

Developing Communicative Competence in English Lessons in Primary Education and Its Transformation in the 21st Century

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to analyze the development of communicative competence in English language learning at the primary school level and to identify the formation of productive and receptive language skills. In education, increasing importance is given not only to the acquisition of language knowledge, but also to the ability to communicate effectively in various situations, which includes both oral and written skills, as well as the ability to adapt language to the social and cultural context. The theoretical foundations are based on the definition of the elements of communicative competence, which has been developed since the 20th century, and modern research on the most effective methods for its development in primary school is also reviewed, including dialogue creation, interactive games, storytelling, project work and interdisciplinary activities. Research on the need to integrate digital communication skills into the modern learning process was also reviewed. In the context of digital transformation, it has become obvious to develop not only students' digital communicative competence, which allows for the meaningful use of new language forms and digital platforms, but also a new dimension of teachers' professional competence – digital pedagogical communicative competence, which includes the ability to plan, manage and evaluate the learning process in a digital environment. The empirical part used students' answers about their experience in using English and teachers' assessments of students' communicative competence skills in English.

Research question: What is the communicative competence in English of primary school students and how can it be improved?

Main conclusions: receptive language skills are better developed than productive ones, girls demonstrate higher performance in oral skills, but students who regularly use the language outside of school achieve higher overall results. Elements of communicative competence develop throughout, especially through the active use of productive language skills.

Keywords: Communicative competence, English language, primary education.

Introduction

English is becoming increasingly popular as a major global language of communication. In 2023, 1.5 billion people in the world spoke English, of whom about 380 million spoke English as their native language and about 1.12 billion spoke English as a foreign language (Most Spoken Languages in the World, 2025).

In Latvia, as elsewhere in the world, English is learned as the first foreign language at school. Therefore, students have limited opportunities to practice the language, unlike students

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who learn English as their native or second language and who have many opportunities to use it in communication (Suban, 2021).

According to data published by the State Education Content Center (VIAA) on student performance in the English language centralized exam in Latvia, the highest results are observed in students' receptive language skills – listening and reading – tasks (VIAA, 2025).

Studies (Legak, Wahi, 2020; Biryukova, Kazarenkov, Petrova, Nikolaev, 2020) confirm that tasks that promote the development of communicative competence in primary education help develop four main language competences – linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. These studies showed improvements in the ability to express themselves more clearly, collaborate and converse with peers. Such tasks increase students' interest in language learning and develop internal motivation to independently use language knowledge in formal and informal settings.

Research problem: The development of communicative competence in primary English education is challenged by an imbalance between receptive and productive skills and by the evolving demands of digital communication, which are not yet fully integrated into classroom practice.

Research aim: To analyze the development of primary school students' communicative competence in English and its transformation in the context of digitalisation and 21st-century learning environments.

Research methods: quantitative pilot study, questionnaire and assessment, data analysis in SPSS.

Literature review

Until the second half of the 20th century, the frontal teaching approach was practiced - a classical classroom where the teacher's speech dominated, there was less dialogue. In language lessons, the emphasis was placed on rules, structure and correctness, less on free conversational practice. Later, Bloom's Taxonomy became the basis for a change in teaching approaches - from a teacher-centered to an interactive and competency-based approach to teaching and learning. The learning environment becomes open to the active participation of students in discussions, collaboration in groups, and projects that develop strategic and discourse competence (Athanasios et al., 2003).

In the 1970s, language teaching underwent a transition to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The emphasis on learning shifted from forms to functions. Canale & Swain's (1980) theory was practically implemented in the development of curricula and tests that determine what the user can do with the language at different levels. During this period, young people learned in an environment that helped them improve their communication, language use, and problem-solving skills (Xin, 2007).

The idea of communicative competence arose when Hymes, in his work "On Communicative Competences" (1972), criticized Chomsky's view that the main emphasis in language learning should be placed on grammatical knowledge – the ability to form correct sentences and understand grammatical rules. This view has been criticized as too narrow, as it does not take into account the use of language in real social situations.

Communicative competence is the ability not only to use language correctly, but also to use it in a socially and culturally appropriate context, to know when, how and with whom to use language in order to achieve communicative goals (Hymes, 1972).

