



From Defining the Notion of Competence to Communicative Abilities and Distance Learning in the 21st Century

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Abstract: In the context of accelerated digitalization and globalization, communicative competence has become a fundamental prerequisite for personal, educational, and professional success. This research aims to analyze the multidimensional nature of communicative competence and its role in contemporary society, with a focus on its relevance in technology-mediated learning environments. Building on the theoretical model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), and supported by studies such as those of Cucoș (2014), Mândruț (2012), and Iliciev (2020), the paper explores the integration of linguistic, socio-cultural, and strategic components necessary for effective communication. The research adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach, synthesizing key perspectives from the literature to examine how communicative competence functions across educational and digital contexts. The results highlight that beyond grammatical knowledge, successful communication requires adaptability, cultural awareness, and interactional strategies—skills increasingly critical in distance education. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating communicative competence development into curricula and teacher training programs. This study provides valuable insights for educators, researchers, and administrators by emphasizing the need to align communication education with the demands of a society based on IT skills. Its contribution lies in redefining communicative competence as a central educational priority in the era of digital transformation.

Keywords: competence; remote; learning; teaching; interaction

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1. Introduction

This article examines the value of communication competence in the 21st century society, a constant changing society based on online interaction and distance learning.

The article adopts predominantly a pedagogical perspective, complemented by psychological and philosophical incursions. The analysis is centered on communicative competence as an essential object of educational training, highlighting how it should be developed in technologically mediated learning contexts, with a focus on distance learning. The references to authors such as Constantin Cuceș, Mândruț, Harmer and Scrivener reinforce the pedagogical dimension, emphasizing the curriculum, teacher training and the adaptation of teaching methods to the digital environment. The psychological (motivation, cognitive stages, need for competence) and philosophical (ethical and ontological view of competence) dimensions are integrated to underpin the complexity of the concept, but are subsumed under the educational objective.

1.1. Methodology

This article falls under the category of theoretical-conceptual research, which involves analysing specialized literature. The main method used is document analysis, which entails identifying, contrasting, and integrating theoretical perspectives on communication skills and their applicability to distance learning.

The article implies a brief review of definitions and conceptual models (Canale & Swain, Cuceș, Barbaroș), investigation of multifaceted competence (linguistic, sociocultural), combining perspectives from mainly pedagogy and a short focus on psychology, and philosophy to comprehend competency holistically, application of theoretical conclusions in the context of digital education.

This approach enables the formulation of certain pertinent conclusions for educational politics, the training of teaching staff, and curriculum development in an accelerated digitalization setting.

2. Working Hypothesis and Research Questions

In the context of technology-mediated education, the development of communication competence contributes significantly to the effectiveness of distance learning and needs to be rethought as a central educational priority.

The questions that stand at the basis of this brief research, that provide a clear structure of the article and even further studies are:

- I. How is communication competence defined in the scientific literature and what dimensions compose it?
- II. What are the particularities of communication competence development in digital educational environments?
- III. How does distance education and smart devices influence the development of communication competence among high school students and teachers?

3. Defining Concepts

According to the Romanian language dictionary, the word competence has various meanings. This concept refers either to the ability of “someone to give an opinion on a matter on the basis of a profound knowledge of the matter in question” or to “the implicit linguistic knowledge internalized by the speakers of a language”¹.

Claudia Barbaros presents different theoretical perspectives on the term competence. In her article “Abordări teoretice privind definirea conceptului de competență” she mentions that in the Republic of Moldova the concept of “competence” has been used since 1996, with the reform of pre-university education, which implied the development of the National Curriculum at the level of knowledge, skills/competences and attitudes. The term ‘competency’ came into use very soon, taking the first place in all the activities of designing and realizing the educational process, which had as its final goal an assessment of the type: *competency exam*.

