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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of Gender and Secondary School Type on the Development of Key Competence for Lifelong Learning Communication in a Foreign Language among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Background/purpose: Knowledge and proficiency in foreign languages has always been considered a characteristic of respectable and educated members of society, and it has long been considered that learning languages contributes to the enrichment of one's personality. This especially applies in modern living conditions, where foreign language proficiency has become essential to successfully function within an international community which has become increasingly plurilingual.

Materials/methods: The goal of this paper is to determine to what level secondary education in the Republic of North Macedonia develops the key competence of communication in a foreign language among students. In order to throw light on the various aspects of learning foreign languages and their respective cultures, a questionnaire with assessment scales was constructed, and which was then applied to 160 students from secondary schools in the Municipality of Tetovo.

Results: The findings lead us to conclude that secondary school students in the Republic of North Macedonia have not mastered their ability to learn foreign languages and their cultures to a sufficient level.

Conclusion: Being proficient in languages other than one's mother tongue is a prerequisite for achieving important life goals such as employment and job retention, obtaining citizenship or a permit to work in another country, achieving horizontal and vertical career growth, establishing social relations and similar goals. For this particular reason, life in multilingual and multicultural Europe obliges its citizens to actively study non-native languages at all levels of education.

Keywords: key competencies, communication in a foreign language, lifelong learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the Council of Europe for has been supporting and promoting a specific policy of learning foreign languages at the European level. At the heart of Europe's contemporary language policy there are several essential views that perceive Europe and the world as the only educational space where people and cultures, languages and their speakers, intertwine. These views include the following:

1. Only solid knowledge of modern European languages will enable to facilitate the communication and interaction between individuals with a different mother tongue, in order to promote mobility in Europe, mutual understanding, cooperation, and to overcome prejudice and discrimination.
2. By adopting and developing national policies in the field of teaching and learning living languages, member states can harmonize at the European level, by applying the policy of mutual cooperation and coordination.
3. In this context, it is also recommended that Europe should promote cooperation at the national and international level between governmental and non-governmental institutions engaged in the development of language teaching methods, as well as in the production and use of didactic materials, including multimedia production institutions (Council of Europe, 2001).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language competence in this context is understood as a set of knowledge and skills not only for the structure of a language, but also for the use of language in accordance with the communicative situation and the sociocultural norms of the community. In other words, the mother tongue of the individual and the foreign language that the individual speaks in their consciousness should not be separated and classified as mutually contradictory knowledge, rather they must be embedded in the broadest perspective of the communication competence that consists of one's entire language knowledge, as well as the experiences gained in its usage.

Within communication competence, all languages that an individual uses mutually interact, both on a cognitive level, where the knowledge of one language helps us to master another language, as well as on a sociocultural level (European Commission, 2017).

In terms of foreign language learning, the Council of Europe encourages all parties engaged in foreign language teaching to consider the factors related to the needs, motivation, personal characteristics, and resources of their students. Namely, teachers need to know why students are learning a language, i.e., to what end, what do they need to learn in order to be able to use the language to meet their own specific needs, how they learn, what are their sociopsychological profiles, whether they have access to different types of language materials in the learning process, and how much money they can spend on the process of learning languages, etc. (Council of Europe, 2001).

The task of language education in the modern world is undergoing profound change. The general goal of foreign language teaching can change significantly with the introduction of new ideas and contents, from teaching aimed at achieving a high level of language competence which is often understood as strictly structural or grammatical where the model is the so-called "ideal speaker" of one, two, or three languages, perceived as mutually isolated, to new ideas aimed at developing a language repertoire in which all language skills will find their spot (European Commission, 2017).

The key competence of communication in a foreign language not only separates the most important dimensions of the key competence of communication in a mother tongue, but it also includes skills such as mediation and intercultural understanding. Thereby, the term mediation does not imply translation as a mechanical activity, rather mediation is an effort to establish contact between different cultural views, perspectives, lifestyles, and interactions (European Commission, 2017).

