.

Methodology

For this article, we chose the documentary method, which consists of the steps and techniques used to search for, find and sort documents on a given topic. It is based on three key actions: defining the topic, selecting sources and evaluating information (http://www.sciencespo.fr). The first aspect involves using reference tools that provide general information, define the context and identify the essential notions of the subject. The second involves consulting specialized bibliographies according to the discipline (the sources), and the third involves accessing documents: an overview of libraries corresponding to the discipline under study, here, the assessment of aspects of communicative competence.

Discussion

At this level, we affirm that researchers such as Hymes have demonstrated that communication does not rely solely on knowledge of language, but also on the ability to use that language according to the social norms of society. We propose, for our part, to specifically illustrate the linguistic and sociolinguistic components through the theme of work. This constitutes the originality of this study.

Structure of the research

Our study is organized according to the IMRAD model. The first chapter will deal with the theory of the communicative approach and communication competences. The second chapter will briefly outline the research methodology. The third chapter will present the results of the documentary analysis before subjecting them to critical discussion in light of the main works devoted to communicative competence, while illustrating the linguistic and sociolinguistic components.

THEORY OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES

This chapter presents the fundamental notions related to the communicative approach and communicative competence. It focuses on the definition of the communicative approach, communicative competence, and the components of communicative competence.

1. Genesis and definition of the communicative approach

The communicative approach took off in Europe in the mid-1970s. It represented a break with traditional methodologies, notably grammar-translation, the audio-lingual method and the structural-global audio-visual methodology, which were considered too focused on form and mechanical repetition [4]. The theory [5] of linguistic competence is considered the triggering element. Chomsky considers linguistic competence to be an abstract and innate ability to generate grammatically correct sentences. However, this view does not take into account the social dimension of language.

Thus, [6] proposed in 1972 the notion of “communicative competence.” For him, “a normal child acquires both the grammar of his or her language and the ability to use that grammar appropriately.” Thus, communicating means knowing:

- Who is speaking?
- To whom is he or she speaking?
- When should one speak?
- Where should one speak?
- What should one say and how should one say it?

In language didactics, the communicative approach is defined by Claude Germain [7] as an approach aimed at developing the ability to communicate in a language, both orally and in writing. Christian Puren adds that with this approach, the

learner becomes a "social actor" who must perform tasks with the language in situations close to real life [8]. It is in this logic of C. Germain and C. Puren that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [9], in 2001, institutionalized this major development in language teaching.

2. Model of communicative competence

Canale and Michael Swain remain a reference following their joint publication [10] in 1980, later clarified in 1983 by Canale [11]. This reference model was taken up in the French-speaking context by Sophie Moirand [12], who divided communicative competence into four sub-competences:

a. Linguistic competence: Knowledge and application of grammatical rules, or more broadly the rules of the linguistic system [13], including phonology, lexicon and semantics.
b. Sociolinguistic competence: The ability to produce utterances appropriate to a target society, including politeness rules and turn-taking.
c. Discourse competence:
d. The ability to ensure the cohesion and coherence of a text [14]. It involves thematic organization, the organization of connectors and the choice of discourse type.
e. Strategic competence: The choice of strategies for overcoming difficulties, including reformulation, requests for clarification and gestures. Puren also adds learning strategies [15].

Pedagogical illustration: an example of activities by component

To operationalize the model in class, each component can be worked on through specific tasks.

Component	Objective	Example of activities	Materials
Linguistic	Master structures for ordering	Lexical translation; complete a restaurant dialogue with expressions such as "I would like / the bill / a coffee."	Menu; gap-fill dialogue sheet.
Sociolinguistic	Choose the appropriate register	Role play: order in two situations: 1. with a friend; 2. with a waiter. Compare: "Pass me the salt" / "Could you pass me the salt, please?"	Role cards; observation grid.
Discourse	Produce coherent discourse	Reconstruction: put the lines of a telephone dialogue for reserving a table in the correct order.	Audio; strips of paper.
Strategic	Manage a misunderstanding	Simulation: the waiter does not understand. The learner must reformulate: "I would like chicken not beef, chicken please."	Pictures.

