

# The Communicative Competence in the Curriculum, the Syllabus and the Teacher Practice

## in a Public University in Colombia.

**El Concepto de la Competencia Comunicativa en el Currículo,  
el Syllabus y la Práctica del Docente en una Universidad  
Pública de Colombiana.**

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## Resumen

El siguiente artículo describe un análisis de baja escala liderado por dos docentes de la Escuela de Idiomas de una Universidad Pública de Colombia. El propósito de este estudio era realizar un análisis sobre el concepto de la competencia comunicativa en el currículo, el syllabus y la implementación de éste en el desarrollo de la clase. Los resultados evidencian una conexión clara entre el concepto de la competencia comunicativa entre el diseñador del currículo y el syllabus pero existe aún la falta de diálogo entre el diseñador del currículo y el docente quien lo implementa en clase

Palabras clave: Currículo, PAE, syllabus, competencia comunicativa y diseñador

## Abstract

The following article describes an analysis conducted by two English teachers from the school of languages of a public university in Colombia. The purpose of this study was to analyze the concept of the communicative competence in the Curriculum and the syllabus of a specific subject and, how this concept was evidenced in the teaching practice. The findings showed that there is a clear connection between the concept of the communicative competence of the curriculum and the syllabus' designers, but there is still a lack of dialogue between the syllabus' designers and the teacher who implements it.

Key words: Curriculum, syllabus, PAE, communicative competence, designer

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What is the concept of the communicative competence; in the PAE (EAP, Educative Academic Project), in the syllabus and the activities propose by the teacher in a subject of the Modern Languages' Program of the School of Languages at a public university of Colombia?

## Introduction

Concerns about the concept of the communicative competence in the curriculum, the syllabus and the teacher practice, in the subject Communicative Project IV, emerged from a discussion carried out in the EFL Methodology Seminar of a Masters program. The starting point of the debate was Kumaravadivelu's (2001) idea of the overall process of education, which involves several players—educational administrators, policy makers, curriculum planners, teacher educators, textbook writers, and others—each constituting an important link in the educational chain. (p. 7). In this respect, we interpreted that if any part of the educational chain is broken, the results will be different from the ones initially expected.

Regarding the previous statements, we analyzed how the Modern Languages School curriculum defines the concept of the communicative competence. For this purpose, the PAE (EAP, *Educativa Academic Project*), which from now on will be denominated the curriculum, is the overall process of education addressed by Kumaravadivelu (2001).

Bobbitt (in Smith, 1996) argues that "curriculum, as an idea, has its roots in the Latin word for race-course", the same author explains "the curriculum as the course of deeds and experiences through which children become the adults they should become, for success in adult society". In formal education, a curriculum is the core from

where philosophies about how to educate children and prospective professionals are taken. Walter (1982 as cited in Smith 1996) states that "Curriculum is many things for many people." Although, the concept of curriculum has led to many debates, each public or private institution must develop a curriculum for the different courses.

One of the main components of a curriculum is the syllabus. Kumaravadivelu (2001, chapter 2) says that the syllabus indicates the teaching and learning techniques that are developed in the classroom. According to Kumaravadivelu, there is a clear disjunction between what curriculum designers and textbook writers prescribe, and what teachers and learners actually practice in the classroom. This disjunction is proposed by Savignon (2002) as the communicative curriculum for language teaching framework.

Bearing in mind Kumaravadivelu's disjunction idea, it is important to analyze and identify, as novice members of the school of languages' community, what the teaching foundations of the school of languages are, how those foundations are linked with the syllabus design and how we, as teachers, integrate the different components in the teaching practice. In order to achieve this task, we first get in contact with the documents and analyze how the curriculum, the syllabus and the teaching practice are designed and interrelated.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### CURRICULUM DESIGN

Two American writers Bobbitt (1918; 1928) and Tyler (1949) define curriculum as follows:

"The central theory of curriculum is simple. Human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. However numerous and diverse they may be for any social class they can be discovered. This requires only that one go out into the world of affairs and discover the particulars of which their affairs consist. These will show the abilities, attitudes, habits, appreciations and forms of knowledge that men need. These will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite and particularized. The curriculum will then be that series of experiences which children and youth must have by way of obtaining those objectives." (1918: 42)

From our perspective, the Curriculum is the core element of any teaching practice and should be designed having into account learners' needs and the way they should be taught. In addition, a curriculum allows teachers the scope to make interpretations in response to the context's particularities, community members' interests, and talents of individuals and groups of students in their classes.

Since, we are placing our attention on the concept of the communicative competence, it is pertinent to tackle the definitions and understandings of this concept and the characteristics of it in the curriculum design.

### The concept of the Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is a concept introduced by (Dell Hymes, 1972 as cited in Bachman 1990, p. 81:110) and discussed and redefined by many authors. Hymes' original idea was that "speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes."

