Emphasis and limitations of teaching oral communication: an analysis of the Chilean curriculum based on its stated theoretical model

Énfasis y limitaciones de la enseñanza de la comunicación oral: un análisis del curriculum chileno, a partir del modelo teórico declarado

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Abstract

The Chilean curricular framework defines three main areas for teaching language and communication: writing, reading, and oral performance, which are supported by the communicative approach. The lack of literature review carried out on this topic reveals a lack of research relating to the coherence between the curriculum and the theoretical frameworks that support the teaching of this competence. This study reviews the study programmes that guide the teaching of oral communication in level two of elementary schools in Chile. To do so, each of the learning outcomes of these programmes was analysed and compared with theoretical categories from the communicative competence model. The results show that, while the design considers the different competences, there is still a lack of attention to the criteria of progression criteria and increasing complexity. This is reflected in the absence of systematic and well defined teaching strategies as well as the over representation of the expositive genre in the proposed strategies.

Keywords: Chilean curriculum, teaching oral skills, communicative approach, competences, elementary education.

Resumen

El marco curricular chileno define tres ejes de enseñanza en lenguaje y comunicación: escritura, lectura y oralidad, los cuales se sustentan en el enfoque comunicativo. La revisión bibliográfica realizada da cuenta de la escasez de investigaciones que indaguen la coherencia entre el curriculum y los marcos teóricos que sustentan la enseñanza de esta competencia. El presente trabajo examina los programas de estudio que orientan la enseñanza de la comunicación oral en el segundo ciclo básico, en el contexto chileno. Para

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ello, se analiza cada uno de los objetivos de aprendizaje de estos programas, contrastándolos con las categorías teóricas derivadas del modelo de competencia comunicativa. Los resultados evidencian que el diseño, pese a considerar las distintas competencias, desatiende los criterios de progresión y complejidad creciente. Esto se ve reflejado en la falta de dispositivos definidos y sistemáticos para la enseñanza, así como en la sobrerrepresentación del género expositivo en las estrategias propuestas.

Descriptores: Curriculum chileno, enseñanza de la oralidad, enfoque comunicativo, competencias, Educación Básica.

1. Introduction

Formal education has traditionally made space for the study and practice of oral discourses. A clear legacy of the classical era, this is common practice in educational institutions that value the ability to persuade an audience through speeches prepared in accordance with some type of accepted logic and almost entirely limited to formal settings where the existing norms of verbal courtesy and careful diction predominate. The scenario described here refers to the most common model of oral expression that has, with some minor variations, shaped both the curriculum and teaching practices throughout history. This is even more significant if we consider the fact that other socially important institutions such as parliament, churches, and the media, not only encouraged this model, but that saw themselves as the obvious settings for competent oral expression.

Both the model of the good orator (who is capable of persuading or convincing) and that of the good speaker (who has careful diction) started to lose importance towards the end of the twentieth century, very probably because of the media's rapidly growing coverage and, in particular, its interactive nature: suddenly, the radio and TV were full of ordinary unaffected voices; meanwhile, rhetoric gradually withdrew from public platforms. In parallel, communicative focuses, which were already extensively used in the teaching of second languages, spread to the teaching of the mother tongue, a trend which the Chilean national curriculum formally joined in the early 1990s. Similarly, since the start of the twenty-first century, we have been witness to the ubiquity of information technologies, making multimedia platforms accessible to anyone, and so the traditional filters concerning an ideal spoken performance have ceased to exist: nobody controls the diction of the speakers on these platforms or evaluates their rhetorical power. It is therefore unsurprising that there is a clear divide between what the school system attempts to teach and what actually happens in other spheres of social interaction.

Nonetheless, among specialists, the need to assume an active role in the development of oral communicative competences in the school system survives: "schools are obliged to provide their students with the common reference points of their

language that will allow them to integrate socially and professionally without needing to abandon their traditional customs" (Ruiz, 2000, p. 14). Agreeing with this vision, the Chilean national curriculum has identified oral communication as one of its main teaching areas, alongside reading and writing.