Constantin Cucos (2014) presents competence as “structured sets of knowledge and skills acquired through learning”. Philosophers like Aristotle contributed to the definition of this concept in terms of virtue, where competence is connected to moral excellence and the growth of ethical character, whereas Kant studied it in terms of rational autonomy, where a competent person is able to judge and act according to moral reason. Philosophers have investigated competence as a personal as well as a functional quality. Therefore, philosophical competence could be defined as the

¹ <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/competenta>

ability to apply judgment in a thoughtful, polite and helpful way towards others and the environment. It implies the harmonious integration of knowledge, reason and ethics. From a metaphysical perspective, competence is an expression of human potential and the harmony and order of knowledge, will and action. Competence, from a metaphysical point of view, implies an harmony between action, will followed by the ability to know. The concept competence is deep and rich enough in meanings to be considered central to human functioning (Vlaşin, 2013).

From a psychological point of view, the need for competence, which has been identified in studies as early as 1963 (White), is one of the important needs of contemporary man. Two psychologists, David C. McClelland and Robert White, introduced the idea of competence into the literature on human resource development.

Jean Piaget identifies that individuals go through different stages of cognitive development, from factual to abstract thinking, and all these stages influence the individual's competence. In other words, an individual's competence can take different forms, which are influenced by their age. Competence is closely related to the ability to comprehend information in different aspects, be it in verbal or written, personal or academic/school variants. In the same article mentioned above, Claudia Barbaroş invokes the voice of the scholar I. Achiri, who proposes the following definition for the concept under discussion: "Scholastic competence is an integrated system of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, acquired, formed and developed through learning, the mobilization of which enables the identification and resolution of different problems in various contexts and situations" (Mândruţ, p. 15).

Sorin Cristea (2011) describes pedagogical competence as the psychological dimension of educational objectives that define a set of cognitive, affective, action (psychomotor) capabilities, engaged in the achievement of concrete, observable, punctual performance, in a behavioral sense.

Going further with the discussion about the topicality and importance of the topic as well as related work, Romanian scholars such as Constantin Cucos or Mielu Zlate and Western scholars such as Jeremy Harmer or Jim Scrivener evaluated communication competence in students of different ages.

4. Concept, Terms and Problem Statement

Before going further to the presentation of objective, factual cases, it is important to clarify, define the concept of public communication competence as well as the broad term of communication, from a general and educational perspective.

Brian H. Spitzberg in „Intercultural Communication: A Reader” (2012) defines communication competence as being “...the extent to which persons achieve desired outcomes through communication acceptable to a situation” (Samovar & Porter, 2012). The set of skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to communicate effectively with a given audience in a public setting is known as public communication competence. In addition to interacting effectively with the public, taking into account the cultural, social and technological dimensions of communication, it involves the ability to organize and communicate relevant information.

The concept of communication can be treated both from a general and educational perspective. Verderber, Sellnow & Verderber (2017) stated that “communication is the process through which we express, interpret, and coordinate messages with others.” (Verderber, Sellnow & Verderber F., 2017).

From an educational point of view, the concept of educational communication can be defined as “the complex, goal oriented interaction process between teacher and learner(s) aimed at transmitting knowledge, cultural values, and skills. It is characterized by role asymmetry, constant feedback, and adaptation to individual and situational needs.” (Stepanenko, 2024) Educational communication involves not just cognitive elements but also aspects related to the emotional and relational status of the teacher and the student. For this reason, it is important to mention some differences in terms of purpose, environment, participants, language between general and educational communication.

In what concerns general communication, the main purpose of the participants is to socialize whereas, in the case of educational communication, the main purpose of the participants is to teach, learn, form and develop new competences. When it comes to the environment, the setting in which the act of communication is taking place, general communication can take place everywhere, both in a formal and less formal setting whereas the educational communication process can take place in a formal environment such as a school, university, work.

The role of the participants in general communication can be equal. However, in the case of educational communication, the participants can have different roles such as teacher – student. Last but not least, when it comes to the language that the

participants use in general communication, in most cases the word that characterizes this style is characterized in terms of flexibility, informal and colloquial.

