The article revisits some key issues in the development of the concept of competences in foreign language learning and teaching. More specifically, the concepts are examined in both historical and theoretical terms and their relevance to modern language learning, teaching and assessment is highlighted. A basic distinction is made between general and communicative language competences, following the guidelines suggested in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). General competences, not specific to any language, include declarative and socio-cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness and skills, while communicative language competences, empowering the individual to act using specific linguistic means, encompass linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. The article elaborates on the concept of both general and communicative language competences, giving a brief historical overview of the impact they had on language education (including EFL) in both theory and practice, and also the current state of affairs within relevant EU legislation and beyond.

1. Competence as a Linguistic and Pedagogical Notion

Historical Perspectives: Chomsky and Hymes

When Chomsky in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* introduced the concepts of linguistic competence and linguistic performance, what he had in mind was the distinction between “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language” and “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (Chomsky 1965: 4). What his theoretical framework, known as Generative Grammar, was subsequently going to focus on was knowledge of language structure necessary for understanding and performance. He noted that

> “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener’s knowledge of his language” and “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (Chomsky 1965: 4). What his theoretical framework, known as Generative Grammar, was subsequently going to focus on was knowledge of language structure necessary for understanding and performance. He noted that

According to this standpoint, therefore, linguistic theory is perceived as essentially mentalistic, “concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behaviour” (Chomsky 1965: 4). In other words, it is primarily interested in identifying the speaker-listener’s actual knowledge, not what he or she reports about their knowledge (see Chomsky 1965: 8). By analysing the data of performance, the linguist’s task is confined to determining the underlying system of rules mastered by the native speaker of a language and employed in actual performance (Chomsky 1965: 8).

This rather limiting definition of the scope of linguistic theory and its central focus prompted the development of the theoretical framework known as the Ethnography of Speaking and subsequently of the theory of Communicative Competence, initiated by Dell Hymes. Hymes’ approach builds on the analytical framework known as the functions of language, which Roman Jakobson originally presented to the scholarly audience at the 1958 Conference on Style held at Indiana University. This theoretical viewpoint emphasizes not just the importance of the speaker’s linguistic competence, but also his or her mastery of the contextual, pragmatic, socio-cultural and stylistic appropriateness of the utterance. In his seminal article “On Communicative Competence” Hymes asserted:

> “We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others.” (Hymes 1972: 277-8)

He goes on to introduce and elaborate on the notion of communicative competence, highlighting the limitations of the competence-performance dichotomy in Generative Grammar. If competence is only meant to deal with the criterion of grammaticality and disregard the criterion of appropriateness, as Chomsky’s linguistic theory suggests, it is necessary to revisit the notion and look more closely into its complexity. Hymes, therefore, pleads for a more integrated approach and suggests that linguistic theory should become much more unified with theories of communication and culture in order to address these questions appropriately. More specifically, he distinguishes four key questions on the research agenda of this integrated linguistic theory:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (Hymes 1972: 281; emphasis original)
Hymes' redefined notion of competence is hierarchically the most general concept. Communicative competence thus defined encompasses four major interdependent categories: grammatical competence (i.e., mastery of the phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexico-semantic structure of a language), discourse competence (i.e., cohesiveness in form and coherence in meaning in both spoken and written domains), sociolinguistic competence (i.e., knowledge of the rules of language use), and strategic competence (i.e., verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed in order to compensate for gaps in knowledge of insufficient fluency). It is still necessary to maintain a basic distinction between communicative competence and communicative performance, the latter being "the actual demonstration of this knowledge in communicative events." A competent foreign language speaker will not only display a high level of accuracy in his or her choice of vocabulary and grammatical structures, but understanding of the contextual appropriateness of his or her utterances. These two major criteria, subsuming a range of complex skills, would become known as communicative competence in the theory of language pedagogy. Interestingly, in reference to the notion of communicative competence, was reassessed and redefined in a number of publications, most notably in a highly influential position paper co-authored by two leading methodologists and language educators, Michael Canale and Swain. The authors looked closely into achievements of students of French as a foreign language, pointing out that traditional grammar-based tests were not able to indicate the level of students' communicative competence acquired through the immersion language programmes they had attended. Students' linguistic competence, although undoubtedly playing a very important role, could only properly be assessed as part of their overall communicative competence, which was assessed through various practical applications. More specifically, it revolutionized language education by putting a strong emphasis on investigating the implications of their theoretical model on the four main areas of foreign language teaching: syllabus design, teaching methodology, teacher training and materials development. The examination of the theoretical bases has led us to question some of the existing principles, and in turn to develop a somewhat modified set of principles which is consistent with a more comprehensive theoretical framework for the consideration of communicative competence. (Canale/Swain 1980).
In an attempt to offer a possible solution to this problem, Spolsky makes a case for the introduction of the functional approach to language testing, arguing for a more holistic, purposeful classroom orientation. This involves drawing from a variety of theories and methodologies, including speech act theory, ethnography of communication, and pragmatic inventory of notions and functions, to raise the learner's awareness of the "aspects of genuine communication such as its basis in social interaction, the relative flexibility and unpredictability of utterances (Canale/Swain 1980: 33)."