The challenge of developing oral communicative skills faces various difficulties, some of which are not easily resolved. One of these relates to knowledge of the basics of oral language, its nature, dynamics, and transcendent meaning beyond its practical use. Certainly, reflection on these topics does not have a sufficiently central place, instead being marginalised by the almost universal interest in written language. In a literate society, the expectation is that citizens will be are competent readers and writers, and so many of the efforts of public education policies focus on this objective, constrained by the permanent pressure of standardised tests, which not only exclude oral expression, but also restrict the field of communicative competence to a few functional applications.

Another limitation, largely resulting from the previous one, is the scarce specialised knowledge of oral language available in the field of pedagogy. Schools are required to take responsibility for developing the competences associated with oral expression, but they do not have the relevant, systematic, and applied knowledge that is required (Fernández, 2008; Pérez, 2009; Núñez & Hernández, 2011).

Along the same lines, there is a belief, among many teachers, that oral communication is a skill that develops naturally from early childhood and, so, does not require a systematic approach as it is sufficient to consolidate certain formal aspects (Garrán, 1999; Pérez, 2009). On top of this, there is a widespread perception among teachers that there is limited time available for the systematic teaching of these skills in the classroom and a lack of interest among students in absorbing new linguistic varieties that differ from those they bring from their own speech community (Pérez, 2009). This, to some extent, illustrates the limited recognition of a didactic identity for oral expression, which leads to an infrequent and intuitive treatment in teaching and learning.

Regarding the initial training of language students, Jover (2014) notes that teachers' lack of theoretical and methodological foundations is also a result of their professional training. Apparently, the academy does not supply the necessary tools for the contents or conceptual frameworks of the discipline to be taught effectively in the field of the teaching of oral communication. The incorporation of text and discourse linguistics, and of the sociolinguistic aspects implicated in the use of language in initial teacher training (language teachers) "has not, in most cases, been accompanied by practical experience in the teaching or oral skills" (Jover, 2014, p. 75).

2. Approaches to studies in oral expression

Considering the problems described above, a general overview of the studies

that consider oral communication is appropriate. The review of this field reveals three fields of production: reflections on oral communication, didactic proposals for teaching it, and research that examines related topics.

As for reflections, we find studies that cover topics relating to:

— The problems and tensions that teachers face when they decide to include oral communication teaching in their professional practice (Vila & Vila, 1994).

— The importance of the linguistic, textual, and pragmatic knowledge that the pupils bring from their families and sociocultural environments (Rodríguez, 1995).

— Teachers' ideas regarding the teaching of oral expression for intervention in and transformation of their practices (Gutiérrez, 2008).

— The contribution of information and communication technologies (ICT) to the process of teaching oral communication in the classroom (Guzmán, 2014).

For their part, among the publications that make proposals for teaching oral communication, ones with following focuses stand out:

— A didactic model for developing oral macro-skills (Núñez, 2002).

— Experiences for developing oral communicative competences, presented in their sociolinguistic, strategic, discursive, and linguistic components, based on classroom work with different discourse genres (Palou & Bosch, 2005).

— Didactic instruments for teaching oral language, based on specific communicative skills and strategies and basic rules of communicative interaction (Pérez, 2009).

— The development of text typologies, based on conversational exchange and the functioning of interruptions (Núñez & Hernández, 2011).

— Developing students' linguistic skills through three main areas: oral linguistic register, reflection through argument, and research (Vila & Comajoan, 2013).

— Proposals for teacher self-training in skills for teaching oral language, through educational research and the development of formative assessment projects (Gutiérrez, 2013).

Finally, among research pieces, there are ones that examine topics such as:

— Phases of communicative interaction in argumentative oral texts produced by students (Marinkovich, 2007; Salazar, 2008).

