

## **Development of communicative skills in English from a linguistic-methodological point of view**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to systematize the theoretical foundations from a linguistic and methodological conception that serves as support for the development of communicative skills in the English language for academic and research purposes. The analytical-synthetic, inductive-deductive, and observation methods were used for this purpose. The article is addressed to teachers of the University of Ciego de Avila who are in need of learning and using the English language for such purposes in their professional practice. A systematization of the most recurrent theoretical elements related to the development of communicative skills was carried out.

**Keywords:** Communicative skills; Linguistic and methodological conception.

### **Introduction**

Interest in foreign languages became very important in the years following World War II. The accelerated increase in economic migration, technological advances in information technology and the development achieved by the mass media made people capable of speaking one or more languages in addition to their mother tongue.

As far as Cuba is concerned, the country's economic development plans, the impetuous advance of the Scientific-Technical Revolution, the economic and cultural agreements with other countries, the reinsertion in the international market, and the economic, political and social changes that operate worldwide, raise the need for the study of foreign languages and the use of knowledge in different contexts; these reasons justify that the teaching of the English language in the Cuban National Education System responds to the political, economic and social importance of foreign languages in today's world.

In correspondence with the above, it is assumed that "... knowing English and even another foreign language such as French, will be one of the manifestations of culture and of an integral general culture in Cuba". (Castro, 2001, p. 3). This idea of Castro's recovers validity in the current conditions of scientific-technical development in Cuba and continues to be an aspiration of higher education professionals.

In Cuban universities, the continuing education of teachers takes into consideration the professional improvement in the English language (SPII) as stipulated in the Director Program of Foreign Languages (PDI) and the new policy of improving the teaching of English in Cuban higher education careers (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). To this end, the theoretical-methodological conception of the English language courses aimed at the professional improvement of teachers in these centers has taken into account varied methods, techniques and approaches for the development of basic communicative skills as a tool for professional work in the consultation of bibliographic sources published in English.

The SPII process of teachers for the development of communication skills for academic and research purposes (FAI) has been implemented on an empirical basis, through short and medium-term courses and workshops that have been essentially aimed at the elaboration of summaries of articles and translation of texts for teachers to demonstrate these skills as requirements in the exercises of written and oral exams in the processes of teaching categories and minimum doctoral exams.

The courses and workshops given to teachers at the University of Ciego de Avila, the territory and other Higher Education Centers (CES), have been restricted to the development of knowledge and skills from a pragmatic perspective.

Despite the efforts made by the Ministry of Higher Education to improve the performance of teachers, the theoretical and methodological demands that contemporary

society places on the professional work of teachers in the academic and research spheres are not being met, which means that there are still insufficiencies in the improvement of teachers of English with FAI due to the poor interrelation between the subsystems of the language and the integration of communicative skills.

The SPII of teachers has been directed to the development of communicative skills; however, a conception is required that recognizes the potentialities of teachers and their shortcomings, the use of procedures and a structuring by teaching stages as referred to by (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986), which contributes to satisfy the demands of teachers in the use of the English language in universities for the performance of their professional work, based on a pedagogical knowledge that integrates knowledge, skills, teaching stages and subsystems of the language.

The aforementioned problems allow the authors to reflect on the need for teachers to have methodological procedures that contribute to the development of communicative skills in the English language for the aforementioned purposes. Hence, the objective of this article is to systematize the theoretical foundations of a linguistic and methodological conception that supports a professional improvement strategy for the development of communicative skills in English with FAI of university teachers.

## **Development**

In the design of the professional development strategy for the development of communication skills in English with FAI of university teachers, the authors start from the criteria set out by Armas et al (2003) on the strategy as a contribution of educational research, so the strategy is defined as the system of actions aimed at solving their needs in terms of language proficiency and its use in their professional work.

Based on a real and contextualized diagnosis of the current situation of the SPII, the problem, the general objective and the goals to be achieved in certain periods of time, the activities and actions that respond to the outlined objectives are defined; the resources are planned to make the execution and actions feasible, which will be systematically monitored and evaluated to transform the existing reality, from a real state to a desired one.

From this perspective, the strategy proposed by the authors is aimed at solving the dissatisfaction in the process of professional development of teachers for the development of communicative skills in English with FAI.

