CAUSES OF LOW COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

CAUSAS DE LAS BAJAS COMPETENCIAS COMUNICATIVAS EN INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA: CONSIDERACIONES Y REFLEXIONES

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Causes of Low Communicative Competences in English as a Foreign Language: Considerations and Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Mastering English as a lingua franca has become a first-rate skill for new professionals in most jobs around the world. According to the bilingualism policies in Colombia it is expected that students from higher education achieve a level of English between B1 or B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), with students from bachelor degree programs in foreign languages, the level must be C1, in this sense the Ministry of Education has implemented projects and strategies to get a bilingual professional with high communicative competences, according to the demands of the globalized world. However, most students show low levels of communicative proficiency in English according to the results of the test applied by ICFES. Despite the demands of learning English, weaknesses persist in the mastery of communicative competences. A constant concern is to investigate some causes of low communication skills in this language. This article presents the results of some research conducted in various countries around the world that has attempted to investigate these causes. The causes, according to the results of the research, have to do with social and cultural aspects, but more importantly, teacher performance is one of the most frequent causes. This requires special attention to start programs and projects aimed at training teachers in didactic competencies.

Palabras Clave: communicative competences, foreign language, english as a lingua franca

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Causas de las Bajas Competencias Comunicativas en Inglés Como Lengua Extranjera: Consideraciones y Reflexiones

RESUMEN

Dominar el inglés como lengua franca se ha convertido en una habilidad de primer nivel para nuevos profesionales en la mayoría de los trabajos en todo el mundo. De acuerdo con las políticas de bilingüismo en Colombia, se espera que los estudiantes de educación superior alcancen un nivel de inglés entre B1 o B2 de acuerdo con el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCERL), en el caso de estudiantes de programas de licenciatura en idiomas extranjeros, el nivel debe ser C1, en este sentido el Ministerio de Educación ha implementado proyectos y estrategias para conseguir un profesional bilingüe con altas competencias comunicativas, de acuerdo a las demandas del mundo globalizado. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los estudiantes muestran bajos niveles de competencia comunicativa en inglés según los resultados de la prueba aplicada por ICFES. A pesar de las exigencias en el aprendizaje del inglés, persisten deficiencias en el dominio de las competencias comunicativas de este idioma. Una preocupación constante es investigar algunas de las causas del bajo nivel de competencias comunicativas en este idioma. Este artículo presenta los resultados de algunas investigaciones realizadas en varios países del mundo que han tratado de investigar estas causas. Las causas, según los resultados de las investigaciones, tienen que ver con aspectos sociales y culturales, pero lo más importante es que el desempeño pedagógico del profesorado aparece como una de las causas más frecuentes. Esto requiere una atención especial para poner en marcha programas y proyectos destinados a formar a los profesores en competencias didácticas.

Palabras Clave: competencias comunicativas, lengua extranjera, inglés como una lengua franca

INTRODUCTION

English has become the most spoken language in the world. In that way, it is important to learn English a foreign language, since it is the key to accessing better job opportunities, have a better economic livelihood, travel overseas, and communicate and interact with other cultures. Tt is very important that students nowadays develop a good level of English to achieve a real mastery English, which is the languages for technology, economics, politics, business, trade, and educational environments. In addition, it is known that English is the needed tool to venture into a myriad of opportunities to expand the abilities that benefit labour and personal development. As Putra (2020) mentions, the use of English is involved in different aspects a person is exposed to daily, such as everyday life, technology, education, trade, and business.

Therefore, she mentions that getting a good English level and good communicative competencies through meaningful methods, is going to allow the production of the writing, speaking, listening, and reading skills that are really needed in the workplace. Thus, it is important that every single educational institution implements very meaningful English classes for learners and prepare them to face the globalized world. Anahuac's University (2020) affirms that learning a second language has not only labor benefits, but also improves the memory and ability of the brain, reducing the chances of mental illness and allowing the brain to be more active. Cely (2020) affirms that, special attention in the developing of communicative and intercultural competences is required to prepare the new professionals for communication and interaction with diverse cultures due to the demands of globalization as a trend and internationalization as the response educational institutions give to those demands.