Based on these aspects, there are various reasons why the communication activity, whether written or presented orally, is practiced during a language lesson with high school students in an educational environment. The reasons could be related to the fact of “understanding the main idea of a text, identifying specific information in a text, deducing an inference based on what is known from a text” (Vizental, 2014, p. 158). The same thing can be applied to an activity which uses mostly recording, listening materials. As for the approach of communication activity in a language and literature lesson, it is well known that a teacher has to conduct the activity in a different way with pupils of lower school age (5-12 years) than with teenagers and adults. Young school-age pupils perceive the world differently, “they understand what is visible, concrete and tangible and for this reason they need activities that capture their attention and interest directly” (Vizental, 2014, p. 121). At this stage, communication activities and activities for acquiring new knowledge should not be based on grammatical notions or abstract information, as this will create disinterest and frustration for the young learners. Therefore, according to their level of understanding, after progressive work, students of different ages will manifest different communication abilities, competences. Therefore, the act of communication is an act of competence?

Teenagers act differently when it comes to language lessons and especially learning new things. Traditional teaching methods which focus on understanding grammar rules, memorization, translation, dictation are no longer appealing to teenagers and for this reason teachers need to find ways to encourage the development of public communication competence through cooperation, group work, pair work and especially distance learning methods.

4.1. Competence and Distance Education

Going along the same axis of analyzing communication competence, the aspect of distance education must be mentioned. Constatin Cucos mentions the fact that the aspect of open distance education has already been invoked in the first instance by different, less authorized voices in the field of “bridge and road engineering, economics, physical education” (Pedagogy, 2014) and pedagogues, authorized voices have not shown the expected interest in this very topical aspect of education. Psychologically, distance frightens and fascinates. Distance implies repulsion and at

the same time a desire to achieve new goals. Distance education implies autonomy. The distance learner must be sufficiently conscious, sufficiently mature, to follow such a form of study. High school or middle school cannot be done at a distance (Cucoş. 2014, p. 208). Scientists predict that distance education will soon occupy a significant position in the market of educational services, largely due to the nation's territorial characteristics, the growing demand for high-quality education in certain fields, as well as annual training and requalification.” (Maxim Illiciev, 2020, p. 2).

Through the planning, advising and guidance process of a group of experts within an educational institution, open distance learning allows students to learn without the direct supervision of a teacher.

Distance learning has several features such as flexible study plans, access to knowledge presented in an attractive way. The following arguments can be used to support distance learning such as the need to update new skills for one's working life in the 21st century, the need to save time and money, the rapid progress and evolution of learning in today's technological age.

Open distance learning is an informational rather than a training tool. Therefore, this organizational framework has limitations in terms of teaching specific behaviors, useful skills and spiritual practices.

According to Maxim Illiciev (Hartel, 2020). in order to increase the effectiveness of distance learning, psychologists should be consulted at every stage of the course by authors, developers, instructors and facilitators. The educational institution should employ professional psychologists with the necessary skills to operate in the new information and communication technologies and to carry out their functional activities in a new learning environment. Establishing a positive psychological environment for distance learning is the main objective of educational and psychological assistance for students. Another equally important objective is to help students create a personalized educational pathway that emphasizes the successful integration of knowledge acquired at a distance. Throughout the learning process, students need psychological and pedagogical support to develop the necessary personal attributes. Psycho-diagnostic techniques should be used when admitting candidates to a university to diagnose their professional orientation, as this is one of the most important requirements for successful distance learning. According to Illiciev, the knowledge acquired or to be acquired at a distance should be created according to their need, professional orientation.

Despite all of these benefits, Distance Learning (DL) has its own disadvantages. According to Bijesh (2017), the likelihood of being upset and forgetting due dates

is higher when there are no faculty members available for in-person interactions and no class members available to assist with ongoing reminders regarding unfinished tasks. Distance Learning (DL) can be extremely valuable in terms of developing certain competences such as communicative competence but can also provide risks related to negative aspects in different daily situations.