As we can clearly see, these activities demonstrate that the communicative approach does not reject grammar. Rather, it integrates grammar into a communication task. As Puren puts it: "We move from knowledge about language to know-how with language."

METHODOLOGY

The present study follows a qualitative documentary approach. This methodological choice is justified by the objective pursued, namely to analyze the theoretical foundations of communicative competence and show how linguistic and sociolinguistic components can be mobilized in French teaching through the theme of work. The documentary analysis is based on the critical use of scientific books, specialized journal articles, institutional documents and research works devoted to language didactics, linguistics and sociolinguistics. The publications of Dell Hymes, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, Sophie Moirand, Jean-Pierre Cuq, Louis Porcher, Christian Puren and the Council of Europe constitute the main references guiding this research. Data collection consisted of identifying recurring concepts related to communicative competence, linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence, and then examining their application in teaching-learning situations involving the theme of work. Particular attention was paid to activities proposed in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) and French as a Second Language (FLS) textbooks, as well as to recommendations in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [16]. The data collected were then subjected to thematic analysis. This method made it possible to group the information into several categories: the theoretical foundations of communicative competence, the characteristics of the linguistic and sociolinguistic components, professional communication situations, and the didactic implications of teaching them. The choice of the theme of work is not accidental. It is a particularly rich field of communication because it mobilizes varied speech acts such as introducing oneself, requesting information, convincing, arguing, negotiating, explaining, thanking, presenting a project or resolving a conflict. These speech acts require the simultaneous mobilization of linguistic knowledge and sociocultural competences.

RESULTS, DIDACTIC ILLUSTRATION OF THE LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPONENTS THROUGH THE THEME OF WORK, AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical foundations of communicative competence

The notion of communicative competence originates in the work of the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes [17]. In response to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance, Hymes argues that a language cannot be studied independently of its context of use.

For him, speaking a language also means knowing the social rules that permit its use within a given community. This conception profoundly renewed language didactics. Whereas structural methods mainly emphasized memorizing grammatical forms, communicative approaches now prioritize the ability to perform real communication tasks. Canale and Swain [18] enriched this perspective by distinguishing several components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. This classification remains one of the most widely used in French didactics research. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages adopts this orientation by considering the learner as a social actor called upon to perform varied tasks in different areas of life. Linguistic competences are no longer regarded as an end in themselves, but as resources mobilized to act effectively in authentic situations [19]. French language teaching has progressively adopted this conception. School curricula now give an important place to oral interactions,

collaborative projects and communication situations inspired by everyday or professional life.

Linguistic competence in the theme of work

Linguistic competence refers to knowledge of the language system. It includes mastery of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology and spelling [20]. It constitutes the indispensable basis of all communication. In the professional field, this competence is manifested in the ability to use precise vocabulary adapted to different work situations. Learners must know, for example, terms relating to recruitment, occupations, employment contracts, professional responsibilities, working hours, remuneration and hierarchical relationships. Sentence construction also plays an essential role. During a job interview, candidates must be able to use verb tenses correctly to present their educational and professional background. The passé composé or imperfect are used to discuss previous experiences, while the simple future or conditional are used to express professional plans and ambitions. Teaching professional vocabulary should not, however, be limited to learning lists of words. Research in didactics shows that vocabulary is acquired more durably when it is integrated into authentic communication tasks [21]. Thus, writing a curriculum vitae, cover letter or administrative correspondence is an excellent way to consolidate learners' linguistic skills while enabling them to reinvest their knowledge in a situation close to reality. Simulation activities also play an important role. Role plays reproducing a recruitment interview, team meeting or company presentation make it possible to mobilize vocabulary, syntax and discourse structures specific to professional French simultaneously.

