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CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES: GNOSEOLOGICAL AND DIDACTIC REFERENCES

LA COMPETENCIA CONVERSACIONAL EN EL PROCESO DE ENSEÑANZA-APRENDIZAJE DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS: REFERENTES GNOSEOLÓGICOS Y DIDÁCTICOS

Lizandra Rivero Cruz[1]
E-mail: lizandra@uo.edu.cu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6373-2338
Yaritza Tardo Fernández[1]
E-mail: tardo@uo.edu.cu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9710-1371
Pura de la Caridad Rey Rivas[1]
E-mail: pura@uo.edu.cu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2923-5124
[1]Universidad de Oriente. Cuba.

RESUMEN

The article focuses on the development of conversational competence in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages (FL). Current studies around this category demand a didactics to be oriented towards awareness, practice and reflection on the structural elements and mechanisms of conversation in order to achieve an optimal communicative performance in the students. However, the current methodology needs to deepen, from more critical and reflective positions, in the dynamics of the teaching-learning process, as the integration of knowledge, skills, strategies and attitudes that intervene in the conversational interactive dynamics has not been sufficiently addressed, especially in their relationship with context and intercultural exchange. The position argued in this work is that the dynamics of the teaching-learning process of conversational competence must be based on the development of collaborative relationships and symmetry among the students in order to co-construct a common interactive discourse, marked by the use of communicative and socio-affective strategies that allow to enhance the conversational skills of FL learners.

Palabras clave:

Conversational competence, teaching-learning process, dynamics, foreign languages.

ABSTRACT

El artículo se centra en el desarrollo de la competencia conversacional en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras (LE). Los estudios actuales en torno a dicha categoría demandan una didáctica orientada hacia la sensibilización, práctica y reflexión de los elementos y mecanismos estructurales de la conversación para alcanzar un óptimo desempeño comunicativo en los estudiantes. Sin embargo, la metodología actual necesita profundizar, desde posiciones más críticas y reflexivas, en la dinámica del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, pues aún no se ha trabajado, suficientemente, en la integración de los conocimientos, habilidades, estrategias y actitudes que intervienen en la dinámica interactiva conversacional, en su relación con el contexto y el intercambio intercultural. La posición que se argumenta en este trabajo es que la dinámica del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la competencia conversacional debe fundamentarse en el desarrollo de relaciones de colaboración y simetría en el alumnado para co-construir un discurso interactivo común, marcado por el uso de estrategias comunicativas y socio-afectivas que permitan potenciar las habilidades conversacionales de los aprendices de LE.

Keywords:

Competencia conversacional, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, dinámica, lenguas extranjeras.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is essentially an interactive process. It depends on face-to-face exchange between speakers in order to solve daily problems and tasks or to establish social contacts. For a student who learns a foreign language through linguistic immersion, conversing becomes the most frequent verbal activity and the most relevant way of participating in the social life of the community where the student is inserted (García, 2009).

Conversation is a linguistic code, a communicative activity and a social process through which participants construct identities, relationships and situations. Summarizing, the spontaneity, the synchrony, the unpredictability of the subject, its familiar and improvised character, the relations of symmetry and the collaboration established by the interlocutors to create a concrete discursive practice constitute the essential features that typify daily conversation. At the same time, these elements make conversation differ from other types of interactive oral speech (Van Dijk, 1978; Cestero, 2017).

These peculiarities make it a very complex object of study to examine and, at the same time, very interesting. Hence, there is a large body of bibliography on this subject in the field of social sciences and theoretical and applied linguistics. Therefore, studies conducted in Pragmatics stand out, as they provide different principles or regulatory guidelines for linguistic and conversational behaviour, among them the Principle of Cooperation and the conversational maxims (Grice, 1975), the Principle of Courtesy (Haverkate, 1994), the text-context relationship (Van Dijk, 1978).