In the foundation of the strategy, the laws, principles and categories of dialectical and historical materialism are assumed as a scientific method due to their integrating and synthesizing nature in the dialectical interrelation thought-language-culture. Language is analyzed as a social-historical phenomenon in constant evolution, as an inherent product of man's activity in the process of socialization.

By considering man as a bio-psycho-social being, the necessary relationship is established between the categories: personality - activity - communication on the basis of the historical-cultural approach in relation to the zone of proximal development, as well as the theory of verbal activity, which allows the teacher to act independently and solve problems in communicative situations with FAI in pedagogical practice based on the knowledge, skills and experiences he/she possesses.

The development of communicative skills in the English language presupposes the gradual transition of the teacher towards higher stages in the management of the language system by taking into account the sensitive periods of learning for the appropriation of knowledge, habits, and communicative skills, thus reducing the distance between the actual level of language performance and the development of communicative skills that allow him/her to express him/herself with coherence, fluency, and clarity.

In order to achieve the above, learning is required through the conscious involvement of the teacher that facilitates the systematic, periodic, complex and flexible development of the knowledge system, skills and interests through the communicative approach, in correspondence with the real needs that the student has in learning the English language. On this basis, the different stages of the strategy should be adjusted to the real needs of teachers taking into account individual differences.

The stages and actions of the proposed strategy are aimed at achieving self-regulation of the teacher's behavior for the development of communication in English with a personological approach that allows him/her to be uninhibited and show willingness and interest in expressing him/herself spontaneously and with self-confidence in communicative situations with FAI.

Socially, the strategy responds to the demands of education as a social phenomenon based on the preparation of man for life, in the educativity and educability of the individual to interact with the social context that transforms and transforms him/her.

The needs that emanate from the specialization profiles and the group of teachers are taken into account, in order to, on the basis of individual characteristics, develop coherent actions with the different groups that reciprocally influence the academic and research activity of the teacher, thus favoring self-regulation and self-diagnosis as part of individual performance.

The strategy is based on the principles of Cuban pedagogy, assuming the SPII process as a necessity for the continuous improvement of plans and programs that contribute to the integral formation of the citizen, in this context through teachers of English with FAI.

In addition, the principles of the direction of the pedagogical process of Addine, González and Recarey (2002) are assumed as general theoretical foundations, due to the integrating character of the conception of the process of professional improvement and its validity in the current process of improvement of plans and programs of the CES.

Similarly, the authors consider it necessary to organize, structure and conceive the strategy in relation to academic and research work, without ignoring the other components - labor and extension - with which the teacher interacts and for which it is also necessary to master the communicative skills in the English language.

Therefore, the strategy is elaborated on the basis of an integrative didactics in the dialectic interrelation and internal dynamics of the personal and personalized components of the formative process. At the same time, it requires a linguistic-methodological conception of the SPII that specifies the organization of the contents in teaching stages according to the subsystems of the language and the communicative skills of the teachers.

In this regard, this conception is defined operationally as the system of ideas that makes it possible to coherently organize the contents of the language subsystems and communicative skills into teaching stages based on guiding ideas, general principles and requirements, where the object is the SPII process with FAI, which is embodied in the strategy.

The guiding ideas that govern the linguistic-methodological conception of the SPII strategy are expressed as follows:

- The transition from lower to higher teaching stages in the development of communicative skills in English language with FAI.
- The concentric arrangement of content - system of linguistic knowledge and communicative skills.

Based on these guiding ideas and the theoretical systematization carried out, the researchers put forward the following principles:

- Logical connection and relative independence of the teaching stages.
- Coherence between the basic cores of the language subsystems and the system of communicative skills with FAI in the process of professional improvement.
- Adequacy of the learning styles and rhythms of teachers in each stage of teaching English with FAI according to their psycho-physiological particularities.
- Establishment of spatial-temporal relationships that favor the development of the professional improvement process.
- The coherent integration of communicative skills with FAI and their interrelation with the language subsystems.