According to Savignon (as cited in Breen & Candlin, 2002, chapter 4), there are many proposed innovations in curriculum planning and they include multiplicity of alternatives such as games, tasks, juggling, and the development of aids to language learning. Also, computer technologies are offering a lot of modern opportunities for computer-mediated communication. Savignon (in Breen and Candlin 2002:11) finds it helpful to think of a communicative curriculum as potentially having five components: language arts, language for a purpose, personal second language use, theater arts, and beyond the classroom.

In agrees with Hymes' theory on communicative competence, Savignon (2002) proposes four components of communicative competence. They are grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence. As we can see, Savignon uses the term sociocultural competence when referring to sociolinguistic compe-

tence and grammatical competence when referring to the linguistic competence coined by Hymes.

Having into account Savignon's redefinition of communicative competence, on one hand, anyone may think that formal and informal components of language are immersed in the foreign language teaching context, and these definitions, should be defined in the curriculum, explained in the syllabus and evidenced in the teaching practice. On the other hand, teachers have their own beliefs about what the communicative concept is, these perceptions about what they believe is "the best" for their students, may influence the curriculum design, the syllabus design and the teaching practice.

In terms of teachers' beliefs, we consider it is important to know about the connection between what Spanish and English teachers interpret for communicative competence, regarding that both can be part of the PAE's design and this enlighten the syllabus designers and the latter, teachers' activities proposed for the class. Regarding the PAE, it seems to be that PAE's designers guided by LOS LINEAMIENTOS Y ESTANDARES EN LENGUA CASTELLANA, have set clear objectives to promote communicative competences such as, interpretative, argumentative, discursive and pragmatics from the PAE and the future teaching practices, as cited in the following paragraph:

"El fortalecimiento de la competencia comunicativa con el fin de que cada estudiante comprenda, interprete, argumente, cree y produzca discurso individual y colectivo, con sentido y significado adecuados, eficaz y eficiente en la interacción comunicativa."

On the other hand, the concept of commu-

nicate competence from the English teaching perspective is cited as follows:

"Hoy, como ayer, el programa se justifica, básicamente, por la imperiosa y permanente necesidad de formar maestros que eduquen de manera integral, mediante las áreas de lengua castellana y lengua inglesa, en los niveles de básica, media y programa de formación complementaria. Además, por el requerimiento, por parte del Estado, de la formación de nuevos profesionales del lenguaje, con competencia: comunicativa, pedagógica, disciplinar e investigativa."

In a study developed at La Universidad Nacional de Colombia titled, "English Teachers' Beliefs about Communicative Competence and their Relationship with their Classroom Practices", the author observes that, "teachers find difficult to define the communicative competence, they relate the communicative competence with functional aspects and the four language abilities as well, however the participants think that nowadays teachers do not take into account all of the components of communicative competence".

From our perspective, the concept of the communicative competence can be seen as an ongoing process, that might be constructed, in the English teachers meetings, from interactions with our students or when observing their learning process. However, there may be a starting point to shape those definitions in the syllabus and in the teacher practice. Another term that it is relevant to mention in this analysis is Syllabus, which concept is defined below:

"The single most important instrument of structure in a course. It outlines the goals and objectives of a course, prerequisites,

the grading/evaluation scheme, materials to be used (textbooks, software), topics to be covered, a schedule, and a bibliography. Each of these components defines the nature of the learning experience. Goals and objectives identify the expected outcomes and scope of the course as determined by the instructor or course designer, restricting the domain of knowledge for the learner. Prerequisites limit the student population to those with certain kinds of learning experiences, usually other courses. The grading or evaluation scheme tells students what kind of learning activities are to be valued (e.g., assignments, tests, papers, projects), that is, the currency of learning in this particular course. Topics to be covered specify the content that the instructor feels is important. The schedule provides a timetable for learning, usually with milestones in the form of due dates or tests." Greg Kearsley and William Lynch (1996)

In this year, English teachers of the school of languages of the university, hold a meeting during a week before the semester started, the relevant aspects of this encounter is recorded in a minute filled by one of the members and lies in the secretary's office of the school. The purpose of this meeting was to clarify, evaluate, reorganize, reflect and understand syllabi designers' decisions. In those dialogues, teachers presented the contents they worked during the semester and shared the strategies to approach such topics; "ups" and "downs" of each aspect.

Something essential of the issues addressed by teachers who attended those meetings is that they illustrated their decisions on syllabus design; form and contents. This permitted novice members of the School of languages and the community to know first-hand syllabus designers'

experiences and theories considered to propose a syllabus.