Likewise, important referents have been systematized in Sociology, which allow understanding the conversation beyond the linguistic framework, determining it as the most significant component of social life and the most relevant manifestation of social exchange (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). The most significant contribution of these researches has been to determine the structure of conversation, which is organized in a dynamic succession of *speech turns* -called interchange- produced by the participants, which develops the conversational interactive activity. The different exchanges can be grouped in sequences, defined conversational units made up of three or more turns or exchanges of turns that mark their internal structure. The combination of different sequences coordinated among them (openings, closings, adjacency pairs) makes up the general structure of the conversation (Cestero, 2017). Other concepts of Conversation Analysis are also studied, such as turn-taking (including overlaps and listener responses), preference organization, as well as prosody and kinesics.

Even though the validity of these studies is recognized, García (2009), agree when she question that these studies, relevant as they might be, do not stop offering a descriptive and fragmented vision of conversational competence that is not actually conversation didactics; a field of study that requires a further look (Cestero, 2012; Tardo, Socorro & Rey, 2017). Certainly, the conversation has not had an adequate systematization in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages, since it is assumed that this is acquired in a natural way, in a process of individual experimentation of the learner outside the educational context. This limits recognition and didactic treatment in classes, since in the teaching staff the belief continues to be generalized: conversing is the same as propitiating the oral expression of the students (Donaldson, 2011).

From the perspective of didactic analysis, it is pertinent to delve deeper into the category of conversational competence, which is considered as procedures allow the speaker to start a conversation, to achieve the attention of the speaker, to take and yield the word at the precise moment and in an appropriate and synchronized manner, to control pauses and the speed of speech, to introduce topics appropriate to the context and the situation, to know how to drop them and to take them up again when the occasion so requires (García, 2009).

However, conversational competence should not be reduced only to the particular capacity of the individual who has the turn to speak, because as interactive dialogical text, the speaker, when conversing, simultaneously becomes a sender-receiver who actively collaborates with his interlocutor, emits signals of understanding and informs with gestures or movements of the reaction that the message is provoking (Gallardo, 1996). It is therefore considered more appropriate to conceptualize it in terms of resources, knowledge and skills that all participants contribute to and show during the conversation (García, 2009), all marked by intercultural communication as a singularity of inter-language communicative interaction.

In this dynamic exchange where roles between speakers and listeners are alternating, a mutual understanding and negotiation of common meanings from shared experiences and cultural contexts emerge. The discovery of the other culture through conversation makes it possible for foreign language speakers to interact with a linguistic code and cultural conventions that are different from their own, but equally valid, thus enabling harmonious integration that is not biased towards understanding and interpreting a new reality.

The intercultural conversation would allow both parts to be enriched, if one renounces the power to accommodate the other's point of view. Then the genuine conversation articulates the relations between subjects from synergy and horizontality, recognizing the differences and betting on convergence and common interest to enrich themselves linguistically and culturally.

The present work deepens, then, in the gnoseological and didactic referents of the conversational competence as relevant category for the teaching-learning process of foreign languages, based on scientific literature review on this subject. This contributes to systematize the main proposals that have been contributed for the development of the referred competence in the FL classes and also to synthesize their main limitations.

DEVELOPMENT

Competence as a theoretical construct is not limited to a cumulative or juxtaposed conception of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but is configured from the mobilization and integration of cognitive, functional, behavioural and ethical processes dialectically related to each other (Pidello & Pozzo, 2015). Skills include tactics for solving problems, overcoming difficulties in interaction, and emotionally adapting to new scenarios and conditions. Attitudes reveal the individual characteristics transmitted or culturally acquired by the groups with whom people interact throughout life, which are reflected in linguistic behaviours appropriate to the sociolinguistic and sociocultural norms of the social environment. On the one hand, knowledge is made up of information acquire through experience and culture, which is reflected and reproduced in human thought; conditioned by the laws of social evolution and indissolubly linked to the practical activity of human beings.