The linguistic-methodological conception assumed in the professional development strategy responds to the following requirements:

- Gradual transit of teachers through each of the teaching stages.
- Selection and gradation of the basic cores of the language knowledge system according to the teaching stages and the IAFs.
- Relationship between the development of teachers' communicative skills and the academic and research context in which they carry out their teaching practice.
- The priority of the communicative approach for the development of knowledge, skills, interests, attitudes and states of mind.

The linguistic-methodological conception of the strategy responds to the concentric arrangement, as referred to by Klingberg (1970), of the linguistic contents in three teaching stages: initial, intermediate and advanced, conditioned among themselves; the integration of the communicative skills of listening comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension and written expression; as well as the determination of the basic nuclei of the knowledge system in each language subsystem: phonetic-phonological, lexical-semantic and morpho-syntactic.

At the same time, the strategy highlights the linguistic and methodological dimensions. The first is based on the dialectic relationship between thought and language and on the need to specify theoretical elements related to language as a concrete social

manifestation of teachers in a context with FAI and its subsystems for the development of communicative skills. The second, methodologically projects the elements of the linguistic dimension in order to direct the SPII process with FAI through procedures.

The linguistic dimension contemplates in the initial, intermediate and advanced stages of SPII the principles of the communicative approach, which allows oral advancement for auditory training and the flexibilization of the organs of phonation so that teachers develop the communicative skills that will serve for the subsequent use of the English language with FAI. Hence the need for the integration of communicative skills related to auditory and oral aspects in a dialogical and monologue form, as a way to achieve motivation for learning English.

In this sense, it is assumed the need to develop reading comprehension from the selection of linguistic texts to reproduce only what has been practiced orally and to incorporate others that contain a minimum of unknown vocabulary. Writing is used as an instrumental skill to support oral expression.

The development of communicative skills in dialogic language with FAI requires the introduction of the basic nuclei of each language subsystem in the different stages, as well as the formal, less formal and informal styles of language. The concentric arrangement of the content requires the cyclical progression of the exercise of the knowledge system integrated with the system of skills at this stage and its logical connection with the subsequent stages in such a way as to enable the application of the acquired knowledge and skills in new situations.

The typological approach of the language subsystems favors teachers' awareness of English language learning with FAI and its stylistic values, which is why didactic principles of greater application to foreign language teaching (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986) are needed in the logical-pedagogical ordering of contents so that they move from the simple to the complex, from the general to the particular and from the known to the unknown in order to favor conscious and meaningful learning in the teachers' SPII process.

The intermediate stage aims to continue deepening the oral and written use of the language, emphasizing dialogic and monologue forms in order to reach a higher level of development of communicative skills and express ideas with spontaneity, precision and appropriateness on general and specialized topics in the academic and research spheres.

In the establishment of the sound-grapheme correspondence and the recognition of the graphemes that represent phonemes, the use of the phonetic-analytic-synthetic-

communicative method is considered for the treatment of reading and writing, as well as the technique of dictation and note-taking.

In relation to the comprehension of narrative, descriptive and expository texts on general and specialized topics through intensive and extensive reading, the levels of text comprehension presented by Roméu (1998) are considered, which favor the correct use of intonation patterns in reading, the identification and efficient use of different types of dictionaries, as well as glossaries of terms to extract information from texts published in English through the discrimination of ideas according to the purpose or needs of the reader to orally express conclusions from what has been read.

At this stage, phonetic correction continues to be applied to achieve greater precision in the production of English vowel and consonant phonemes, and thus communicate ideas with clarity and precision, with creativity that promotes cooperative learning and self-regulation with the application of the linguistic contents learned in new situations through the use of simulations, transpositions and dramatizations as procedures that guarantee the transit through the different levels of knowledge assimilation to move from a level of dependence to one of independence and vice versa.

The introduction of the basic elements of translation at this stage contributes to the development of this skill for working with more complex texts in scientific prose at the advanced stage.

For the systematization of content in English language learning as referred to (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986), the following order is assumed: presentation, deepening, application and interrelation with the contents of the different teaching stages.

In the advanced stage, oral and written language comprehension is deepened through extensive reading as a requirement for the translation of texts of little, medium and greater complexity on general and specific topics of the teachers' profiles through the use of the dictionary and other electronic resources.