However, achieving a high proficiency in English is influenced by several factor such as motivation, learning environment, the institutional curriculum, teacher's training, the role of the local community, the role of national policies, and cognitive, linguistic, and affective levels that can weaken knowledge and hinder the learning process of students. In the bachelor's degree Program at UNIMINUTO, for example, about two hundred students enrol in this career each semester and around the 30% of them come with an English level of A- according to the CEFRL. Those students have devoted at least 11 years learning English during their primary school and secondary school; however, their English

competencies does not reach the minimum levels of language proficiency. This situation could cause frustration and university drop-out.

This article presents a reflection on the causes of low communicative competence in students learning English as a foreign language. National and international research have identified some of the factors that cause low levels of social and communicative competence in foreign languages for non-native speakers. First, t is necessary to define communicative competences, English as a foreign language, low communicative competencies, and English as a lingua franca, understood as the global medium of communication or the use of English between speakers of different languages for whom English is the only communicative medium of choice. Finally, this paper presents the results of some research conducted in various countries around the world that have attempted to investigate these causes of low communicative competencies in English. The results show that some causes are associated to social and cultural aspects, but more research found that the causes are closed connected to teacher performance.

Communicative Competence

Communication is the basic and necessary tool to share and understand the information a person gives and receives. We talk about writing, speaking, listening, and reading, as mass communication. As a receiver or sender, both need to perceive a clear message to get an effective communication, as Patesan, Zechia, and Balagiu (2015) mentions that there must be a correlation between what the sender thinks and what the receiver thinks to get an effective communication. Thus, in the process of acquiring a second language creates the need to strengthen communicative competencies, so it is vital that the L2 learners have excellent communication skills and adequate language development to express their own ideas meaningfully while using the foreign language.

Antoni and Cueva (2006) state that academic performance results from a learning process that a student takes in a course, where those communicative competences that the student reaches in this teaching and learning process are measured or valued. In this process, the teacher determines if the student is fossilizing concepts with their classes properly. Han and Selinker (2005) claim that the fossilization process occurs in the learning process, where the student can *Fossilize* or learn concepts both correctly and incorrectly. This allows the teacher to assess how much the student internalizes these concepts about the topics seen in class, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This to see if these results are really

what was expected, or if in contrast, teachers should make changes or modifications to their delivery classes, implementing strategies to ease learning.

Competence and Performance is another important concept brought by Chomsky (1965), in which, he makes a great linguistic study of the learner's mental process, building the distinction of these two concepts, competence and performance, affirming that competence is the knowledge that someone has of the language regarding all the grammatical and structural properties of the language, allowing a person to generate all the possible grammatical sentences wanted to make, while performance is the transformation of that competence to the use of spoken language in daily situations. This concept is considered of high importance for our research owing to the student through knowledge of different grammatical patterns, and making different sentences, students may transform this competitive into something they can use in their daily life, prompting not only that they can use them, but they can apprehend it suitably, helping with the acquisition and the fully mastery of English as a foreign language.

Finally, it is important to differ communicative competence and language proficiency, Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan (2000), define proficiency as the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in both, oral and written communication. For this reason, in the communication process it is not enough to communicate and make others understand your messages in some way but to have accuracy in the use of the language to communicate.

Low Communicative Competences

In spite, English is the most spoken language worldwide, we wonder, why some people have difficulties in learning this language as a foreign language and why they do not fully master the language. According to Arnao, Aguilar, & Santisteban (2013) there is a huge gap in higher education on issues of pedagogical, curricular, methodological, disciplinary, and didactic aspects around the concept of communicative competence. However, it is known that institutions take actions to reduce this problem, Peñaranda (2015) highlights that most institutions provide sufficient study material to students, allowing them to have access to different books, through the library, also providing public policies of reading, writing, among other helpful materials for students. It is also well knowing that institutions invest budget to develop bilingualism polices.