Therefore, the development of the FL student must be a stimulus for the transformation of his or her intellectual and human capacities during the learning process, since apart from knowing what and knowing how to do, he or she acquires full meaning in knowing how to be, which includes knowing how to coexist (Fuentes, et al., 2017). These are essential qualities in the development of communicative competence, above all when they are strengthened during the construction of meanings and senses that are produced in conversation. It is clear that the competences of students are of a complex nature, which are developed in the teaching-learning process, passing through qualitatively different stages that are dialectically interrelated, while at the same time developing the transforming capacities of students.

In Linguistics, the concept of competence arises from the ideas of Noam Chomsky (1957 quoted by Corsetti, 2015), who proposed competence as the knowledge on the grammatical rules of a language; while distinguishing performance as the human behaviour that reveals the knowledge on those rules. This conception presupposes an ideal competence that integrates a set of grammatically correct rules and structures and thus denies the influence of the social environment on the development of language. For this reason, it is a useful concept within theoretical linguistics, but it becomes too reductionist if applied to language learning and teaching, although it represented the starting point towards new approaches to language and communication.

From Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence, the concept of communicative competence emerges (Hymes, 1972), which represents both the general underlying knowledge of the system and the speaker-listener's ability to use the language. Communicative competence is the theoretical construct that methodologically sustains the basis, objectives and didactic criteria of the communicative approach for the teaching and learning of languages, being the models of Canale & Swain (1980); and Bachman (1990), the most influential.

The communicative competence model of Canale &Swain (1980), was the first attempt to adapt the conceptualization of competence proposed by Hymes (1972), in a taxonomy of sub-competences, in order to evaluate the criteria of performance and linguistic knowledge (Corsetti, 2015). According to its definition, communicative competence is a synthesis of knowledge and performance, necessary to communicate. Knowledge, whether conscious or unconscious, relates to knowledge of grammatical principles, knowledge on how to use language in a social context to meet communication needs, and knowledge to combine communicative functions and statements according to the principles of discourse organization. This model is subdivided into four sub-competencies: linguistic or grammatical, sociolinguistics, strategic and discursive.

Criticism of this model is mainly due to the fact that its authors view the components or sub-competences as static compartments that do not interact with each other (García, 2009; Corsetti, 2015). Furthermore, competence is seen as something abstract, exclusive of the individual's cognition and not as a socially acquired dynamic element.

Bachman (1990), on the other hand, proposes a theoretical framework of the communicative ability of language, which rethinks the distinction between competence and action. For Bachman (1990), the ability to use language communicatively includes both components which

complement each other. Consequently, Bachman's model has three elements: linguistic competence, strategic competence, and the psycholinguistic mechanisms of learning. While this model represents a reconceptualization of communicative competence, its main fissure, according to and García (2009); Corsetti (2015), was in not taking into account the interactive nature of performance. Bachman (1990), uses the term interaction to refer exclusively to the cognitive and metacognitive activity of the speaker, which suggests, like the previous model, that competition is only an exclusive category of the individual and not a social product, which disregards the vision of communication as a consequence of the interactivity of subjects in a given space and context.

Summarizing, the models of communicative competence of the authors studied make it possible to understand what a person needs to know and do in order to communicate, but considers communication as a sum of actions (product in turn of individual competences) and not as a process constructed jointly by all the participants, essential dimension of the spontaneous conversation.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018), definitively replaces the dichotomy between knowledge and ability with a notion of communicative competence, seen as an internal representation of the linguistic code, the communicative situation and the context, which is activated when the user or student participates in the different types of communicative activity (García, 2009). Specifically, interaction is understood as the ability to use language or an instrument of communication through which the user or learner develops strategies of comprehension and expression, but also cognitive and collaborative strategies. Its involve controlling actions such as taking the turn to speak and giving it up, formulating the subject and establishing a focus, proposing and evaluating solutions, recapitulating and summarising what has been said and mediating in a conflict (Council of Europe, 2018).

The previous conceptualization of communicative competence contains important aspects of language teaching, since verbal activity is not reduced to the reception and transmission of information, but is configured from a more integrated assessment of interaction and context. The latter is considered not only a physical or situational space, since it starts from a broader vision, which implies the understanding of interactive diversity and culture in all its variability (Van Dijk, 1978).