Communicative competence is defined as the speaker's ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real communicative situations, which combines several components:

- linguistic competence - knowledge of vocabulary and language grammar;

- sociolinguistic competence - the ability to use language in accordance with the social situation (for example, formal/informal speech);
- discourse competence - the ability to maintain a coherent, logical, meaningful text or conversation;
- strategic competence - the ability to overcome interference, adapt to different communication situations, use alternative means of expression (Canale, Swain, 1980).

Communicative competence is a set of language knowledge and skills that help a person to communicate successfully in different situations. The level of this competence depends on the characteristics of the person's personality, knowledge, skills and willingness to act in accordance with their goals and experience (Ušča, 2015).

Communicative competence in English as a foreign language is based on the use of language as a means of communication, both orally and in writing, as well as a tool for forming ideas, interpreting and understanding reality (Mayo & Barrioulengo, 2017). This ability is affected by foreign language anxiety – students who experience high anxiety about speaking in foreign language classes avoid speaking freely, asking questions and participating in classes (Nilsson, 2020). Bury (2021) points out that by changing the foreign language lesson from an “I ask – you answer” approach to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) – more flexible activities and a variety of communication methods (oral and written), students get used to actively using language, reacting and using strategies to achieve a communicative goal. This reduces silence and passivity, making communicative competence an effective form of cooperation in the classroom.

CLT methods include:

- Creating real communication situations – dialogues;
- Interactive games;
- Storytelling;
- Movement-based activities, where children respond with body movements to language impulses, linking language with action;
- Project work;
- Interdisciplinary subject teaching (Tajbenova & Jumabaeva, 2024; Baltabayeva, Kagazbayev, Eskazinova, & Mustagaliyeva, 2022; Bykova, Kuvaldina, Mashkovtseva, & Malova 2018).

The development of communicative competence in primary school is more effective if it is implemented as a school-wide project, an interdisciplinary process in all lessons, and not only in language lessons. Barrios & Jurado (2024) emphasize that the purposeful integration of oral and written language practice in different subjects significantly contributes to the development of students' communicative skills. Nowadays, we increasingly hear the term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). CLIL is an educational approach in which the content of the subject and a foreign language are learned simultaneously, using the foreign language as a learning tool, not as an end in itself (Goethe-Institut, 2016). Studies (Poveda-Garcia-Noblejas & Antropova, 2024; Evnitskaya, 2018; Targamadzé & Kriaučiūnienė, 2016) on the CLIL approach to the development of communicative competence show positive results, especially in the development of sociolinguistic and strategic competence. There is a need to improve teachers' strategic language competence so that teachers can adapt the learning environment to bilingual teaching.

Over time, as aspects of language use develop, the environment in which we apply communicative competences has also changed and developed. Studies (Assylzhanova & Sadykova, 2024; Yusupalieva, 2024) indicate that using interactive digital exercises and information and communication technologies (ICT) in English lessons can promote faster and more effective development of communicative competence in students. In such an environment,

new language forms are developing, such as emoticons, abbreviations, multimedia messages, etc., which expand the aspects of the concept of communicative competence and create a need for digital communicative competence – the ability to appropriately use new language forms in digital platform communication (Kern, 2014). In the intercultural environment, which is expanding along with the digital environment, sociolinguistic flexibility, the ability to adapt language to different cultural contexts, becomes important (Byram, 1997). Children's communication often takes place through social networks, chats, multimedia content, games. This environment changes both the sociolinguistic form (how to express oneself in text messages and orally) and the forms of discourse (short, multimodal means of expression) and strategies (abbreviations, emoticons, etc.).

In the context of the 21st century, elements of communicative competence are no longer limited to interaction in the physical environment, but are also transferable and adaptable in the digital communication space (see Figure 1).