The basic nuclei of the phonetic-phonological level will be centered on the accentual and intonational patterns of the spoken language. In the lexical-semantic subsystem, the processes of word formation are studied in depth: affixation and composition; conversion and reduction are incorporated; polysemy, connotation and denotation of words are treated; in the morpho-syntactic subsystem, verb tenses are studied in depth; simple sentences, sentences composed by subordination and by coordination are introduced.



The structure of the text, the paragraph, the composition, and the resources to organize ideas: sequence and chronological order, cause and effect, comparison, contrast and reformulation; the synthesis of the text: the scheme, the diagram, the table, the oral and written summary in English are also introduced.

The methodological dimension complements the general methodological aspects that must be taken into account for the development of communicative skills and in the treatment of the language subsystems at each stage, taking into account the psychopedagogical particularities of the teachers to whom the SPII process is directed.

In the initial stage, the contents of the different topics are logically and coherently ordered, and respond to the communicative needs of the teachers by introducing communicative functions, which can be adapted depending on the characteristics and demands of the teaching-learning process.

The methodological steps established by Byrne (1989) for the active and conscious assimilation of linguistic content, including presentation, practice and production, will be used. The transit through these steps provides a favorable environment to eliminate psychological barriers and achieve the disinhibition of teachers in the use of communicative functions.

In order to achieve relaxation and preparation of teachers in the use of communicative functions, teaching aids stimulate the imagination, facilitate suggestion in the classroom, and at the same time achieve the durability of what has been learned in the memory. Also, the use of visual, sound, tactile and kinesthetic stimuli facilitates the appropriation of the content by the teacher.

In this regard, the use of the classroom space in its entirety is indispensable: graphics, illustrations, artistic pictures, cognitive maps and other media related to the life and culture of English-speaking peoples can be displayed on the walls. The organization of the classroom furniture in a "U" shape encourages interpersonal communication in the use of communicative functions in duos, trios or subgroups, which contributes to the use of the English language more naturally, as well as to raising self-esteem in the development of communication skills with FAI.

The presentation of the new linguistic material as a model for listening comprehension and oral expression through games, simulations and visual media, among other procedures, facilitates the development of communicative skills and the motivation of the teacher to feel the need to move towards higher stages of development in the mastery of the language. The methodological procedures for the presentation of

linguistic material depend on the oral form used, whether dialogic, dialogic or combined, whose common element consists of maximizing the use of dialogic expression as the most natural and frequent form of linguistic activities, according to Engelhardt (Engelhardt, 1980).

The fixation of the linguistic material requires the reproduction through repetition, imitation and simulation of the proposed model, as well as the use of phonetic correction techniques and induction-deduction in the process of assimilation of the basic nuclei of the knowledge system and communicative skills. Once the patterns of the subsystems of the language have been established during systematic practice, the next step is production based on communicative situations, where role-playing and the solution of everyday problems are the didactic procedures to be used.

Taking into account that the development of oral language is the starting point, the use of the identification card (I.D. Card) is proposed as one of the fundamental techniques for the development of communicative functions in this initial stage. To reinforce the oral production of the phonological system of the English language, a list of names and surnames of English origin with phonemes that do not appear in the phonological system of the national variant of Spanish spoken in Cuba will be offered, which will be assumed according to the preference of the teachers, which favors the psycho-social and linguistic environment of the group and avoids possible negative transfers of the Spanish language. Some surnames will be repeated in both sexes, which will allow the introduction of kinship through communicative functions referring to family members.

The alphabet is presented aloud rhythmically in the order it is placed for familiarization with the pronunciation of each letter and row and the procedures for presentation and repetition will be followed, which can be in groups, subgroups, trios, duos and individual. It is suggested to verify the pronunciation and recognition of the individual letters in each row and finally, in the whole alphabet, which facilitates the spelling of names, surnames and practice other communicative functions related to the alphabet.

An essential objective is the mastery of cardinal and ordinal numbers. For oral presentation, repetition and verification of comprehension of cardinal numbers from zero to nine, the use of a number table is recommended, which responds to a linguistic criterion, where each digit is placed under its corresponding ten. The table will be completed according to the communicative functions that require the use of numbers, among others, asking and answering particular addresses and telephone numbers. The

numbers from zero to nine are taken up again and systematized up to 100 by tens, both horizontally and vertically.