On the other hand, Echeverria, and Madrid (2000) establish that the low communicative competences and the possible loss of them depend on different factors and characteristics such as the student, the student acquisition process, and the period. These factors turn out to be very important when talking about *Low Communicative Competences* because it helps to know how students learn, the strategies they use to learn faster, the aspects they learn and forget more easily, and what is prompting students can not advance in their learning process. This allows the Institution to implement plans to improve or correct this problem, designing a better curriculum. Low communicative competences could be defining as de lack of languages knowledge that affects the effective process of communication and prevent people from understanding each other, Ahmad (2019)

English as Foreign Language

Most people from different countries use English as vehicle of communication, even according to some studies carried out by Statista (2021) determined that more than three times of the English-speaking population are non-native, acquiring the English as a foreign language. That is why, many institutions adapt the English language within their educational curriculum, making students learn this language from childhood. According to Mei (2008) the process of learning English as a foreign language is mostly developed in an educational environment, in which with meaningful and controlled activities students can reach a high level of communicative competences in the English language.

In higher education, English is taught to students to reinforce prior knowledge from their higher-school, and likewise to enhance all their skills for students to fully master the English language. Nikula (2016) recognises that in Europe there are three variations in higher education, which on these variations the universities may work either with a total English environment, Bilingual or Trilingual approaches, and a native language approach, where mainly those who fully use English or use Bilingual or Trilingual approaches, are the ones that have more recognition, it is up for students to choose the one they like the most. However, this is not seen in the universities of Colombia, since in most universities only the native language is used in daily communication, in this case Spanish, in some universities the English language is up to time being implemented as the main dominant language in the whole university, seeking the way to implement it in the best possible way.

The study of English by non-native speakers in countries where English is not the official language, the term English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is used. This is the case of Colombia where Spanish is the modern language and English has been established as the official foreign languages to learn. A close term that could cause confusion is English as a Second Language which refers to the uses of English in a predominantly English-speaking country, Nordquist (2020).

English as a lingua franca

English as a lingua franca refers to the teaching, learning and use of English by mean of communication for speakers from different parts of the world as Mauranen (2003) points out that English has established itself as a globalized language, that is, it is used worldwide as Lingua Franca as the vehicular language spoken, that people do not speak the same native language. The main feature of English as a lingua franca is that it differs from the concept of English as native Language since according to Nesterenko (2013) states that English as native language is known to be used only by Native English Speakers instead of Lingua Franca is used by people from other countries. That is why the concept of Lingua Franca has a lot of linguistic variations or dialects which are better known as "World Englishes".

Nowadays, more and more people are using English as a lingua Franca in Europe. Thus, for those who do not speak the same common native language in Europe, English is the most viable option to communicate with each other. That is why, according to Seidlhofer (2007) claims that English is highly important for international communication owing to it is used a lot for business, education, science, for some other important fields, and likewise for furthering understanding of the different cultures that there are internationally. Finally, it is considered important that in the field of education, it is used the English as vehicle of communication and instruction because indeed according to Björkman (2010), it is the most language used in common by people thereby, for students is massive important it since use the language every single time will help them have the possibility to get in touched with the language, being able to express themselves within different contexts.

English as a lingua g franca has become essential in today's communication processes. Santana and Cely (2021) state that we are facing a globalised society because of migratory waves that have caused English to spread around the world, and the advance of technology has created the need to establish international communication that facilitates the process of communication and integration with other

cultures to enable the understanding of the particularities and backgrounds of everyone. As mentioned by the authors, there is a real need to establish a global language that helps to better integrate individuals into the world, improve understanding, tolerance and the misconceptions and bars that exist between cultures.

Causes of Low Communicative Competencies: Considerations by Some Authors

There are number of causes of low communicative competencies in English as a foreign language. It was identified ten different research worldwide that show the causes and factors of low communicative competences in non-English speakers. As it was mentioned before, learning English as a foreign language is important because English has become the most common language that allows people to communicate among each other, to face the increasing demands of the internationalized world, using the English language as a lingua franca.