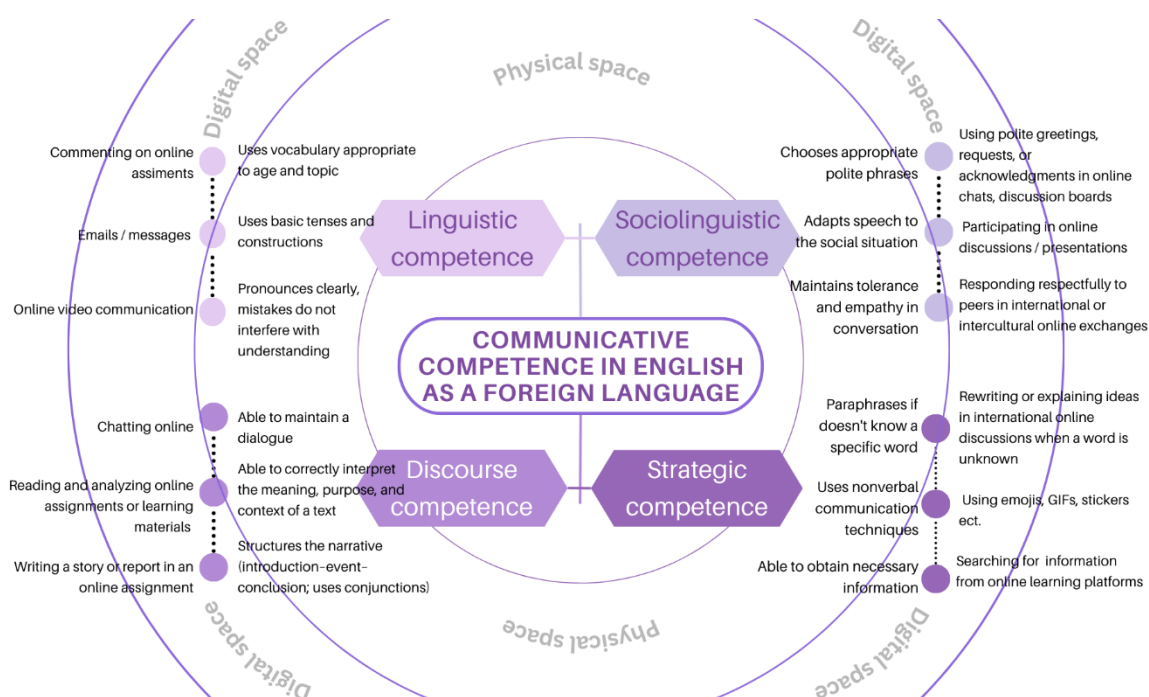


Figure 1 Communicative competence in the physical and digital space (created by the author after Assylzhanov, Sadykova, 2024; Byram, 1997; Canale, Swain, 1980; Choudhary et.al, 2024; Kern, 2014; Ušća, 2015)

The use of non-verbal symbols in communication, however, poses a risk of language simplification, language inaccuracy, and misinterpretation (Ratuningtyas & Englishtina, 2025; Nasir, Hatta, Suriatinazir, & Ikram, 2025; Koltsova & Kartashkova, 2022). Another study (Solomakha, 2021) emphasizes that in the digital age, teachers also need relevant competencies, which include the ability to effectively use digital tools, platforms, and diverse language forms in teaching communication.

Methodology

As part of this study, a pilot study was conducted to obtain initial data on the use of English as a foreign language by primary school students in the learning process and beyond, and their level of communicative competence in a foreign language.

43 respondents participated in the survey: 17 1st grade students, 17 2nd grade students and seven 3rd grade students, two English teachers.

The questionnaire consists of two parts, where the questions were structured in relation to the components of communicative competence (see Figure 1). Each student answered five questions about their experience using the English language:

1. *Do you speak English with the teacher and classmates in English lessons?*
2. *Do you also speak English outside of school (for example, with family or friends)?*
3. *Do you watch cartoons, movies, or other videos in English?*
4. *Do you read books or other literature in English outside of school?*
5. *Do you travel to countries where people speak English?*

To each of above questions respondents answered with “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Often”, or “All the time”.

The second part of the questionnaire was completed for each student by English teachers. Teachers, based on their observations in English lessons, assessed each student's communicative competence using four statements:

1. *Understands information provided orally,*
2. *Answers questions in grammatically correct sentences,*
3. *Expresses thoughts clearly and logically,*
4. *Creates a narrative on a specific topic.*

To each statement, teachers responded with “Only with the teacher's help”, “With partial teacher help”, “Able to complete the task independently, has minor mistakes” or “Completes the task independently and correctly”.

A non-probability sample was formed for the study using the convenience method - the study included easily accessible participants from one educational institution. This also constitutes a limitation of the study, as only students from one educational institution participated in the study, therefore the results obtained cannot be generalized to the entire population of primary school students.