— The presence of grammatical strategies for expressing the evidential meaning in oral argumentative discussions (González & Lima, 2009).

— The difficulties and tensions that teachers report concerning oral expression as teaching object (Gutiérrez, 2012).

— The conversational mechanisms used by students in classroom activities from a sociocultural focus (García & Fabregat, 2013).

According to the review we performed, many the works agree on areas related to theoretical and methodological reflection

on oral communication, and on suggestions for teaching them. Without wishing to cast doubt on the importance of the information these sources provide, we believe it is necessary to have research that empirically studies the various problems that underlie the teaching and learning of this competence, as well as the focuses and beliefs that support the teaching of oral communication in the convergences and divergences between the curriculum and teaching practice regarding this competence and, as a necessity, in diagnoses that reveal the level of acquisition of this skill by the students.

Based on the overview described, this piece intends to examine the relationship between the Chilean national curriculum and the theoretical frameworks underpinning it. Specifically, we have undertaken to examine the study programmes that guide the teaching of oral communication in level two of elementary school (year 5 to year 8). To do so, we analyse each of the learning objectives of these programmes, comparing them with the theoretical categories derived from the communicative competence model.

The decision to focus on this teaching cycle, was because of its importance in the process of acquiring the oral and written production skills, that are supposed to be consolidated subsequently in secondary education.

3. Oral language in the context of communicative competences

The concept of competence in the field of language and communication studies has been the object of countless approaches, something explained by at least three reasons: 1) the fierce controversy that arose from the initial critique of Chomsky's perspective, recognised as the formal origin of the theoretical notion of competence in linguistics; 2) the impact of the reworking of the concept in the field of communication, sociology, pedagogy, and other human sciences; 3) the valuing of the linguistic and communicative component in the field of professional and workplace development, as it is an indispensable competence.

While this controversy has led to very different reworkings of Chomsky's position (Chomsky, 1965), it is useful to refer briefly to the importance of the identified critique. The postulation of a self-contained system (Taylor, 1989; Lakoff, 1991), that disregards the speech situation and virtually all pragmatic factors including, obviously, sociocultural variation, does not account for the skill set required to construct meanings and cannot ultimately explain how we communicate effectively (Raiter & Zullo, 2004). Generativist models of linguistic competence are, therefore, regarded as defective models of the social nature of language and communicative functions, and so functionalist and pragmatic trends appear as alternatives with more explanatory power, in accordance with epistemological definitions that contradict the Chomskyan approaches.

The tension between the notion of linguistic competence and the need to account for the set of phenomena at play in communication gives rise to critiques that are relevant to formal linguistic studies. For example, Lyons (1997), when establishing

the distinction between grammaticality and acceptability, draws attention to various phenomena that might mean that an utterance lacks acceptability for the listener, even though it fulfils the rules of construction. On the other hand, the "pragmatic turn" (Rorty, 1990; Wittgenstein, 2003), expressed especially in the pragmatics of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), contributes not only to the critique of the generative view, but also, in the field of applied linguistics, to the consolidation of communicative focuses in teaching, especially second language teaching.

At the start of the 1970s, D. H. Hymes started to define a concept of communicative competence, in other words, a type of knowledge that explains linguistic usage, beyond the sharing of syntactic rules. As well as proposing the integration of linguistic theory with a theory of communication and culture, Hymes (1971) discusses the distinction between the grammaticality, feasibility, and appropriateness of linguistic statements, from the perspective of the language users. Consequently, he believes that "competence" is the more general term for a broad set of human skills and that it includes both tacit knowledge and the skill to use it.

A sufficiently descriptive definition of communicative competence, based on these postulates, is the one provided by Niño Rojas:

> We understand communicative competence as knowing how to communicate in a field of knowledge and knowing how to apply it, abilities that comprise types of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (preconditions, criteria, customs, rules, norms, etcetera) that enable people to perform efficient communicative acts, in a given context, according to needs and aims. (Niño Rojas, 2011, p. 25).