One of the important stating points is students' perceptions about English class and the importance of learning English. Yepes (2015), in research done at Franciscan School Jiménez de Cisneros in Ibague-Colombia, identified that ninth-grade students perceive English classes as an important factor for their future, since English is regarded as a universal. Unfortunately, for some learners, language learning is mostly related to the need to fulfill the school goals, more than for being part of a new English-speaking culture. Thus, it is considered that when students do not contemplate the impact of English on their future life plans, English language learning is of no relevance for them, and the apprenticeship is only for a short period of time with not impact on their future.

In learning a foreign language such as English, there are different factors that can foil the process of learning in a successful way. In research done by Bastidas & Muños (2020) could determine causes of low communicative competences associated to external and internal factors. The first ones are related to the learning environment in the classroom, the institutional curriculum, the professional preparation of teachers, the role of the local community and the role of national policies. Internal factors refer to cognitive processes, linguistic aspects, and affective levels. In their research, 25 teachers and 113 students were surveyed, the main object of study was to determine, according to the perspective of each one, how much influences each factor and how they are categorized.

These factors were identified by both, students, and teachers at the secondary level. Broadly, it was concluded that external factors, which go linked with socio-cultural and educational factors, are the ones that have the greatest incidence in learning English, even more than the internal ones. On the other hand, the internal factors that were found to have a higher incidence are those related to cognitive and linguistic nature, but breaking down these internal factors in more detail, were also found that factors such as student's attitude, attention, and motivation, are also perceived as having a great influence on language learning.

Other causes of low communicative competences are associated with socioeconomic factors. Diaz (2014) in research done at ICESI university in Cali- Colombia, it was found that students from stratums 1, 2, 3 were the ones with the lowest level of English, while students from stratums 4, 5, 6 are the ones with the best performance and level of English. Another important data found was that if students have an excellent performance in English, it is because they feel involved and comfortable with the class and lead a good relationship with the teacher. Hence, students were interested in learning, taking part, and developing tasks in the best way. Whereas students with low academic performance because simply dislike the subject, feel forced to attend to the class, feel that they are wasting time and probably their relationship with the teacher is not good. It was also identified factors such as motivation, anxiety, learning styles and study strategies, as factors of huge incidence for the learning of a foreign language. In the same way, in research done in Colombia by Lopez & Sellamén (2019), it was recognized the characteristics of the population with low academic performance, according to the results found in the national test developed by ICFES named   *Saber 11* and *Saber Pro Tests* in 2015. This investigation stated that factors such as socioeconomic aspects, the fact of obtaining scholarships, student's age, marital status, technology, and internet access, influenced the performance of English proficiency. Hence, demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional factors are very important for the development of communicative competencies in English. It is recognized that depending on the context each person belongs, and the frequency each one uses English as a tool of communication, the acquisition of a foreign language could vary. According to the results of the tests Saber 11 and Saber Pro, other factors were raised such as the academic character of the institution, academic students' performance, the academic calendar, diagnostic tests, and the nature of the school.

In research done by Rany, Zainol & Lai (2013), it was identified factors such as professionalism, and teachers' training, as factors that affect students' English learning process. This research done at the University of Laos, gave evidence that teaching methods must be changed since teachers are the maximum support to learn. Besides, some students at this university claim that English teachers are not well trained since they use Lao language when teaching English. although this is the case at this university, it is a situation that could be occurring in other places in the world where English is taught. Therefore, it was found that teachers did not give enough input to students during their learning process, it caused students' lack of vocabulary and difficulties in the use of languages structures. In this research it was also identified that the curriculum of this university was not reliable, because it does not allow students to improve their English skills because of students do not have the possibility to practice speaking skills in real contexts, within the class, and with native speakers, also the environment is not comfortable for students and they did not take part in the class because they were afraid of making mistakes, and the feeling of shame. Seki, Tekyiwa & Kofi (2015) warn that students from public Ghana's colleges within weak background in English, underqualified teachers, may be affected the English learning process, where though teachers are professional with their university degree and likewise receive regular professional training to improve their teaching skills , this is not enough for them to be good professionals and perform well in teaching since their lack of knowledge and understanding the subject they are going to teach. Indeed, Ghafoor & khaliq (2016) also reports in a study carried out to some government and private elementary primary schools in Pakistan that qualified English teachers also may affect the student's performance, and not only that but also components such as social economic issues, the difference of culture, poor family backgrounds, unsuitable curriculum and textbook design, lack of students' learning motivation, and carelessness of students could cause academic underdevelopment.