The key competence of communication in a foreign language requires a person's knowledge in the field of vocabulary and functional grammar as well as knowledge of the most important types of verbal interaction and language parameters. The knowledge of the social environment and cultural diversity of the language is also very important.

The basic skills consist of the ability to understand speech messages, an initiative, i.e., commencement of a conversation, having a conversation and a conclusion, as well as reading and understanding a text according to the individual needs. Individuals should also be able to use appropriate assistance, as well as to informally learn the language as part of the lifelong learning process.

The positive attitude includes respect for cultural characteristics and diversity, as well as interest and curiosity about the language and the intercultural communication (European Commission, 2005).

3. METHODOLOGY

The current study was conducted according to the descriptive research method with all its modalities, i.e., condition analysis, comparison, and generalization were performed.

Of the research techniques, a survey and scaling method were applied, whereby a questionnaire incorporating an assessment scale was developed.

The dependent variable in this research is the level, i.e., the degree of development of the key competence of communication in a foreign language, as well as the indicators thereof. On the other hand, the independent variables include: the gender of the students and the type of secondary school they attend.

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis was performed. Within the quantitative analysis, the data are presented in percentage and tabular form, with comments added following the presented data.

The qualitative analysis consists of processing existing documents and comparing the results of relevant research related to the subject of study.

Research sample

The research sample is random. The sample of students consists of 40 fourth-year students from four secondary schools located in the Municipality of Tetovo (high school, and schools of medicine, economics, and agriculture), representing a population of 160 students.

Hypotheses

General hypothesis:

H0: High school students are trained to learn foreign languages and their cultures.

Auxiliary hypotheses:

H1. The key competence of communication in a foreign language directly depends on the gender of the student learner.

H2. The key competence of communication in a foreign language is more developed among high school students in relation to students from secondary vocational schools.

4. RESULTS

In order to obtain a greater overview of the differences in the level of knowledge, the skills and attitudes that are considered characteristic of the key competence of communication in a foreign language were grouped into several segments: Knowledge of basic vocabulary, intonation, and pronunciation; knowledge of an appropriate range of literary and non-literary texts to a sufficient extent; ability to initiate and maintain an appropriate range of autonomous language learning activities; ability to initiate, have, and finish a conversation on related topics, of particular interest or relevant to everyday life, as well as interest in intercultural communication.

On the basis of the results presented in Table 1, we reached some findings about the students' level of knowledge of foreign languages.

Table 1. What foreign languages do you know?

	I am not fluent at all	I am not very fluent	I am partially fluent	I am very fluent	Arithmetic mean
1. English	3	16	72	69	3.29
	1.88%	10.00%	45.00%	43.13%	
2. German	80	34	41	5	1.82
	50.00%	21.25%	25.63%	3.13%	
3. French	112	29	16	3	1.44
	70.00%	18.13%	10.00%	1.88%	
4. Russian	137	16	6	1	1.19
	85.63%	10.00%	3.75%	0.63%	

Namely, the highest percentage of the respondents, 45.00%, stated that they were partially fluent in English. Approximately the same percentage (43.13%) stated being very fluent in English, and of those, 43.48% were male and 42.86% female.

There was also a difference revealed in the ratio between high school students (55.00%) and vocational school students (39.17%).

These results suggest that there are shortcomings in a certain segment of the English language learning process. We consider that within English language instruction, a considerable amount of time is dedicated to the adoption of grammar rules and the effort to help students learn to speak "correct" English. On the other hand, this hinders the opportunities for active use of the language, as well as an assessment of the students' needs to master this language. For this reason, students who express significant interest in the field of English meet their need in courses organized by private schools.

As for the other foreign languages, 25.63% stated being partially fluent in German, whilst only 3.13% were very fluent in German. Only 10.00% of the respondents were noted as being partially fluent in French, and only 1.88% were very fluent in French. Furthermore, only 3.75% of the respondents expressed themselves as being fluent in Russian, even less (0.63%) were very fluent in the Russian language.[1]

Considering that in both high school education and in secondary vocational schools of economics, in addition to English, a second foreign language is only taught as an optional

[1] *Considering the very low proficiency percentage in other foreign languages, the analysis examines the different aspects of the English language acquisition and usage.*

subject, hence we cannot be satisfied with the level of knowledge of these other foreign languages.