In addition, one of the university administration requirements is to present a report of the students that failed and to support the reasons why they failed. Besides, at the end of each semester, at individual level, teachers receive the printed report of the evaluation made by students on line, in that evaluation teachers can identify weak and strong points of his/her teaching process, as well as to reflect on the suggestions that students make to the teacher. Those processes described previously nurture not only teachers self-growth but also the way we manifest the way students should be educated in the PAE, The syllabus and the teaching practice.

After understanding what syllabus is, it is now necessary to pay attention to the syllabus implementation.

As cited in González (2008:3) the Colombian National Ministry of Education describes teaching practice as a crucial social event to which the field of pedagogy has a lot to contribute. In Richards (Richards & Lockhart, 1994) the authors mention that there exist a clear distinction of the current teaching practices and the traditional ones, they point out that back then, and teachers were conducted for their beliefs and values. In addition, they state that nowadays, teachers are better informed about theories and concepts that provide them some guidelines to improve their teaching practices.

Both teachers and students involve in the curriculum should take part in the design and creation of lesson plans and syllabi within the framework of the given curriculum. In this respect, one of the teacher's responsibilities is

to implement the curriculum to meet student needs. According to González (2008), "Los profesores de inglés deben ser cuidadosos al momento de tomar decisiones con el fin de ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar su competencia en la lengua extranjera". In any educational context, the person in charge of

implementing the syllabus is the teacher, and his decisions on how to prepare the activities for the class can be influenced or not by the syllabus designer. In this respect, the concept of the communicative competence and the students 'particular needs' are the starting point to plan a lesson

en el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa.

## CURRICULUM, SYLLABUS AND THE TEACHING PRACTICE ANALYSIS

### The curriculum

The Proyecto Académico Educativo (PAE) manifests the core foundations of the School of Languages Pedagogy. In this regard, the curricular design of the programs is described in there and the basis of the School of languages programs are conceived from the (PAE's) perspectives. The curriculum of the Modern Languages program covers two languages: English and Spanish. This curriculum includes subjects to instruct students and to promote the teaching of these two languages. Therefore, it was designed by teachers of both areas. Every semester this curriculum is subject to analysis and revision by the teaching staff. Bearing in mind how the curriculum is designed, we will discuss three parts where the communicative competence concept is evidenced in the PAE.

First of all, we found an approach of the concept of communicative competence from the Humanistic approach addressed in the document: "Se fundamenta en un individuo que, gracias a su capacidad de lenguaje, puede enseñorear el mundo, construir su identidad personal y social, su mundo significativo, su espacio, y su contexto; luego de esa construcción sólida, puede comunicarse y

propalar el conocimiento, para entender tal mundo y el de los demás, con el fin de proyectar su ser y su quehacer."

Secondly, we found in the methodology "LOS LINEAMIENTOS Y ESTANDARES EN LENGUA CASTELLANA", that propose the pragmatic competence, grammatical competence, textual competence, semantic competence, sociocultural competence, encyclopedic competence, literary competence, poetic competence and competence in other non-verbal symbolic systems. In this same line, the methodological foundations of the program focus on the communicative approach as the basis of the English teaching:

"El Programa de Idiomas Modernos, mediante la implementación del enfoque comunicativo para la enseñanza de las lenguas, propende hacia el conocimiento y el uso del idioma Inglés con propósitos comunicativos, para satisfacer las necesidades y expectativas personales y profesionales de los maestros en formación y de la sociedad colombiana, en torno de su posicionamiento como ciudadanos globales."

The authors' concepts of the communicative competence explained in the PAE, enlighten

the syllabus' designer on approaching the communicative competence through the syllabus' methodology, contents and evaluation. Besides the PAE's designer points out the importance of the role of the teacher to fulfill the communicative competence objectives in the foreign language learning: "Por esta razón, el maestro debe hacer su propio seguimiento a las estrategias metodológicas que está utilizando, a los contenidos temáticos –cantidad, secuencialidad y pertinencia– y, de acuerdo con lo que detecte, proponer y ejecutar acciones que permitan el mejoramiento del proceso enseñanza aprendizaje."

## The syllabus

In order to understand better the concept of the communicative competence and how it is present in a subject of the Modern languages Program, we referred to its syllabus and we found that it is taught under the principles of the multi syllabus-syllabus which combines in integrated ways some features of notional, situational, topic and task based syllabus, on the assumption that this integration of syllabus and the form in which they are combined should contribute to experiencing language learning under a communicative approach. We compared different theories about syllabus and we realized that the syllabus of this course is supported by Richards and Platt & Platt (1992), and Wilkins (1976). In addition, the presentation of the syllabus manifests that it is intended to develop the students' communicative competence by engaging them in integrated work on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and communicative skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing around different real life contents and situations.