When it comes to teacher training, however, it is evident that the traditional model for teaching methodology is to be re-examined and re-defined if the communicative teaching approach is to be implemented in foreign language classrooms. According to Canale and Swain, the role of the teacher should be re-defined to become just a facilitator, an instigator of communicative situations that will prompt the development of adequate communicative skills of the learners. This role, however, should only be seen as complementary, never as alternative to the original didactic role of the teacher.

Lastly, what does the model imply for the conceptual design of teaching materials? Functionally organised textbooks, the authors maintain, need to be based on a thorough empirical investigation on communicative syllabus design. The relevance of a theory of communicative competence to language testing is obvious. A language test should be designed to reflect the communicative competence of the examinees, particularly in innovative approaches to language testing, as expressed by figures in the field of language teaching, and notably by Bernard Spolsky. In his widely cited and highly influential article, Spolsky notes:

"Communicative Competence, Language Proficiency, and Beyond: A Model for the Conceptual Design of Foreign Language Tests."

Spolsky's theoretical framework had a groundbreaking impact on the theory and practice of language learning, teaching, and assessment. It revolutionised language education by introducing the concept of communicative competence as a notion was enthusiastically embraced by the language teaching profession and redefined further by Canale and Swain. In practical terms, a functionally organised communicative approach proved itself very effective in foreign language classrooms, putting an emphasis on authentic communicative situations that the learners are likely to find themselves in.

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2. Current Approaches to Competences in Language Education: Common European Framework and Beyond

Language(s) for Communication: Common European Framework...

After the meeting held on the 24th September 1982, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe put forward a document outlining recommendations to the member states concerning modern languages policy. In the preamble to the document three basic principles were highlighted as a starting point based on which the recommendations were made and presented to the governments of the member states. Namely, the Committee acknowledged the fact that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding;

[...] that it is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination;

[and] that member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level, by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies [...] (Recommendation R (82)18).

Over the years the Council of Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe carried out a number of initiatives promoting the principles outlined above. More precisely, Council’s own activities, and in particular the Modern Languages Section of the Committee for Education, were “concerned to encourage, support and co-ordinate the efforts of member governments and nongovernmental institutions to improve language learning” (CEF 2001: 2). Their activities covered a range of areas with a view to ensuring that all sections of [the] populations have access to effective means of acquiring a knowledge of the languages of other member states (or of other communities within their own country) as well as the skills in the use of those languages that will enable them to satisfy their communicative needs (CEF 2001: 3), and, perhaps more importantly, to promoting research and development programmes leading to the introduction, at all educational levels, of methods and materials best suited to enabling different classes and types of student to acquire a communicative proficiency appropriate to their specific needs (CEF 2001: 3).