Sociolinguistic competence in the theme of work

While linguistic competence makes it possible to produce correct sentences, it does not guarantee that those sentences will be appropriate to the communication situation. This is precisely the function of sociolinguistic competence. According to Sophie Moirand [22], this competence corresponds to the ability to adapt language productions to the social and cultural norms of the linguistic community. It involves knowledge of language registers, politeness formulas, turn-taking rules, relational conventions and expected behavior in each context. In the professional world, sociolinguistic requirements are particularly important. The way one addresses an employer differs significantly from the way one speaks to a close colleague. Linguistic choices depend on the status of the interlocutors, the degree of formality of the situation, the objective pursued and the culture of the organization. Thus, a candidate who begins a cover letter with "Hi" commits less a grammatical error than a sociolinguistic error. Similarly, using the informal "tu" during a first job interview may be interpreted as a lack of professional distance, even if the sentence is grammatically correct. Teaching this competence therefore requires placing learners in varied situations in which they must choose the most appropriate formulation. Interview simulations, analyses of authentic dialogues, role plays and case studies are particularly effective tools for achieving this objective. Beyond verbal aspects, sociolinguistic competence also includes certain non-verbal behaviors such as greetings, eye contact, physical distance, turn-taking and signs of respect. These elements contribute greatly to successful professional communication.

Didactic illustration of the linguistic and sociolinguistic components through the theme of work

The theme of work is a particularly valuable support for developing communicative competence because it puts learners in contact with communication situations close to their social reality. From an action-oriented perspective, pedagogical activities should lead learners to solve tasks that reproduce the requirements of the professional world. The goal is no longer merely to learn the language, but to use it to act effectively in authentic contexts. Contemporary French didactics programs therefore recommend prioritizing complex tasks in which linguistic knowledge is mobilized in the service of a clearly identified communication objective [23].

Activity 1: Writing a curriculum vitae

Writing a curriculum vitae is a linguistically rich activity. Learners are required to select specific vocabulary relating to education, professional experience, skills and interests.

This activity promotes, in particular:

- Acquisition of professional vocabulary;
- Correct use of noun groups;
- Use of action verbs (design, organize, coordinate, manage, supervise, carry out, develop);
- Mastery of lexical and grammatical spelling;
- Logical organization of information.

Beyond these linguistic aspects, a curriculum vitae also follows sociolinguistic norms. Depending on cultural contexts, some information is expected while other information should be avoided. Presentation, concision, prioritization of information and level of formality also contribute to the effectiveness of this document. The teacher may ask learners to compare several curriculum vitae models in order to identify characteristics that correspond to recruiters' expectations.

Activity 2: The cover letter

The cover letter is another particularly relevant activity. Linguistically, it mobilizes logical connectors; expressions of cause, consequence and purpose; the polite conditional; introductory formulas; and argumentative techniques. Sociolinguistically, it requires respect for professional letter-writing conventions. Expressions such as "Yours faithfully, Madam/Sir, please accept the expression of my distinguished greetings" are less a matter of grammatical competence than of sociolinguistic competence. Their use demonstrates knowledge of professional conventions specific to administrative correspondence [24]. This activity can be enriched through collective rewriting in which learners compare several formulations to determine which ones best suit the communication context.

Activity 3: Simulating a job interview

Simulations are currently among the most effective practices in language didactics. In a job interview, learners must respond to questions such as those normally asked by recruiters.

- Linguistic competence: The learner mobilizes the vocabulary of occupations, verb tenses, logical connectors, argumentative techniques and temporal markers.

- Sociolinguistic competence: The learner must also use the formal form of address, employ appropriate politeness formulas, wait for their turn to speak, maintain a formal register and adapt their discourse to the recruiter's status.

The teacher can film the simulations in order to conduct a reflective analysis of the quality of interactions.

Activity 4: The work meeting

A meeting represents a particularly complex communication situation. Participants must present an idea, defend a proposal, request clarification, express agreement or disagreement, and reformulate a colleague's statements.This activity mobilizes important discourse skills, but also numerous sociolinguistic competences. For example, the expression "I understand your point of view; however, allow me to propose another solution" is generally more appropriate than "You are wrong." The difference does not lie in grammatical correctness, but in taking into account relational norms that promote effective professional communication.