Namely, in our educational practices it is still considered that knowledge of foreign languages is important for traveling abroad and for communication in the case of having contact with people who do not speak our same language. In this context, there is a lack of understanding that knowledge of foreign languages is also important for meeting one's own needs for participation and integration in the "learning society."

Table 2. What do you know in _____ language?[2]

	This is not true at all	This is not true partially	This is partially true	This is completely true	Arithmetic mean
1. Commonly familiar words and phrases that refer to the family	7	9	36	7	3.53
	4.38%	5.63%	22.50%	4.38%	
2. Familiar words and phrases that refer to the immediate environment	2	15	48	2	3.48
	1.25%	9.38%	30.00%	1.25%	
3. I can write a short text on a topic from everyday life	3	12	44	3	3.52
	1.88%	7.50%	27.50%	1.88%	
4. Lyrics of songs by famous performers	6	20	49	6	3.33
	3.75%	12.50%	30.63%	3.75%	

The offered statements do not reflect the entire range of linguistic content, but aim to identify the level of foreign language knowledge as well as interest in that language, that is, whether the students' knowledge is limited to phrases from the immediate environment and everyday life experiences or they can independently describe specific events.

Of the statements offered as answers to this question, "I know commonly familiar words and phrases that refer to the family in a foreign language" was the most supported (67.50%). Of those who responded, 62.32% were male and 23.08% female, with a slightly smaller difference between the respondents being high school students (77.50%) compared to vocational school students (64.17%).

The support of 63.13% of the respondents for the statement "I can write a short text on a topic from everyday life in a foreign language" was found to be approximately the same as for the previous statement in all examined categories.

In this context, the time that students spend in front of a computer screen based on their own initiative as well as their motives, where knowledge of English is necessary, should also be considered.

[2] *Students comment on the foreign language that they have the most knowledge of.*

Table 3. How do you behave while learning _____ language?

	Never	Rarely	Frequently	Always	Arithmetic mean
1. I ask for the teacher's advice about the best method to learn a foreign language	9	33	60	58	3.04
	5.63%	20.63%	37.50%	36.25%	
2. Of several offered methods I seek the one that suits me best	3	20	50	87	3.38
	1.88%	12.50%	31.25%	54.38%	
3. I ask for the teacher's feedback about my understanding of the specific content	7	42	61	50	2.96
	4.38%	26.25%	38.13%	31.25%	
4. I ask for my classmates' assistance when it comes to familiar topics and activities	10	46	62	42	2.85
	6.25%	28.75%	38.75%	26.25%	

The student's own initiative is particularly important for the development of the key competence of communication in a foreign language. Within this research, we attempted to understand to what extent students are able to actively participate in the process of language acquisition with their proposals and suggestions and ask their teachers to fully clarify any ambiguities that emerge during the process of language acquisition.

As can be seem in Table 3, the strongest support, with 54.38%, refers to the statement "While learning a foreign language of several offered methods I seek the one that suits me best," of which 32.97% of the respondents were female and 28.99% male. Additionally, 55.83% of respondents from vocational schools supported this statement compared to 50.00% from high schools.

Such a level of support indicates that students are unable to assess their own needs when it comes to learning a foreign language, and accordingly to independently choose appropriate methods that correspond to their actual needs and interests.

The statement "While learning a foreign language I ask for the teacher's advice about the best method to learn a foreign language" was shown to be relatively poorly supported, with "frequently" selected by 37.50% of the respondents and "always" by 36.25%. What matters most when it comes to supporting this statement is the difference in the support shown for the category of "always," with 41.67% of respondents from vocational schools compared to 20.00% from high schools

Such a level of support suggests that in the foreign language learning process, a very small percentage of students rely on their teacher's support; this, on the one hand, may be an

indicator of their ability to self-assess their own knowledge, but it may also indicate a level of distrust with regard to how they perceive their teachers.