Teaching methodology plays an important role in the development of communicative competences, research have demonstrated that methodologies such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English for Communicative Purposes (ECP) help students to achieve better competencies in the foreign language. Ceballos, Davila, Espinosa, & Ramírez (2014) in a study carried out in Chile with students from a language institute that implement (EAP) and (ECP), it was found that in terms of communicative

skills, students show a high level of competition owing to they can communicate spontaneously and fluently. Likewise, it was identified that by using (EAP) and (ECP) students not only learn the language but also about different subjects because the study showed that students can also provide simple explanations on specific areas of concern. It seems to be that this kind of methodologies increase motivations on students since while they are leaning English can learn about different subjects and areas of their interest, in this methodologies English is used as a medium of instruction, so I English is the way, not the final purpose.

Teachers usually cope with students' demotivation and boredom in the English language classes for that the challenge to innovate in the EFL class including methodologies that satisfy student's current needs and create better understanding of their learning processes through intrinsic motivation to achieve significant results. Medina, Cely & Abreus (2023). Regarding to methodology and pedagogical strategies, Parra, Villarreal, & Castillo (2012) state that in order to reduce student's low communicative competencies, it is just recommended to use tables, pictures, flashcards, visual aids, and filmstrips to make teaching, in order to create mental bonds, in this way students feel more engaged, and encourage to take part within the class to get a much more effective process of learning. Likewise, the use of games or didactic activities is recommended, since by using resources such as music, the students are going to understand the topics they are expected to learn in the class. It is also suggested to use bilingual dictionaries because according to some students, the only way to understand texts is to translate them. That is why, the teacher should give them readings by putting the students first in context so that they better understand the text and if the students don't get to understand some words of the text, the dictionary is important so that students can not only understand the meaning but also know in what context they can use it.

Learning strategies are essential for students as they deepen their learning of English as a foreign language. To support this statement, Peralta (2016) maintains that learning strategies allow the student to make significant progress since the student learns autonomously, so the learner does not need the teacher constantly. Broadly, students who use learning strategies have the chief motivation and can learn in a more effective way because they like to control their own learning process, looking for new strategies in this process to cope with the difficulties that are presented during it.

Richard and Lockhart (1998) propose a classification of these learning strategies, such as

- **Memory strategies:** The student stores and keeps information through repetition.

- **Cognitive strategies:** New messages are understood and produced that are captured by the environment, carrying out communication.

- **Compensatory strategies:** Interaction with verbal and non-verbal language communication mechanisms is facilitated.

- **Metacognitive strategies:** The student regulates his learning process through the organization, planning, and evaluation of this.

- **Affective Strategies**: It allows the student to have better control of their emotions to strengthen the development of their attitudes, motivations, and values towards learning a foreign language.

- **Social Strategies:** The student interacts and socializes with other people forcefully.

In the development of communicative competences, learning strategies applied in different institutions are crucial because their effectiveness could help students to reduce the gap of students' low performance. Parra (2013) states that it is necessary for students to recognize those learning strategies that can benefit them in their academic performance in the English learning process, since many high school students have a complete ignorance of these. The institutions should improve the infrastructure and educational policies because of the characteristics of the classroom, and the distribution of students significantly affects because it does not allow efficient interaction and communication among them.