One of the most concrete results of these efforts and activities is the creation of the Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (2001), a comprehensive document providing “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (CEFR 2001: 1). It outlines in a detailed manner “what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (CEFR 2001: 1, own emphasis). The framework, therefore, takes onboard key concepts of the theoretical and methodological frameworks that the communicative approach to foreign language learning and teaching has to offer, without openly pledging its allegiance to any of them specifically. Furthermore, it explicitly positions itself as a context-free document, non-prescriptive and flexible enough to stand side by side with various frameworks, approaches and provenances:

In accordance with the basic principles of pluralist democracy, the Framework aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic. For that reason it cannot take up a position on one side or another of current theoretical disputes on the nature of language acquisition and its relation to language learning, nor should it embody any one particular approach to language teaching to the exclusion of all others. (CEFR 2001: 18)

The framework’s target readership are professionals and policy-makers in the area of language and intercultural education. Therefore, it is primarily usage-and, perhaps even more so, action-oriented, designed to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. (CEFR 2001: 1).

Structurally, it is presented as a taxonomic list of thematically inter-related units, in an attempt “to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components” (CEFR 2001: 1). The framework asserts that “[c]ompetences are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” (CEFR 2001: 9), and makes a basic distinction between the general ones, “those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities” (CEFR 2001: 9), and communicative language competences, “empower[ing] the individual to act using specifically linguistic means” (CEFR 2001: 9).

The **general competences** comprise notions such as declarative knowledge (savoir), skills (savoir-faire) and existential competence (savoir-être), as well as the general ability to learn (savoir apprendre) (CEFR 2001: 11). They are to be seen as a prerequisite for any language learning activity.
Knowledge as one of the key and perhaps most complex general competences comes as a result of the person's day-to-day experience of language. Both play a very important role in the process of language learning and teaching. When it comes to academic knowledge, the framework largely draws from the legacy of major communicative-functional approaches (see Hymes 1972; Canale/Swain 1980; Canale 1983) when defining communicative language competence as a notion combining three main components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic, each of which involves a range of skills, knowledge and abilities. Communicative language competence encompasses elements of lexical, phono-logical, syntactic, pragmatic, and sociocultural dimensions of language as a system. 

Pragmatic competences refer to the functional use of linguistic resources in order to achieve a communicative goal. Linguistic competences encompass elements of lexical, phonological, and syntactic usages in language as a system. Sociolinguistic competences refer to the cultural context in which language is used, including the sociocultural dimensions of language such as reception, production, interaction, and mediation. 

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment) provides a comprehensive framework for describing language proficiency levels. The framework is divided into six levels, ranging from A1 (basic user) to C2 (mastery). Each level is further divided into sub-levels, with A1 sub-levels being lower proficiency levels and C2 sub-levels being higher proficiency levels. The CEFR framework is used to assess and describe language proficiency levels, and it is widely used in Europe and other parts of the world for language teaching and assessment purposes.
Another important initiative, emanating from the framework and the results of its implementation, is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, a document commissioned by the Council of Europe. This framework outlines "what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication" (CEFR 2001: 1) and gives a detailed taxonomic list of function-oriented descriptors, specifying the levels of language proficiency (A1-C2). The framework makes a basic distinction between language competences, empowering the individual to act using specific linguistic means.

To conclude, the Common European Framework is a document commissioned by the Council of Europe, outlining what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication. The framework provides a taxonomic list of function-oriented descriptors, specifying the levels of language proficiency (A1-C2). The framework makes a basic distinction between language competences, empowering the individual to act using specific linguistic means.

A number of initiatives, led and inspired by the Council of Europe and its Mission, are currently underway. Their results are expected to inform future directions of research and development in language education policy in Wider Europe.

**3. Implications for EFL Teaching and Ways Forward**

Since the advent of communicative approaches, the EFL teaching profession has readily embraced its ethos and welcomed the impact it had on all key areas of its activity, including curricular innovations, EFL classroom methodology, teacher training and materials design. The shift from grammar-based EFL pedagogy to the communicative-functional one coincided with the spread of the English language, leading to its global geographical dispersion. This, in turn, gave rise to a growing number of regional and national varieties of the language, with unique and complex sociolinguistic profiles (see Leung 2005: 133). Moreover, English seems to have joined the list of basic skills (Graddol 2006: 72).


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