Summary of results

The documentary analysis reveals several findings. First, linguistic competence remains indispensable. Without sufficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and syntax, communication becomes difficult, if not impossible. Second, this competence alone is not sufficient to guarantee successful professional interactions. Work situations also require knowledge of the social rules organizing exchanges between individuals. Third, pedagogical activities based on authentic tasks promote more lasting learning than purely structural exercises. When learners write a cover letter, take part in an interview simulation or present a professional project, they simultaneously reinvest their linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge. Finally, the analysis shows that the two components are complementary. They cannot be taught separately without risking incomplete learning. A learner may master the grammatical rules of French while experiencing difficulties communicating effectively in a real situation. Conversely, good knowledge of social conventions cannot compensate for major gaps in mastery of the linguistic system.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained confirm Hymes's analyses, according to which communication relies not only on knowledge of language but also on the ability to use that language in accordance with the social norms of the linguistic community [25]. They also align with the work of Canale and Swain, who regard sociolinguistic competence as an essential component of communicative competence. The activities observed show that the most effective learning occurs when mastery of the linguistic code is systematically combined with consideration of the social parameters of interaction [26]. The conclusions of this study also converge with the orientations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It encourages teachers to design tasks close to real-life situations in order to develop operational communicative competence. From a pedagogical point of view, these results encourage teachers to move beyond traditional isolated grammar exercises. Linguistic content should be integrated into contextualized communication projects in which learners simultaneously mobilize their linguistic, discourse and sociocultural knowledge. This reflection is particularly relevant in African educational systems, where French teaching also pursues an objective of social and professional integration. Activities centered on the theme of work help prepare learners for the demands of the labor market while developing their language autonomy.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the place of communicative competence in French language didactics, with particular emphasis on the linguistic and sociolinguistic components through the theme of work. The documentary analysis shows that these two components have a complementary relationship that determines the effectiveness of language learning. Linguistic competence remains the foundation of all communication. It enables learners to master the lexical, grammatical, morphological, syntactic and phonological rules necessary to produce correct utterances. However, this mastery alone does not guarantee successful communication. Professional situations also require the ability to adapt discourse to interlocutors, context, objectives of the exchange and sociocultural norms. This is precisely the role of sociolinguistic competence. The theme of work therefore appears to be a particularly fruitful didactic support. Activities involving the writing of a curriculum vitae and cover letter, job-interview simulations, project presentations and participation in meetings provide concrete opportunities to simultaneously mobilize linguistic and sociolinguistic resources. They bring school learning closer to situations learners will encounter in their academic and professional careers. The results obtained confirm the orientations of the communicative approach and the action-oriented perspective. They show that French teaching becomes more effective when it is based on authentic tasks that give meaning to learning and promote the development of global communicative competence. This reflection is also particularly relevant to French-speaking educational systems in Africa, where mastery of French is often a determining factor in academic success, professional integration and participation in public life. Training learners who can communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately in varied contexts is today a major challenge for French didactics. Finally, this study opens research perspectives concerning the experimentation of teaching systems incorporating more authentic professional interactions, digital tools and collaborative communication situations.

Recommendations

For teachers :

- Regularly integrate authentic communication situations into teaching sequences;
- Give balanced attention to the linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and pragmatic dimensions of communicative competence;
- Prioritize role plays, simulations, debates and collaborative projects;
- Develop assessment of communicative competences through complex tasks rather than simple grammatical recall exercises.

For curriculum designers :

- Strengthen the presence of professional communication situations in curricula;

- Diversify teaching materials while taking local sociocultural realities into account;
- Encourage the production of contextualized textbooks illustrating the uses of French in African professional environments.

For researchers:

- Conduct empirical studies on the impact of simulated professional activities on the development of communicative competence;
- Compare didactic practices implemented in different French-speaking contexts;
- Analyze the influence of digital technologies on the teaching of professional communication in French.

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