Despite the reasonably generalised agreement on the extent and nature of this knowledge, the models proposed to describe, teach, and evaluate communicative competences differ in some categories. Bachman and Palmer (1996), for example, establish a distinction between organizational knowledge on the one hand, comprising a grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge, and on the other hand pragmatic knowledge. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell however (1995), propose a five-part model that includes linguistic, strategic, sociocultural, actional, and discourse competences.

In general, there is agreement on a type of competence relating to knowledge of the linguistic code; another referring to the strategic application of knowledge to be able to function in different communicative situations; and a competence relating to the knowledge of all the types of linguistic variation. These levels are already differentiated in Canale & Swain's postulate (1980), revised by Canale (1983), that aims to meet the challenges of teaching second languages. This model has been a clear reference point in its field, but its influence has also spread towards the promotion of the communicative focus for teaching students" first language. Therefore, its presence in the Chilean national curriculum is no surprise. The following list sets out the details of the competences considered in the curriculum framework for language teaching appears below:

1. Grammatical competences:

a. Linguistic competence: the capacity to handle the grammatical components of one's own language.

b. Discourse competence: the capacity to construct texts, both oral and written.

2. Pragmatic competences:

a. Functional or illocutionary competence: the ability to distinguish communicative intentions and aims.

b. Sociolinguistic competence: sociocultural in nature, this is the speaker's ability to distinguish the patterns of cultural appropriateness to the context, such as register and courtesy.

c. Strategic competence: this encompasses the appropriate use of persuasive strategies and formal choices to attenuate undesired effects (MINEDUC, 2009).

4. Oral communication in the national curriculum

Oral communication, along with writing and reading, is identified as one of the main areas of the Curriculum Framework and Study Programmes for elementary and intermediate teaching in Chile. In accordance with the foundations of the curriculum, oral language is considered to be "one of the main resources that students possess for learning and participating in the life of the community: through it, knowledge is shared and created jointly with others; in other words, it creates a shared culture" (Mineduc, 2012, p. 10). Consequently, the development of this competence is a crucial factor in the education of independent students who can share and build knowledge in a democratic society.

While it is true that the curriculum framework states the importance of oral communication by making it one of the three main areas identified by the programmes for studying language and communication, it also recognises that it is one of the areas with the greatest weaknesses in its theoretical and methodological treatment. In the classroom, the teaching of communication is reduced to unilateral transmission of knowledge by the teacher and verification of what the students know and understand by asking them questions, to the detriment of the development of communicative skills that promote the capacity for reflection and thought.

We will now present our analysis of the communicative competences in the oral communication part of the teaching objectives of the study programmes of the Chilean curriculum for years 5 to 8 of elementary schooling, in accordance with the proposal by Canale and Swain (1983) adapted by Mineduc (2009). This examination focusses on the conceptual and methodological treatment of each competence, and the emphases and the limitations.

4.1. Grammatical competence

4.1.1. Linguistic competence

The analysis of the objectives for years 5 to 8 regarding the development of oral expression, proves that linguistic competence is associated with the handling of structural elements from different levels

of language. Nonetheless, the prominent position of vocabulary teaching at all levels is apparent. With regards to this component, the continued acquisition of a varied, precise, and formal vocabulary is promoted to achieve the aim of clear and appropriate expression before an audience. Even in year 5, this structural component has a specific objective: "Incorporate relevantly in their oral interventions new vocabulary taken from texts that have been listened to or read" (Mineduc, 2012, p. 47). The importance given to vocabulary in the school setting might be based on the belief that "broad and precise handling of the lexicon guarantees the possession of sufficient communicative skills" (Núñez & Del Moral, 2010, p. 2); however, without ignoring its importance, it should be noted that this is another component of linguistic competence that must be integrated into the set of communicative skills.