Based on all these aspects, after presenting some clear examples of general as well as educational communication and understanding these elements in the context of distance learning, we could go back to the questions that stand at the basis of this brief research, try to provide an answer and find out whether or not distance education influence the development of communication competence.

5. Solution Approach and Analysis of the Results

In the context of general as well as educational communication, in order to find out if distance education has an influence in the development of communication competence, it is important to apply a set of steps, a specific technique in order to get specific results, data which could later be analysed and interpreted.

An extremely useful technique which could provide answers to the questions of this research could be the observational technique, also known as observational research.

Research Scenario Based on Observation

Title: The Influence of Distance Education on the Development of Communication Competence in High School Students

Description of the context: A group of 28 students, aged 15–16 from a high school in Târgu Ocna, Romania participated in a learning activity designed to develop and assess their communication competence.

Task: The children were organized in groups of 4 students. A total of 7 groups were formed. The children were asked to participate in a role play that involved acting out real-life scenarios that illustrate general communication (casual, informal, daily conversation) and educational communication (formal, teacher-student conversation). The students were asked to use in their conversation different IT devices (phones, smart watches, computers) during their general and educational conversation. The students were allowed 10 minutes to prepare their speeches. The results of the research were analyzed and structured by using a 1-5 (1=poor; 2 = fair,

with limited effort; 3=moderate, medium effort; 4=good, clear effort; 5=excellent, obvious performance) scale observation grid and a line chart.

Research objectives:

1. to observe how students behave and participate in role-playing exercises involving general and educational communication;
2. to evaluate which form of communication students feel most comfortable and skilled in;
3. To determine whether digital and distant learning devices have an influence in the development of communication skills;

Method: Observational technique; observation grid, line chart

Presentation of the speeches of each group:

Group 1: Planning a trip outside the city

General Communication:

Students casually discuss where they'd like to go on a school trip.

Darius (Student 1): "Hey, do you wanna go in Predeal? I've heard the restaurants and landscapes are amazing!"

Teo (Student 2): "Yeah! Let me know when so we meet up!"

Both students pretended to talk on Messenger. Darius (Student 1), opened the application on the school laptop and wrote this message on the laptop. All the other students could see the text on the video projector. Teo (Student 2), sent Darius a message from her phone.

Educational Communication:

One student plays the role of teacher and the others are students presenting facts about the city of Predeal.

Alexandra (Teacher): "Good morning, everyone. Today we're learning about Romanian tourist destinations. Group 2, you may begin your presentation about Predeal."

George (Student 1): "Thank you, Ms. Alexandra. We'll start with the geographic location. Predeal is a mountain resort town in Braşov County, located in the Prahova Valley, close to Bucegi mountains."

Tony (Student 2): „Due to this fact, it has a cool climate and is popular for winter sports like skiing and snowboarding.”

Crina (Student 3):”In addition to skiing, Predeal is also visited in summer for hiking and mountain biking. There are several trails leading to beautiful viewpoints in the Bucegi Mountains.”

Group 2: Solving a Mathematics Problem

General Communication:

Casual talk about a Mathematics assignment.

The students pretend that they are chatting live on Whatsapp, using their phones.

Darius (student 1):”Sorry, I really don’t get it. Do you guys know what that formula means?”

Marina (student 2): „I don’t have any clue! Let’s ask Andreea.

Andreea(student 3): „Beats me! This is too much! Let’s call the teacher”

Educational Communication:

Using a PowerPoint presentation to present an explanation of the solution.

Teacher Rareș (student 4): “Dear students, please pay attention. Andreea, Darius are you paying attention? If we apply this theory we will get this result!”

Group 3: Talking with your friends about weekend activities versus giving a speech in front of the class

General Communication:

Ema (student 1): „Hey,Mihaela! What’s up? How was your weekend?