The survey was conducted in person. The principles of research ethics were observed in the implementation of the study. The participation of students in the study was voluntary, with written permission from parents or legal representatives, which was formalized by signing a consent for the child to participate in English language classes at the educational institution. The obtained data were processed anonymously, using data coding, the results of the study were analyzed in the SPSS program and reflected in a summarized form, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants. The Cronbach's alpha test resulted in $\alpha = .816$. Since $\alpha > .7$, the data indicate that the questionnaire has good internal consistency.

Results

First, the students' responses were analyzed by grade group and gender, where statistically significant differences (p) appeared by grade group to the question "Do you speak English with your teacher and classmates in English lessons?", which indicates that 3rd grade students communicate in English with their teacher and classmates more often than 1st and 2nd grade students. Then, the distribution of teachers' responses was examined, assessing students' language skills (see Table 1).

Table 1. Average values and differences in skill ratings

<i>Skills</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>p</i>
Understands information given orally	2.34	-
Answers questions in grammatically correct sentences	2.27	-
Expresses thoughts clearly and logically	1.93	0.036
Creates a story about a specific topic	1.95	0.030

The average values show that higher achievements are observed in students' receptive language skills than in students' productive language skills. When dividing the responses by grade group and gender, statistically significant differences (*p*) appeared by gender in the statements "Expresses thoughts clearly, logically and coherently." and "Creates a story about a specific topic, using the proposed scheme.", which indicates that girls have better developed these competencies than boys.

Correlations (*r*) between students' responses on their experience of using English and teachers' assessments of communicative competence were examined (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between students' English language experience and language proficiency assessments

	<i>Understands information given orally</i>	<i>Answers questions in grammatically correct sentences</i>	<i>Expresses thoughts clearly and logically</i>	<i>Creates a story about a specific topic</i>
Speaks English in English lessons	<i>r</i> = 0.328 <i>p</i> = 0.021	<i>r</i> = 0.379 <i>p</i> = 0.000	-	<i>r</i> = 0.327 <i>p</i> = 0.018
Speak English outside of school	<i>r</i> = 0.314 <i>p</i> = 0.033	<i>r</i> = 0.391 <i>p</i> = 0.006	<i>r</i> = 0.360 <i>p</i> = 0.013	<i>r</i> = 0.391 <i>p</i> = 0.006
Travels abroad	<i>r</i> = 0.472 <i>p</i> = 0.001	<i>r</i> = 0.364 <i>p</i> = 0.010	-	-

The analysis revealed that correlations appear between the questions "Do you speak English with your teacher and classmates during English lessons?" and "Do you speak English outside of school?" and almost all assessed statements, which indicates that communicative competence skills are closely interconnected and develop in a complex manner. The test also allows us to conclude that students who have travelled to foreign countries where English is spoken have more developed skills in understanding orally presented information and answering questions in grammatically correct sentences.

Discussion

After analysing the survey results, it can be concluded that in the 3rd grade, or at the age of 9–10, students begin to communicate more confidently and experiment with the use of a foreign language in the classroom with the teacher and classmates, which is consistent with researchers' findings that in the 3rd grade, compared to students in the 1st-2nd grade, oral communication skills increase, and therefore participation in communication situations (Nilsson, 2020; Hulme et al., 2020). These conclusions indicate the need to adapt the learning process so that it supports students' active communication in lessons, thus promoting the further development of their communicative competence. In practice, this can be implemented by

structuring each lesson to include short, regular speaking activities (5–10 minutes) - pair and group work, role-playing (e.g., shopping, introducing oneself, asking for directions), discussions, storytelling activities can be enhanced by using story maps, picture sequences, or digital story creation tools, and other creative tasks. Regular use of communication games (e.g., information gap activities, guessing games, quizzes) can create a low-anxiety environment that motivates students to speak more freely. Also integrate digital tools, interactive learning platforms, e-communication, video and chat activities, which provide additional opportunities to safely experiment with language and collaborate with peers, while developing digital communicative competence (Kern, 2014; Solomakha, 2021).