As well as lexical development, grammar teaching is explicitly identified as one of the objectives examined. Grammatical content that focusses on the teaching of oral communication specifically relates to morphosyntactic aspects such as conjugating verbs correctly, using irregular participles correctly, and favouring varied syntactical constructions over familiar or colloquial ones, and with aspects relating to the coherence and cohesion of oral texts to achieve clear and effective expression. The concept of "correctness" appears in connection to grammar but not vocabulary or phonetic-phonological elements; however, their appropriateness the communicative context is expressly stated.

Another element that stands out in the development of this competence, at the declarative level, relates to the phonetic-phonological elements needed to develop clear and effective expression in oral speeches and presentations to an audience. Resources such as an audible volume, intonation, use of pauses and emphasis appropriate to the communicative situation, as well as clear pronunciation, are at all levels regarded as elements that influence and shape oral texts. In this regard, it would be important to know how teachers approach the teaching of these items or the development of these communicative skills in their students, as this requires the handling of disciplinary content that is specific to this linguistic level, and so its presence in initial teacher training would seem to be a necessity.

4.1.2. Discourse competence

This competence relates to how grammatical forms and meanings are combined to create a coherent spoken or written text in different genres (Canale, 1983).

This competence is the one that most often appears in study programmes, especially in years 5 and 6 of elementary school. This would indicate that their emphasis is placed on developing oral skills to construct successfully different text types in accordance with their particular features.

At these same levels, one of the main aims of the learning objectives related to this competence is the development of comprehension by reading a variety of texts: explanations, instructions, news, documentaries, interviews,

testimonies, stories, reports. The methodological proposals promote activities related to expressing orally or in writing an assessment of what is seen or heard in class, formulating questions, and giving well-grounded opinions. On the other hand, in years 7 and 8 there is no increased variation in the text types used, but there is in the objective they pursue, given that comparison and evaluation of what these texts say are added to comprehension.

While gradual changes to the teaching objectives can be seen, there is no greater variation in the treatment given to the different text types. They are viewed as a means for developing comprehension or other skills. It is apparently taken for granted that students can handle key aspects for understanding a given text, such as reconstructing its structure and the regular features that comprise it as such.

For its part, the production of oral texts principally focusses on oral presentations at all of these levels, with activities intended to highlight discourse aspects such as the structure of the presentation, and coherence and cohesion when presenting. However, methodological suggestions are not given, nor are prior activities proposed to underpin these aspects, something that again assumes knowledge on the part of the student that makes it possible for them to identify the rules that shape them.

Another skill that is present in the learning objectives is debating. Students are expected to discuss ideas and seek agreements, activities that are part of debating.

4.2. Pragmatic competence

4.2.1. Functional competence

Also called illocutionary competence, this is defined as the capacity to distinguish communicative intentions and objectives. In accordance with this distinction, our analysis of the learning objectives reveals the scant concern for this dimension of pragmatic competence. One of the year-6 learning objectives includes as content the issuer's intention in advertising messages, something that appears to be directly linked to this competence; however, the prior knowledge that might support this explanation is not specified in the curriculum for this level or in the curriculum for year 5, where we do not find explicit statements relating to this competence. In years 7 and 8, there are stated objectives relating to comprehension and evaluation skills, that involve argumentative practices, favouring the distinction between facts and opinions. Insofar as this skill of assigning an argumentative value to a statement involves the relationship with a point of view maintained by a person (or author), we assume that it contributes, albeit to a limited extent, to developing the functional competence according to which recognition of intentions is a requirement for thorough comprehension of messages.

4.2.2. Strategic competence

This competence involves the command of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that can be used for two purposes, principally: (a) compensating for failures in communication owing to limiting conditions in real communication (for example, the temporary inability to

recall an idea or a grammatical form) or insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence; and (b) facilitating the effectiveness of communication, for example, intentionally speaking slowly and quietly with a rhetorical purpose (Canale, 1983).