As evidenced in the previous syllabus' description, the concept of communicative

competence is addressed from different perspectives, such as, the communicative Competence model proposed by Bachman (1990), and the MEN in the LINEAMIENTOS DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS, and the inverted Pyramid" classroom model proposed by Savignon (1983). In addition, the syllabus designer proposes that the methodology of this course is influenced by the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching Approach), critical thinking, as well as by processes and strategies for autonomous learning. According to the literature, Communicative Language Teaching Approach has been interpreted by Savignon (1972, 1983, 1987, 2000) Canale and Swain (1980; Canale (198); Bryam (1997 as cited in Breed & Candlin, 2002) as the interrelation of the grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence and interpretative competence.

In the last decades, the concept of the communicative competence addressed by different authors has influenced the way teachers plan and design a syllabus. This is why we perceived that teachers first, get informed about the concepts of the communicative competence theory, reflect on their decisions to design a syllabus and finally, replicate these understandings in the methodology and contents they proposed in it. From this stand point, we can deduce that the concept of communicative competence proposed by the syllabus designer shows a dialogue between this and theory but, does the syllabus designer maintain the same dialogue with the PAE's designer?

Previously, we noticed that in the methodological foundations the PAE's designer suggested the communicative approach as the basis of teaching practices. The same approach about learning a language is

then adopted by the syllabus designer and adapted according to theory, teaching experiences or beliefs. Now, the concept of the communicative competence addressed in the PAE seems to be associated with linguistic issues, meanwhile, the syllabus designer provokes a more reflexive use of the language beyond the linguistic manifestations. These reflective manifestations are clear in the implementations of projects about raising cultural awareness and global issues and also, in the fact of conceiving sociolinguistic and strategic competences as important aspects of the language. In addition, the contents of the syllabus are directly related to the textbook contents and this will lead to novice teachers to reduce a class to a specific model instead of a wide view of the approaching different topics.

## The teacher practice

In relation to teacher practice, the teacher is the person who understands and applies the syllabus, which is supported by several theories studied along her teaching and learning experiences. The teacher, explained that she feels identified herself with the theory presented by Savignon (2002) in relation to the Communicative Competence which characterizes the ability of language learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge. The teacher encourages students to take risks on the communicative aspect. Although, integrating the language skills in the classroom is a demanding task, she states that she is focused mainly on two competences; grammatical and pragmatic. However, the teacher is aware that she is to propose communicative activities related to the students' life such as asking for personal information, seeking for clarification,

or simply speaking about topics of interest such as fashion, music, friendship, etc.

Before drawing the conclusions of the analysis, the communicative project students were interviewed via on line using a volunteer survey, four students answered the following questions:

How do you perceive the type of activities that the teacher uses in the class?

The students that participated in this checklist stated their teacher uses a lot of activities that help them improve their communicative competence because she prepares a lot of exercises considering that the class is heterogeneous.

Which activities from the textbook help me to develop which communicative competences? Give examples.

Two students consider that the book that they are using in class does not help them too much. And, two students stated that the book does help them to improve their four language skills. As an example, a couple of students mentioned that the book proposes a lot of grammar exercises and then, they have to use that knowledge in writing exercises.

Which activities proposed by the teacher help me to enhance the communicative competences?

Since the teacher prepares a lot of activities and games, the students have the possibility of practicing their English more frequently. The students that participated in this checklist wrote that they have noticed that the teacher fosters the oral skills. As an example, the teacher encourages stu-

dents to prepare various oral presentations. This type of activities helps students to develop their fluency.

In which competence I feel I am good or bad at English?

Two students wrote that they feel weak at writing because they still need more knowledge about grammar and how to structure good texts. Regardless that weakness, they feel that they are good at speaking and listening.

Does the teacher propose activities where I can participate using the communicative competences developed during the semester?

To this last question, students recognize that the teacher proposes a lot of activities in which they can practice and reinforce their English. For example the teacher uses a lot of speaking activities, such as conversations, workshops, and oral presentations about specific topics.

## CONCLUSION

There are clear connections in relation to the understanding of the concept of the communicative competence between the PAE and the syllabus designers, but there

is still the necessity of a direct dialogue involving the syllabus designers and the teachers who implement it.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on what we observed and analyzed we propose two steps that could be taken into consideration for future modifications of the syllabus and the curriculum:

The creation of spaces within the meetings of the teachers of the School of Languages in which the PAE and syllabus designers along with teachers can socialize about the concept of the communicative competence inside these core entities.

It is relevant that new and part-time teachers get informed about the concept of the communicative competence in the PAE and the syllabus in order to avoid improvisation. We assume that, at some point, we will become syllabus designers and participants of any modifications needed. This will be only possible if we know the theories, the concepts and the objectives of the PAE and the syllabus of the School of Languages.

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