



FORMATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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Abstract

The article examines didactic and psycholinguistic foundations for developing foreign language and communication skills in primary school pupils. A mixed-method design was applied through classroom observations, diagnostic tasks, and comparative analysis. Findings indicate that communicative micro-tasks combined with formative assessment increases sustained oral participation, improves interaction quality, and supports early functional language use, contributing to a practical model for primary classrooms.

Keywords: Primary education, foreign language teaching, communicative competence, speech activity, formative assessment, classroom interaction, learning strategies.

Introduction

The primary stage of education is described as a period in which motivation for learning a foreign language, phonetic sensitivity, and readiness for communication are formed most rapidly. However, it is precisely at this stage that maintaining a balance between teaching the “language” as subject matter and using the “language” as a means of social interaction remains particularly challenging. International didactic perspectives emphasize that foreign language competencies should primarily be oriented toward understanding and conveying



meaning in real communicative situations, since in children's cognitive development situational meaning construction operates more effectively than abstract grammatical generalization [1].

Nevertheless, in school practice at the primary level, reproductive exercises, rote memorization of vocabulary, and repetition of isolated grammatical patterns often dominate. As a result, learners do not regularly practice essential communicative actions such as expressing simple ideas in everyday situations, asking questions, listening to a partner, or selecting strategies during interaction. Consequently, the gap between language units and speech skills widens: although learners may successfully complete test tasks, they experience difficulties in conducting even minimal dialogues in classroom or everyday contexts.

The relevance of this topic is further reinforced by the fact that in modern primary education communication is no longer limited to being an internal objective of the foreign language lesson. Instead, it has become central to general educational outcomes across subjects, including collaborative learning, exchange of ideas, and justification of one's position. In this regard, the foreign language serves as a convenient laboratory for developing such "soft skills" from an early age. Even with limited linguistic resources, learners activate compensatory strategies to realize communicative intentions, clarify meaning through question-answer interaction, and gain communicative experience without fear of making mistakes [2].

Despite the abundance of methodological recommendations on the communicative approach for primary education in the academic literature, fewer studies address the development of an integrated model that adapts these principles to local classroom conditions while ensuring coherence among learners' age-related psychological characteristics, teacher talk, assessment practices, and instructional materials.

This article addresses the problem of insufficient systematization in the process of forming communicative skills in primary school foreign language lessons. Specifically, it examines the lack of coherence between task sequencing, the step-by-step development of micro-competencies, and assessment criteria aligned with communicative outcomes. The research gap lies in the fact that communicative activity is often described as a separate method, whereas the minimal units of communication characteristic of primary school learners, the diagnostic indicators for their development, and the mechanisms for managing

growth dynamics through formative assessment remain insufficiently substantiated.

The purpose of this article is to substantiate a methodological model for developing foreign language and communicative skills in primary school learners based on empirical observation and diagnostic data, and to describe its effectiveness. To achieve this aim, three objectives are set: first, to specify the structure of communicative skills in primary education through operational indicators; second, to analyze the impact of classroom-based communicative micro-activities and teacher scaffolding on learners' communicative development; and third, to explain the sustainability of learners' speech activity through formative assessment and reflection tools.

Methods

The research methodology is grounded in a conceptual approach situated at the intersection of psycholinguistics and communicative didactics. The theoretical framework is based on the view that, at the primary level, language learning primarily occurs through social interaction, communicative intention, and context-dependent meaning construction. At the same time, the idea of decomposing learners' activity into small, manageable speech actions and automating them through systematic repetition was adopted as a methodological construct [1; 3].