Teachers have rated students' receptive language skills higher than productive skills. This shows that students are mostly successful in perceiving and understanding written and oral information in a foreign language. In turn, students' achievements in the area of productive skills – writing and speaking – are slightly lower, especially in terms of vocabulary use and correct grammatical forms. This trend also coincides with VIAA information on the results of centralized examinations (VIAA, 2025). This indicates the need to emphasize the development of communicative skills more in the learning process. In practice, this can be achieved by deliberately increasing the proportion of structured speaking and writing tasks in each lesson. For example, teachers can implement daily short speaking routines, such as answering open-ended questions, describing images, or expressing opinions using sentence frames (e.g., *I think..., because..., In my opinion...*), which support both vocabulary use and grammatical accuracy. Additionally, guided writing activities (e.g., completing dialogues, writing short messages, or creating simple descriptions based on models) can help students gradually develop independent written expression (Tajbenova & Jumabaeva, 2024; Baltabayeva, Kagazbayev, Eskazinova, & Mustagaliyeva, 2022). Formative assessment also plays a crucial role in developing productive skills; therefore, teachers should provide regular, specific feedback on students' speaking and writing, focusing on both strengths and areas for improvement. Peer assessment and self-assessment strategies (e.g., simple checklists) can further support students' awareness of their language use (Skola2030, 2019). However, this need is not limited to improving exam results. Communicative skills need to be developed so that students can confidently and independently use an international language in various communication situations. This includes not only formal language use, but also the ability to cooperate, respond to other speech and use language strategically – this significantly expands their communicative competence in the classroom and beyond.

The data obtained indicate that productive language skills are better developed in girls than in boys. This is also shown in other studies on the specificities of language and communicative competence development between genders, and that this trend decreases with age (Adani & Capanec, 2019; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). Taking these indicators into account, it is necessary to plan thematic activities in the learning process that would especially motivate boys to actively engage in language use, for example technology, sports, games, or problem-solving scenarios, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation to participate in communication. Task-based activities with a clear goal (e.g., completing a mission, solving a challenge, or creating a product) can be particularly effective, as they shift the focus from language accuracy to meaningful language use.

English teachers have rated the foreign language skills of students who themselves claim to speak English both in class with the teacher and classmates and outside of school the highest. This means that all elements of communicative competence develop interwovenly through practicing productive language skills, and it should therefore be integrated at school level as an interdisciplinary process across all lessons.

Conclusions

1. Communicative competence develops more effectively in an interdisciplinary environment:
 - In a variety of communicative language teaching methods;
 - If communicative competence is developed at the school level - language practice is included in all subjects;
 - CLIL significantly contributes to the development of communicative skills in a foreign language;
 - The successful implementation of these practices in primary school requires that teachers have sufficient language knowledge or that school resources are sufficient to organize interdisciplinary lessons.
2. Digital space has become an essential element of communicative competence:
 - There is a need to develop digital communicative competence;
 - The use of digital tools in the learning process has a positive impact on the development of communicative competence in a foreign language;
 - Along with the digital environment, the intercultural environment is also expanding, which develops sociolinguistic competence;
 - New forms of language are emerging in the digital environment – emoticons, abbreviations, multimedia messages, etc.
 - There is a risk that in the digital environment language is simplified, errors in language use, incorrect interpretation of messages using non-verbal symbols occur;
 - Under the influence of digital transformation, the need for a new professional competence of teachers – digital pedagogical communicative competence – is becoming more clearly evident.
3. After surveying students about their experience of using the English language and assessing students' communicative competence in English in the data processing program SPSS, it can be concluded that:
 - 3rd grade students begin to communicate more confidently and experiment with the use of a foreign language in the classroom environment, pedagogically this process can be supported by including more interactive and digital activities.
 - Teachers have assessed that students' receptive (understanding written and oral information in a foreign language) language skills are better developed than productive (writing and speaking) language skills, which indicates the need to develop communicative skills so that students learn to use language independently and strategically, and not only formally to improve exam results.
 - The data obtained indicate that productive language skills are better developed in girls than in boys. This tendency decreases as children grow older, but pedagogically this process can be promoted by planning thematic activities that would especially motivate boys to actively engage in language use.
 - The highest performance evaluations of English teachers are associated with those students who regularly use English both in learning situations and outside of school, which confirms that elements of communicative competence develop throughout, especially through the active use of productive language skills.

Limited data sources and a small sample were used to assess the current situation, which allowed us to obtain an initial picture of the communicative skills of primary school students in the use of English as a foreign language. However, in order to obtain a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding, further research is needed on the factors influencing the components of students' communicative competence and the opportunities for the development of communicative competence in English lessons.

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