From this perspective, it is necessary to consider the mental activity of the student, the peculiarities of the communicative situation and the orientation in the context, in order to be able to be more effective in conversation. All this implies a process of internal mobilization of the cognitive, communicative and strategic potential of the student that allows the appropriation of the target language from an internal process of acquisition and cognitive stimulation. This favours the ability to reflect together on the internal construction of resources for the handling and control of the topics and turns of the conversation without having to pay attention to previous scheme. It is also the basis for the need to develop skills and strategies in learners to achieve mutual understanding of the message, from a reflective process to develop the student's awareness to negotiate the meaning with the other, to ensure that understanding occurs.

None of the models analysed includes conversational competence as a sub-competence of communicative competence, although most of its elements (taking turns, pragmatic markers, routine formulas, etc.) are incorporated into the pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic competences mainly. Even though the CEFR rightly emphasizes two key notions: the co-construction of meaning in interaction and the constant and interrelated movement between the individual and the social in language learning, the truth is that the procedures are not revealed to dynamized and evaluate the development of the teaching-learning process of conversational skills and strategies.

After more than three decades of practical implementation of the communicative approach and with the advances obtained, it continues being a real challenge to integrate the elements, mechanisms and conversational strategies in the current methods of teaching-learning.

Conversational competence in the teaching of foreign languages

The analysis conducted by some authors García (2004, 2009); Donaldson (2011); Cestero (2012, 2017); Corsetti (2015); Tardo, et al. (2017), warn about factors that negatively influence the development of conversational competence within the institutional context of the classroom, in which it commonly influences:

- The dynamics of the oral communication of language learners, which is usually shown in the form of individual oral discourses that discourage collaboration among participants in order to establish a congruent conversation and create a coherent and common interaction.

- Insufficient systematization of interactive situations, which are reduced to activities of simulation and dramatization of transactional and evaluative dialogues mainly, limited to contexts of performance very

controlled by the teacher, which corresponds to some formats of tasks, such as the interview, the purchase-sale or the debate, which, although they are oral and interactive genres, do not allow freedom neither in the assignment of speech turns nor in the choice of the subject, key characteristics for speaking of conversational discourse.

• The use of group techniques and dynamics of cooperative learning that strengthen procedures for the comprehension and oral expression of the students, but less to the development of interactive skills of collaboration and acceptance of the other, which affect the interrelation of the members of the group, the quality of their interventions in conversation and intercultural relations within the context of the classroom.

At present, there is a methodological eclecticism in foreign language classes that combines procedures of different teaching methods, which may be adequate in some cases or inefficient in others, for the development of the dynamics of conversational competence and its didactic systematization in classes.

Neither the grammar-translation method, nor the direct, nor the audio-lingual projected in their methodological and conceptual bases the strengthening of interactive skills in the learner, but rather the formation of repetitive and mechanic habits, which intended to internalize artificial models of the spoken language through deductive procedures, vocabulary reinforcement exercises and grammatical or functional structures. Neither does the notional-functional approach which, although it transcends the notion of linguistic competence to communicative competence. In practice leaves the conversational elements absent, both in the language samples used as linguistic input and in the activities programmed for the systematization of oral expression. Unfortunately, many of these procedures survive in the class oriented by the principles of the communicative approach.

This approach, still in use in the teaching of foreign languages and considered an evolution of the notional-functional curriculum, defends the idea that language should be considered a vehicle for expressing and communicating, allowing the development of creativity and the autonomy of the learner in the communicative dynamic. Its main methodological objectives are intended to be achieved based on the criteria of subordination of form to content, the transmission of relevant content for interlocutors and the resolution of a problem.

The task-based approach that defends the use of language for learning and defines the task as an operative unit of work in the classroom, as well as the action-oriented competence-based approach advocated by the Common European Framework of Reference, do not include in their theoretical-methodological conception the explicit development of conversational elements, phenomena and mechanisms. Although this document includes in an original way the categories of interaction and mediation as language activities, these have not been taken into account for the systematization of knowledge and skills that allow the learner, in a conscious process, to strategically construct a conversation regulated by the linguistic and cultural patterns of the target language.