The empirical part of the study was organized using a mixed-methods design: qualitative analysis focused on coding interactional episodes obtained from classroom observations and audio recordings, while quantitative analysis was aimed at comparing the dynamics of learners' progress based on diagnostic tasks. The study was conducted over the course of one academic term in two parallel primary classes of an urban school. In one class, a lesson design based on communicative micro-activities and a regular formative assessment protocol was implemented, whereas in the other class traditional instruction based on the existing textbook was maintained, serving as a conditional control group for comparison. During observations, selected episodes of teacher–student and student–student interaction were analyzed, with indicators such as type of communicative intention, response speed, evidence of comprehension of the interlocutor's speech, strategies for maintaining interaction, and attitudes toward errors being recorded.



For diagnostic purposes, three types of tasks appropriate for primary learners were selected: completing a situational dialogue, constructing a minimal narrative based on a picture, and performing an in-class “information gap” task. These tasks were designed not to assess knowledge of linguistic units as such, but to identify communicative actions that ensure meaning conveyance and mutual understanding, since at the early stages it is functional use that develops into stable competence [4].

Comparative analysis served as the primary method of data analysis: results obtained at the beginning and at the end of the term, as well as indicators from the experimental and control classes, were compared. To enhance the reliability of qualitative data, coding was reviewed using uniform criteria, and both typical and boundary cases were identified separately. The selection of methods corresponds to the research objectives: given that communicative competence is a complex phenomenon, it cannot be adequately assessed solely through testing without documenting real classroom interaction; at the same time, purely descriptive observation is insufficient, as diagnostic measurements that demonstrate learning dynamics are necessary to determine the practical value of the proposed model [2; 5].

Results

The first result demonstrated that the structure of communicative competence can be operationalized at the primary school level. Based on observation and diagnostic data, three stable dimensions emerged as minimal units of communication: interactive responsiveness, that is, the ability to respond quickly and meaningfully to a partner’s utterance; meaning construction, understood as expressing communicative intention even with limited lexical and grammatical resources; and interaction maintenance, which involves sustaining mutual understanding through asking questions, clarification, repair strategies, as well as the use of gestures and intonation. At the beginning of the term, pupils in both classes tended to focus primarily on producing the “correct answer” expected by the teacher, and interaction manifested itself as a sequence of isolated, turn-based utterances. By the end of the term, however, the experimental class showed a strengthening of semantic cohesion between utterances: instead of limiting themselves to short answers, pupils increasingly expanded the dialogue by adding brief explanations or counter-questions.



The second result highlighted the impact of communicative micro-activities on learners' oral participation. After the introduction of short but regular 6–8 minute pair-based “information gap” interactions in each lesson, even previously passive pupils in the experimental class began to engage in communication. Observation episodes indicated that such micro-activities create a psychologically safe communicative environment: compared to speaking in front of the whole class, the fear of making mistakes is reduced in pair work, and learners begin to self-monitor their speech using the criterion “Did my partner understand me?”. In the diagnostic “dialogue completion” task, pupils in the experimental class more frequently used contextually appropriate responses and interaction-continuing elements, whereas in the control class responses often remained single-word or formulaic.

The third result was associated with qualitative changes in the teacher's communicative scaffolding. In the experimental class, the teacher increasingly employed open-ended questions, reformulation, gentle correction, and “wait time” strategies, which allowed learners to organize their thoughts and find their own linguistic expression. Analysis of audio recordings revealed a decrease in instances where the teacher immediately provided the correct answer, alongside an increase in cues and prompts guiding pupils toward self-discovery. As a result, by the end of the term pupils began to partially appropriate these strategies in peer interaction as well, producing clarification moves such as “say it again,” “I don't understand,” and “what does this mean?”.

The fourth result demonstrated the contribution of formative assessment to the stability of communicative skills. In the experimental class, weekly feedback was provided based on simple and transparent criteria: listening to the partner, semantic appropriateness of the response, attempts to sustain interaction, and the use of strategies in cases of misunderstanding. Rather than assigning grades, these criteria were intended to help learners understand what should be improved in subsequent lessons. In the diagnostic “picture-based minimal narrative” task, pupils in the experimental class did not merely label depicted objects but attempted to establish sequence and basic cause–effect relations using simple cohesive devices, thereby strengthening the communicative coherence of their speech. In the control class, by contrast, listing descriptive elements predominated, and communicative intention was less evident.