At this stage, the section ", (How do you say it...?), (How do you say it...?), (How do you say it...?) is introduced. (How do you say it...?) section, which is intended to clarify the meaning of words, expressions in one or the other language, which will facilitate listening comprehension and the construction of meanings of unfamiliar words or grammatical structures to be used in transposition.

The "Thursday Show" section will be aimed at exercising through various techniques such as dramatization, simulation, pantomime and role playing several communicative functions, which promotes a favorable socio-psychological climate, motivation towards the development of oral expression, independent work both individually and in subgroups, raises self-esteem, and self-evaluates the development of communicative skills.

At this stage, the monologue form of the English language is introduced through the recounting in the first person singular of the data that have been filled in the I.D. Card during the course of the classes. The written expression is introduced once it becomes an instrumental necessity to fix the oral language learned according to what is stated by (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986). The procedures of reading and writing will be used, as well as simple dictations containing the vocabulary and grammatical structures practiced.

The inclusion of simple audiotexts is not disregarded for the development of listening comprehension, which favors oral expression through the communicative functions of authentic linguistic materials.

The evaluation of the contents focuses on a three-stage process: first, the gradual acquisition of new knowledge and development of communicative skills in the different teaching activities is controlled, then, at the end of each thematic unit in a partial way, and finally, in a comprehensive way at the end of the first stage through self-evaluation, co-evaluation and heteroevaluation.

The intermediate stage includes methodological procedures used in the previous stage, as well as others of a higher level of complexity as the time devoted to independent work increases, thus increasing its frequency based on the skills developed on the basis of the concentric arrangement of the content, where the Spectrum II Course will be used as a text for the deepening of the communicative functions.

The methodological procedures used take into consideration that the initial dialogue of each unit is presented following the methodological steps already referred to in the previous stage and the semantization of the new vocabulary in context is included in a section called "Key Words and Structures". The section "Ways to say it", for the expansion of vocabulary and the systematization of communicative functions, is worked on.

As independent work, the comprehension dialogue is included in order to develop reading comprehension and text analysis.

The grammatical elements are approached through the "Close-up" section, with the support of exercises from the text *Brighter English* to systematize the grammatical contents and integrate at the same time the acquired knowledge for which the "Weekly Planning" will be used, (Weekly Plan), which consists of a weekly work plan where the action verbs are placed on each day of the week according to the day and time, and encourages the exchange of questions and answers in the exercise of the knowledge system of the subsystems of the language.

The translation of texts on different general topics begins with the section "On Your Own" of the *Spectrum II* course, taking into account the styles and level of complexity of the texts in the selected units. In translation, the article "Basic elements for a good translation" by (Pérez & Sardiñas, 2010) will be used as a source of information, and its exercise is conceived both in and out of class through independent activities.

The advanced stage requires a higher level of complexity in the concentric arrangement of content to achieve the development of communicative skills that allow for a deeper understanding of the oral production of English with FAI to translate specialized authentic texts, which acquires a certain hierarchy in the teachers' SPII process with FAI.

The sources of information to be translated are evaluated in advance to determine their relevance: consistency with the FAI, authenticity, scientific prose style and length, so from the outset the selection of chapters and articles that will be worked on throughout the entire stage will be made. Bilingual, specialized dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms in Spanish, the glossary of English expressions with FAI, as well as digitalized dictionaries, are sources for the development of the levels of comprehension of the text. The "outline" will be used as an organizational resource to coherently guide the oral report of the topic and as a basis for translation.

The linguistic and methodological conception approached constitutes a theoretical foundation of the professional improvement strategy for the development of communicative skills in English with FAI in university teachers.

## **Conclusions**

The theoretical systematization carried out by the authors contributed to the construction of the linguistic-methodological conception of the strategy of professional improvement in the English language, which makes possible the hierarchical ordering of the teaching stages according to the professional context where university teachers deploy their cognitive, practical and evaluative activity, as well as the selection, gradation and integration of the theoretical nuclei of the linguistic knowledge system in each teaching stage for the development of communicative skills for academic and research purposes.