Similarly, the methodologies offered by some of the manuals and didactic materials for language teaching with the nickname of *communicative* (Aula Latina 3; Avanc-ELE, Aprendamos español 3; Bem-vindo a língua portuguesa no mundo da comunicação; Face to face intermediate; Nuevo Ven 3), although they favour the treatment of elements of conversation and interactivity such as pragmatic markers, acts of speech or conversational strategies, they lack the didactic orientation and intentionality necessary for the coherent articulation of activities that reinforce their recognition, production and expansion to new situations and contexts.

As an attempt to lessen the current limitations of the communicative approach and find new ways to efficiently achieve the didactic objective aimed at communicative improvement in classes, three approaches have been proposed for the teaching-learning of conversational competence: the indirect approach (Brown & Yule, 1983) and the direct or explicit approach (Richards, 1990 quoted by García (2004, 2009); Cestero (2017), both supported mainly by psycholinguistic theories of second language learning.

The first of these emphasizes making the students speak, in order to develop the ability to converse from practice itself. From this perspective, it is assumed that socialized adults already know, through their mother tongue, the rules of interaction and that they can transfer them to the second language automatically, once they know the appropriate structures and lexicon, and that, therefore, for learning it is sufficient to activate this transfer through meaningful practice exercises. Through the indirect approach it is neither necessary nor possible to teach conversation, but simply to practice it (García, 2004, 2009).

On the other hand, the direct or explicit approach, as its name indicates, proposes the opposite, since it considers necessary an explicit teaching of conversational phenomena (processes, micro-skills, strategies) that makes students aware of the conversational mechanism and turns them into analysts of their own discourse. The direct approach proposes, then, to highlight certain conversational

phenomena that would otherwise go unnoticed and, at the same time, to foster in the learner the capacity for discourse analysis, that is, to provide the necessary resources and stimuli to observe and deduce the rules of conversation functioning. However, García (2009), points out that empirical research carried out to prove the effectiveness of the direct approach to the *teachability* of conversation in second languages had as a result that this propitiates declarative knowledge of the elements of structuring and functioning of conversational norms, but it is ineffective for aspects of communicative performance that require automatism of such norms, which can only be acquired through practice.

Faced with these opposing didactic positions, more recent works have raised the need for a balanced combination of both approaches (García, 2004, 2009; Sanz, 2016; Cestero, 2017; Tardo, et al. (2017), where opportunities to make students speak are integrated with the explicit teaching of the mechanisms and phenomena that make up the interactive ritual of conversation. The explicit indirect approach is materialized in the teaching-learning process through a didactic sequence of three fundamental phases: sensitization or illustration, practice or interaction and reflection or revision (García, 2004, 2009).

The awareness phase familiarizes students with the typical phenomena of colloquial conversation from the analysis of authentic language samples. The practice or interaction is aimed at systematizing the conversational phenomena previously identified during awareness. Essentially, the objective is not to practice for practice's sake, but to speak using the resources and strategies used by native speakers in conversation to incorporate them into their conversational practice in the second language, through activities of reflection, controlled practice and free practice. Reflection or revision is aimed at facilitating awareness about the variables that affect the conversation in the foreign language (turn-taking, connection of turns, regulatory marks of beginning and closing and the support speech turns among others) and propitiates an internal acquisition process that allows the student to organize his speech turns, according to the variables that affect the dynamism of the conversation, in addition to controlling the content of the conversation, the freedom to choose the topics and the way to initiate, develop, conclude, change and reintroduce new topics without having to attend to a previous or preconceived scheme (García, 2009).

The three-phase model pursues that, through inductive learning, the foreign student reflects on different aspects of the conversation until they become aware of them. However, in practice these do not exceed the usual and schematic procedures of practice, presentation and production (PPP) that are generally used for the didactic treatment of other knowledge and contents such as linguistic, pragmatic or notion-functional present in current communicative methodologies or based on interaction.