Table 4. When do I feel capable of establishing simple communication in _____language?

	This is not true at all	This is not true partially	This is partially true	This is completely true	Arithmetic mean
1. If I am being asked simple questions on topics that are well known to me	4	17	40	99	3.46
	2.50%	10.63%	25.00%	61.88%	
2. If I am asked to discuss on a previously read short text	9	9	32	110	3.52
	5.63%	5.63%	20.00%	68.75%	
3. I feel capable to spontaneously engage in simple communication in a foreign language	5	12	50	93	3.44
	3.13%	7.50%	31.25%	58.13%	
4. I feel capable to express my views in a short letter	3	13	38	106	3.54
	1.88%	8.13%	23.75%	66.25%	

On the basis of the answers recorded to this question, we gain insight into how much the respondents believe they are able to use the learned foreign language in their everyday communication.

The statement "I feel capable of establishing simple communication in a foreign language if I am asked to discuss on a previously read short text" was the most supported statement, by 68.75% of the respondents. There was a small difference of 6.21% noted between the support of female (71.43%) and male (65.22%) respondents, while the difference between high school respondents (82.50%) and vocational school respondents (64.17%) amounted to 18.33%.

The statement "I feel capable to express my views in a short letter" was supported by 66.25% of the respondents. This statement was supported mostly by female respondents (69.23%), compared to 62.32% of male respondents. Additionally, the statement was supported by 82.50% of high school respondents and 60.83% of vocational school respondents.

Support for these statements realistically reflect the current educational practices. Namely, the statements that make students feel more "secure," such as a discussion on a previously read text, which is already known, as well as written expression of their own views, were found to be the most supported. We think that this is due, among other things, to the fact that in this period of adolescence, students are somewhat shy and unprepared to start a

communication due to fear of doing something wrong that could result in ridicule among their classmates.

However, their preparedness to establish simple communication on familiar topics and to spontaneously engage in simple communication in a foreign language was found to be satisfactory, which is considered a good basis for more thorough practice of appropriate vocabulary and language structures and phrases needed in order to conduct quality communication in a foreign language, which is illustrated by the respondents' support of the following statements.

We believe that the expressed difference in the support, in favor of high school respondents over vocational school respondents, is a result of the attention paid to foreign languages as general educational content within high school education, which implies the use of more interactive teaching methods.

Table 5. Why is learning a foreign language useful?

	I completely disagree	I partially disagree	I partially agree	I completely agree	Arithmetic mean
1. For successful communication with people who speak a different language	5	5	28	122	3.67
	3.13%	3.13%	17.50%	76.25%	
2. We can expand our knowledge to areas for which there is no written material in our mother tongue	4	6	36	114	3.63
	2.50%	3.75%	22.50%	71.25%	
3. For touristic travel	1	6	35	118	3.69
	0.63%	3.75%	21.88%	73.75%	
4. To be able to study abroad	5	2	18	135	3.77
	3.13%	1.25%	11.25%	84.38%	

Intercultural and international communication offer the greatest opportunities for the active use of a foreign language. On the basis of the answer to this question, we can see that the statement "I think that learning a foreign languages is useful because of the opportunity to study abroad" was the most supported, with 84.38% of the respondents. Of these, 92.31% were female compared to a lower 73.91% of male respondents; whilst the support between high school and vocational school respondents was shown to be almost identical. This statement was the most supported within the entire questionnaire which refers to the examination of the key competence of communication in a foreign language.

The statement "I think that learning foreign languages is useful, because we can expand our knowledge to areas for which there is no written material in our mother tongue" was supported by 71.25% of the respondents. The support for this statement between high school students and vocational school students was found to be identical, whilst there was a

difference noted between the support by female respondents (79.12%) compared to male respondents (60.87%).