Mihaela (student 2): “Cool! I played Minecraft all Saturday night. I am almost blind!”

Educational Communication:

Delivering a short presentation about healthy digital habits.

Teodosia (student 3): “Studies show that screen time should not exceed two hours per day for high school as well as secondary school students. We created this graphic using Excel.”

Iulian (student 4): “Teodosia, excuse me! What happens if we spend too much time in front of the screen?”

Teodosia (student 3): „You are likely to develop anxiety and attention span issues.”

Group 4: Preparing for a debate on the following topic: technology improves education

General Communication:

Karina (student 1): “Hi, guys! I hope that you’ll all get my point and admit that computers help us a lot when it comes to learning and doing different assignments. Giulia, what do you think?”

Giulia (student 2): „Yeah, I think you’re right. Smartphones and computers help us a lot. However, everything has a price. The more we use computers in education, the less we use our imagination, memory, attention.”

Educational Communication:

Ștefania (student 3): “Good afternoon, everyone! I hope my point is clear: computers significantly support us in both learning and completing various assignments. Iosua, may I ask for your opinion on this?”

Iosua (student 4): „Yes, I believe you are correct. Smartphones and computers are indeed very helpful. However, there is a cost. The more we rely on technology in education, the less we tend to engage our imagination, memory, and attention.”

Group 5: Writing a story (group work)

General Communication:

Cătălin (student 1), *writing a text on MS Word*: “What if fairies turn up to be real? That would be amazing!”

Daria (student 2): „Wow! Awsome idea! Let’s put this on paper!”

Educational Communication:

Ana-Maria (student 3): “Hello, dear students! As you know, a story, a narrative text needs to respect the following basic principle: it needs to have a beginning, a middle and an end.”

Iulia (student 4): „I totally agree. According to Cambridge dictionary, a story is a narrative description, either true or imagined of a series of events.”

Group 6: Peer Evaluation class

General Communication:

Students making jokes

Alessia (student 1): “You talked so fast!”

Crina (student 2): “I felt as I was watching the news!”

Educational Communication:

Denis (student 3): “Your topic was well structured and presented!”

Daria (student 4): “You could try and summarize the key points in the conclusion section”

Group 7: Organizing a Graduation ceremony

General Communication:

Daria M (student 1): Hi, guys! Guess what? We’re gonig to have a live band at the ceremony! Let’s tell everyone about this!

Sebi (student 2): Sure! Sounds great! Let’s talk to our headteacher!

Educational Communication:

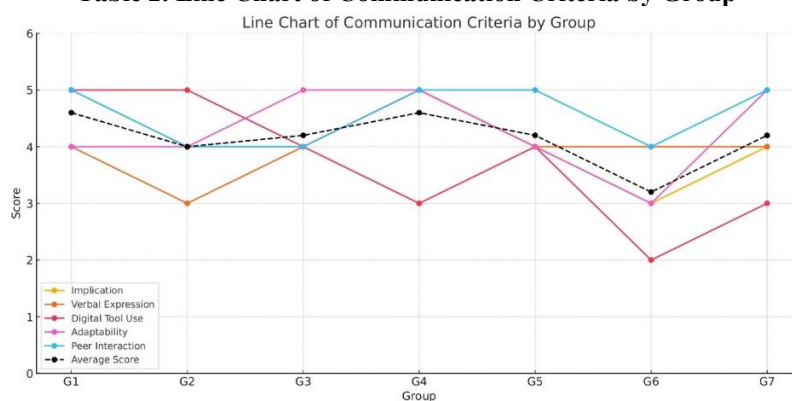
Denisa (student 3): Please take into account that the event is scheduled for next month, on the 14 of June and the budget is expected to be about 1000 RON.

Roberta (student 4): Before informing other people about the live concert, we need to make sure that we don’t exceed the expected budget.