Consequently, procedures and didactic actions that result from these models are directed towards the enhancement of certain mechanisms and conversational elements, the promotion in the learner of the capacity for discourse analysis, the activation of the transfer from one language to another, metalinguistic explanations of the conversational aspects by the teacher, corrective feedback to stimulate the appropriation of the content and the use of group activities for communicative practice. Therefore, greater emphasis is placed on metacognitive analysis and the controlled practice of conversational contents, objects of study, rather than on the development of interactive skills and strategies in which the learner operates and regulates his or her oral interventions freely, spontaneously and creatively, which reflects the lack of more defined and integrating proposals.

The explicit indirect approach attempts to fill the methodological gap presented by the communicative approach for the teaching of conversational competence in foreign languages, but its main insufficiency is due to the criterion of trying to substitute grammatical and functional structures for conversational structures, as essential constituents of the previous methods in a reduced orientation, mainly towards analysis, inference and reflection skills, which are valid to promote in the student the necessary skills to construct internally his oral communication, but not to help him interact with others. As García (2004), puts it, in this approach the student speaks less, but works more on what he says*,* a fact that is counterproductive with the objectives of the communicative approach, since the teaching-learning process must be oriented, not only towards knowledge about conversation and the variables that affect its realization (knowledge), but also towards the development of procedural skills (can do) that favour the concretion and systematization of the dynamics of conversational interactions, the situations and the contexts in which they occur.

Interactivity, seen as the co-construction of oral discourse for successful communication, activity that emerges and is acquired through the participation of individuals in interactive or discursive practices through the use of verbal and non-verbal resources (Richards 1980; Kramsch, 1981; Scarcella 1983 and Young, 1995 quoted by García (2009), is biased in this model and reduced to activities of oral and written production in which the objective is directed to the enhancement and systematization of conversational, which subordinates content to form.

Conversational practice in foreign languages should also not be reduced to interactive negotiation for communication, but needs to transcend the understanding and interpretation of intercultural-exchange relationships that characterize socializations between people of different nationalities and cultural identities, who develop skills and attitudes to share and interact with other speakers, an aspect little addressed in the explicit indirect approach. These positions make it possible to argue that the teaching-learning process of conversational competence in foreign languages must deepen the systematization of its didactic treatment, since it has privileged, from the methodological conception of the approaches and methods for teaching, the psycholinguistic criteria of learning, while the didactic analysis of this process has been, to date, very superficial.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the revised literature shows an interest in the development of conversational competence in foreign languages from theoretical conceptions and practical proposals for their treatment in classes, it still lacks an interpretative and integrating vision of this process. Theoretical and practical research on this category needs to address in a holistic and integrated way the relationships that can occur between the systematization of the mechanisms and structures that intervene in the production of conversational discourse and the development of skills and strategies as essential resources for the achievement of a pertinent conversational performance in FL learners.

While there is an openness to respond to the imperative of offering didactic proposals adapted to the needs of students, it is still necessary to rise to the teaching-learning process of conversation as a necessary communicative activity for intercultural dialogue and as learning content that enhances such dialogue. The didactic treatment of conversation is reduced to a linguistic and structural approach to the object, which still suffers from an interpretative vision of it.

Likewise, it is necessary to value the context and intercultural relations, which have not been taken into account in previous research and that are key to understand the particularities that characterize the oral interactions between speakers of different cultures and cultural identities. It that transcend the simple exchange of information, in unilateral occasions, to build a regulated and negotiated conversation by their interlocutors.

In synthesis, it is assumed that the development of conversational competence in the didactics of foreign languages must be based mainly on the need to strengthen collaborative relations and symmetry among the participants of the teaching-learning process (teacher-student-student) in order to construct a common interactive discourse, marked by the use of communicative and socio-affective strategies in a dynamic that, in and from communication, develops the interactive potentialities of the learner for a self-generating and contextualized oral process.

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