The fifth result showed that the effectiveness of the communicative model is determined not only by the number of lexical units acquired, but also by the growth of initiative and cooperation in interaction. Pupils in the experimental class increasingly assumed communicative initiative: they asked questions, explained game rules, and supplemented their partners' responses. This outcome indicates a parallel strengthening of the social and psychological dimensions of communication, as learners began to perceive the foreign language not as an object that must be used without errors, but as a functional tool for accomplishing meaningful actions.

Discussion

The findings indicate that although the communicative orientation of foreign language teaching in primary education is well established at the theoretical level, its practical effectiveness depends primarily on the regularity of micro-activities, the quality of the teacher's communicative scaffolding, and the flexibility of formative assessment. Contemporary approaches to communicative competence emphasize acting through language rather than merely knowing the language; this perspective is consistent with our results, as pupils in the experimental class prioritized meaning conveyance over grammatical completeness, which in turn increased interactional continuity [1]. A crucial implication is that an excessive emphasis on "accuracy" at the early stage discourages learners' communicative initiative, whereas the observed strategies of gentle correction and reformulation supported the perception of error as a natural component of interaction.

Within Vygotsky's educational theory, social interaction and learning through the zone of proximal development with adult mediation occupy a central position [6]. In the experimental class, the teacher's use of support mechanisms such as wait time, gestures, and partially completed patterns led to pupils' independent construction of utterances, indicating a gradual internalization of scaffolding. Our observations revealed that when the teacher's practice of immediately supplying correct answers decreased, learners shifted toward internal planning, thereby enhancing interactional stability; this finding aligns with the principle of social mediation.

In primary education methodology, activity-oriented models of language teaching are repeatedly described as relying on play, tasks, and collaboration [3; 7]. However, our data demonstrate that play alone is insufficient: if an activity does



not require achieving a concrete goal through language, it may enhance emotional engagement but does not systematically develop communicative competence indicators. The effectiveness of information-gap tasks in the experimental class stemmed from the necessity to obtain information from a partner, which naturally generated the need for questioning and clarification. This outcome corresponds with the “communicative need” principle in task-based language teaching [2]. Moreover, the interaction-maintenance indicators identified in our study are closely related to compensatory strategies discussed by Brown—ways of achieving communicative goals despite limited linguistic resources. The early emergence of such strategies in primary education contributes to greater learner autonomy at subsequent stages [5].

In discussing formative assessment outcomes, Black and Wiliam emphasize that formative assessment activates learners as agents of their own learning and enables self-regulation when criteria are transparent [8]. In our study, an increase in communicative initiative was observed when feedback was based on clear and comprehensible interactional criteria rather than numerical grading. This suggests that even though metacognitive reflection is limited at the primary level, elements of self-monitoring can be developed through simple, recurring criteria. At the same time, the effectiveness of formative assessment is closely tied to the teacher’s discourse practices: feedback supports engagement only when it frames errors not as failures, but as indicators of the “next step” in learning.

Local scholarly literature likewise emphasizes the importance of communicative and interactive approaches, as well as the creation of speech situations in primary foreign language instruction [7; 9]. The present study refines these perspectives by conceptualizing communicativeness not as a general slogan, but as a set of observable and manageable skills defined through minimal units of classroom interaction and their diagnostic indicators. In this respect, the study’s contribution lies in integrating micro-activities, teacher scaffolding, and formative assessment into a coherent model. While recommendations on these elements exist in isolation, they fail to produce sustainable outcomes unless integrated in a manner consistent with classroom rhythm. The study is not without limitations: the observation period was restricted to one academic term, which does not fully capture long-term effects, and the findings are context-specific to a single school. Nevertheless, the evidence obtained demonstrates that the systematic



development of communicative competence in primary education is both feasible and methodologically grounded.

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