Table 1. Scale Observation Grid

Number of group	Implication	Verbal expression	Digital tool use	Adaptability (General – Educational)	Peer intraction	Average Score
Group 1 (Trip to Predeal)	5	4	5	4	5	4.6
Group 2 (Math Problem)	4	3	5	4	4	4
Group 3 (Weekend activities versus giving a speech in front of the class)	4	4	4	5	4	4.2
Group 4 (Debate on Technology)	5	5	3	5	5	4.6
Group 5 (Writing a Story)	4	4	4	4	5	4.2
Group 6 (Peer Evaluation)	3	4	2	3	4	3.2
Group 7 (Graduation Ceremony)	4	4	3	5	5	4.2

Table 2. Line Chart of Communication Criteria by Group



Main Observations

Group 1 (Trip to Predeal) and group number 4 (Debate on Technology) scored the highest average: 4.6 points out of 5 points. All the students from this group communicated in a clear manner and managed to create a convincing discourse from the perspective of verbal expression. All the students from group number 4 managed to adapt the main idea, the topic of the presentation of the general and educational context of the communication process. In terms of peer interaction, all the students from this group demonstrated a respectful, elegant behavior while communicating with their peers.

Group number 6 (Peer Evaluation) scored the lowest average: 3.2 points out of 5 points. They did not show a high level of implication. Their answers were short and their transition from an informal to a formal (educational) tone was rather limited.

Most groups demonstrated (with scores between 4 and 5 points) a high level of implication, which suggests that role-play and tasks based on peer-interaction and communication are engaging.

The verbal interaction of all groups was clear and appropriate, in relation to the topic of their presentations. All groups scored 3 points and above.

While Group 1 (Trip to Predeal) and Group 2 (Math Problem) scored 5 points out of 5 in terms of digital tool use, while group 6 scored only 2 points. This demonstrates that some students do not know how to use IT devices efficiently in role plays, group work, simulations.

In terms of adaptability of the message in connection to the topic of their presentations, most groups scored 4 or 5 points, which indicates that the students understood how to adapt their speech according to general and educational contexts.

Last but not least, in terms of peer interaction, most of the groups, except group number 6, demonstrated the ability to cooperate, to show respect and focus on common tasks in a pleasant, enjoyable manner.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

In order to make sure that all groups use IT / smart devices effectively, an efficient way would be to organize the activity in the IT classrooms or at home, in front of the computers and allow the students at least 30 minutes to gather materials, enough information and develop their speeches by using the IT devices effectively. The

teacher could provide more support (online or face to face) to all the students or to the ones in need, while supervising them or asking for a constant update of their work before the final presentation of their role plays. In order to develop a role play activity based on general and educational communication, the students need enough time and an appropriate environment to brainstorm ideas and organize their speech on smart devices. To ensure that all students master their smart devices in specific contexts, the teacher needs to expose them to specific contexts as much as possible and allow them to use their smart devices while trying to solve their assignments.

In conclusion, the concept of competence can be interpreted from multiple perspectives and can be expressed in a more simple word: ability. Competence can be identified in various cases of human existence, even in general or educational communication. We cannot define the concept of competence without thinking or discussing about education. To be competent means to be educated in a particular field. The current century is marked by interactive education and technological devices which make the users, both the students and the teachers, able to make use of remote educational resources and distance learning. The way a course is designed, the level of involvement of the teacher and the delivery of the course, the technological complexity and efficiency of the platform or online venue where the course is delivered and the influence the platform has on the learners all affect how effective distance or face to face teaching and learning is. Nonetheless, the process of communication and developing communicative competence is in a constant evolution and aspects related to technology and technological devices cannot be neglected when talking about distance learning and education in general. To sum up, modern technological devices need to work together with traditional (face to face) teaching and learning techniques in order to create a successful educational environment. To be a successful communicator, regardless your role (teacher or learner), means to make use of technology in order to achieve the basic, traditional objective of education, which is to receive and send knowledge through communication.

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