Motivation is one of the major causes of low communicative competences according to studies found. It is considered being the most influencing factor in the success of a foreign language learning. Wimolmas (2013) states that when the student has a higher level of motivation learns information in a much more effective way than a person who is demotivated. Thus, in this research, it is sought to make reinforcements so that the professors of the different programs of the university have better commands to increase the motivation of the students, making the learning much more effective.

In the same way, Dembo and Seli (2007) state that motivation influences student behaviour, which allows the student to design learning experiences that encourage them to continue learning for the personal satisfaction that this represents. It was found in this research that if students have a low motivation, this has a significant impact on their academic performance as this will make them think

they are less capable than others, using failure-avoiding strategies in the classroom such as trying not to call on, copying material from friends or cheating.

Teaching performance is another important factor that could cause low communicative competencies. Teacher's training is an important factor influencing in the student's communicative competences since the teacher belongs to a group of people whose professionalism, skills and strategies affect the low or high performance of students owing to Wilson (2009) claims that effective learning depends on the skill and strategies the teacher uses to keep students engaged within the class, adding that if students receive a high-quality instruction students will receive that input in the best possible way, allowing them to have a high academic performance. Thus, the effectiveness of teachers matters so much in the students' learning evolution.

Assessment and teacher's feedback has an important role in the process of learning. It is known that for some students some English topics are more difficult than others, that is why the teacher should create opportunities to give feedback and solve doubts the student could have and help them to understand the topic. The teacher must be fully able to create assessment tasks to verify that the student really learned. Assessments gives evidence of students' leaning process, the development of their knowledge and how effectiveness of the methodology used. Khadijeh and Amir (2015) affirm that teacher's assessment is quite important because this reflects the quality of teaching, allowing teachers to analyze and use all these data gathered from the student's performance to keep improving the teacher's strategies and methodologies in teaching.

Finally, the learning environment is something that is always present in the classroom. This environment can be present in the classroom in a good or bad way. This environment can lead the class to success or failure. As Western Governors University (2021) says, the learning environment is a space in which one should promote a space in which the feelings one has are one of safety, freedom, and persuading knowledge. To achieve a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, not only the aesthetic part is important, but the teacher is also an important actor to achieve the aspects mentioned above. His attitude and his way of teaching are essential to achieve a wonderful development of the class, and a good participation of the students.

The importance of a good English learning environment should not only be developed in the classroom, having a nurturing environment in which the teaching of English is instilled is also important. Verma (2019) states that an environment in which students learn from mistakes and successes will allow students to have a greater ability to learn on their own. She also mentions that it is important that the student feels as comfortable as possible in the classroom so that their environment facilitates learning. As we can be seen, there are several causes of low communicative competencies in English. Although there are several factors that affect low English proficiency, such as socio-economic and cultural factors that influence the motivation of students as pointed out by Diaz (2014) in her research. There are also factors that have a great influence on the development of students' communicative skills, such as those related to the use of teaching methodologies. These factors directly affect the motivation of students and thus the development of students' communicative competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that the English language is essential for the life of anyone since by fully mastering this language, this will allow for better job opportunities, being able to travel overseas and know other different cultures. This is possible because English is the most spoken language in the world, where most people use it as their Lingua Franca for economic, trade, political, education and business contexts.

Besides, according to the authors mentioned above in the considerations section, it was found that most factors found in such research, which all go in relation to students, were learning strategies, learning styles, anxiety, and motivation. Other studies also classified these factors into internal and external factors, considering aspects such as context, learning environment, class material and some other aspect, but what all the studies agree on is that the learning process of the students not only depends on themselves but also depends on the parents, surroundings and mainly of the teacher's training, because teachers can be certified with their own diploma that is prepared to teach, but if he is not really qualified enough for it, using different strategies, methods and catchy material for the class, students will always present low communicative competences, in any context.

It is necessary that teachers have a constant training to be more instructed about the new methods, approaches, and materials that they can implement in their classes to reduce this gap between students

with low communicative competences. It is also suggested to make a much more detailed academic follow-up to each student to know if the student has academic problems, what problems, to seek the most effective solution so that the student can have a better academic performance.

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