The high percentage of support for these statements indicates that our respondents have an awareness that only through proficiency in foreign languages is it possible to facilitate the communication and interaction between individuals with a different mother tongue. The stronger support by female respondents shows their greater interest and personal ambition to promote mobility as a good opportunity to continue education outside of their country.

The relatively high support for the other two statements indicates that students have a highly developed awareness of the need to acquire foreign languages as a necessity to engage in modern trends, for the realization of personal satisfaction, such as traveling as a tourist, but also for professional development, i.e., introduction to contents for which there is no written material in the mother tongue.

4. DISCUSSION

Foreign language teaching is based on the understanding of language as a means of communication, i.e., as a social tool that speakers use to convey knowledge. In this regard, it should be pointed out that in the classroom, foreign languages should not have the role of an isolated phenomenon in which theoretical explanations in the mother tongue are mostly given, rather as a system that children should recognize as a functional medium for receiving and conveying information important to expanding their system of knowledge and skills. This means that the foreign language should be a means of communication in the classroom from the very first day, i.e., from the first meeting with the students, because the teacher's speech in the first phase of learning the foreign language is the key source of language material that allows students to initiate and advance the learning process.

This is particularly important if the aim is to enable students to actively participate in the life of a multicultural and multilingual international community. The realization of this goal implies a change of attitude towards foreign language teaching which in this case should be based on the principles that suggest that the goals in learning foreign languages should be defined in such a way that students in a number of formal and informal situations will not be expected to reach a level of competence similar to that of a native language speaker, i.e., goals and outcomes in foreign language teaching that lead to different levels of competence should be envisaged. Accordingly, foreign language teaching should be organized so that it offers students the opportunity to develop language competence and the opportunity to learn the language throughout life (Filipović, 2018).

On the basis of the presented results, we can conclude that high school students in the Republic of North Macedonia are not sufficiently trained to learn foreign languages and their cultures, which means that the set hypothesis(H0) is rejected.

Regarding the gender of the respondents, we can point out that male respondents' results were higher with regard to their component knowledge, while female respondents' results were higher in relation to the other two components, skills and attitudes, which means that the key competence of communication in a foreign language directly depends on the gender of the students, which means that the set hypothesis (H1) is rejected.

In the relationship between high school respondents compared to vocational school respondents, the high school respondents' results were higher in terms of knowledge and skills, while in terms of attitudes, the vocational school respondents' results were higher, which means that the key competence of communication in a foreign language is not more

developed in high school students in relation to vocational school students, which means that the set hypothesis (H2) is rejected.

In this regard, it is extremely important for the educational system to provide individuals with the opportunity to register and formalize innovative and advanced language knowledge in a certain way, and in different life stages and situations. This means that school grades must not remain the only significantly important measure of knowledge of a foreign language throughout an individual's lifetime.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of a foreign language, i.e., the application of the acquired knowledge, is very important for the development of the key competence of communication in a foreign language in every possible situation. Despite the availability and widespread use of foreign languages, primarily English, the results of our research indicate an underdevelopment of the key competence of communication in a foreign language. In order to improve upon this finding, it is recommended to intervene in the following areas:

- Instead of acquiring English language competence through long and theoretical explanations given in the learners' mother tongue, students should master their ability to establish active communication based on creating contextual situations from everyday life.
- Selection of content should be based on it strengthening the ability for oral and written expression of students' own views and opinions, as well as to support them with arguments.
- Promoting social interaction and mobility should be seen as an important aspect of becoming integrated into a "learning society," and also as an incentive to learn foreign languages.

In the upcoming period, research should focus on the various forms of learning that help students to develop their own initiative and aimed at enriching their knowledge in the field of foreign languages. This primarily refers to the use of digital technology, where learners not only develop the key competence of communication in a foreign language, but can also develop skills for self-assessment of their knowledge and abilities.

The government of Nigeria and all stakeholders in teacher education should provide additional hardware and software in order to allow for seamless electronic teaching and learning within all educational institutions.

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