At all levels learning objectives are specified that are linked to the strategic competence. Among the ones that develop oral expressive capacity, activities stand out that favour declamation, performance, exposition, and debating. The strategies promoted here relate to the appropriate use of paraverbal and nonverbal language, such as intonation, volume, gestures, and using space.

In the case of debating, students express agreements and disagreements, based on arguments, they question stated opinions, they negotiate agreements with their interlocutors; however, it is not specified what strategies the students should develop, for example to avoid unwanted effects on the interlocutor.

In years 7 and 8, plays and films are used to analyse the effect on the audience of paraverbal elements, such as change in tone of voice, sound effects, music, among others.

4.2.3. Sociolinguistic competences

Our analysis of the learning objectives for years 5 to 8 shows that this linguistic competence is principally associated with the handling of the more prestigious and formal uses and registers, along with the progressive use of politeness formulas. Specifically, the stated intention of the objectives is for students to achieve improved formal oral expression in the school setting, progressing from familiar and spontaneous uses to more formal uses and registers, with the aim of achieving effective and contextualised communication. So, over different levels the requirement is promoted for students to interact in accordance with social conventions in different communicative situations and develop the capacity to express themselves clearly and effectively in oral presentations, displaying command of the different registers and using them in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

When it is intended that the student will be able to use consciously the elements that influence and shape oral texts, and command and appropriately use different registers, the focus is on the pupils' capacity to reflect on their communicative instrument as a form of social performance. This should result in the abandonment of the prescriptivist trend we see, for example, in the teaching of grammar where the focus is on what is and is not correct. This way, it is possible to advance in showing pupils what is and is not appropriate, according to the communicative context, as one of the functions of school is to expose students to different language-use situations to allow them to reflect on alternative and more socially prestigious speech formats so that they can function in wider and more formal contexts (Rodríguez, 1995).

5. Conclusions

As has been stated by various authors, the challenge of teaching and acquiring oral communication skills at school is

complex for several reasons. Teachers do not have sufficient theoretical or methodological tools to teach these skills competently in the classroom. Furthermore, the widely-held belief that this is an innate competence, that consequently does not require systematic planning and treatment, means teaching is limited to certain formal aspects.

The Chilean curricular framework is clear in defining three main teaching areas in language and communication (reading, writing, and oral expression), which are presented with equal status and the same communicative teaching focus. However, this claim of balance is undermined, when we find that the main emphasis is on the areas of reading and writing, to the detriment of oral expression. This is the conclusion reached when we examine learning objectives in detail and note a weak systematisation of the content and its use in the area of oral expression. For example, in the case of writing, both the teaching model and the methodological strategies are clearly presented in the framework of what is known as "process writing". This clarity, applied to oral expression, might contribute to a more robust adoption, as the teacher would have more defined and systematic teaching instruments. In contrast, in the area of oral expression we find no curriculum elements that guide its teaching in an equivalent direction. This situation evidently contradicts the normative framework, when it states that the development of oral competences is the foundation of the other competences.

Regarding the specific analysis of the level-two study programmes, we can see that each oral communicative competence is represented in the teaching objectives except for the functional competence, to which we found no explicit references in year 5 of elementary school. This illustrates how comprehension of intentions and communicative objectives, elements of this particular competence, do not seem to be preferred subject matter at this teaching level.

The competence that is most apparent in the general overview is discourse, essentially understood in a structural sense, deriving from the grammar of the text, specifically the basic notions of coherence and cohesion. As for knowledge and command of the linguistic code, vocabulary has a prominent position in the specified learning objectives, especially in years 5 and 6. Nonetheless, this higher profile than the other components of linguistic competence (phonology, morpho-syntax) is not based on a didactic proposal that guarantees it will make an effective contribution to the development of the oral communicative competence. Indeed, its restriction to the structural level of language impedes the planning of appropriate development of communicative competences in the broad sense of the proposed model.

One important feature of the communicative focus is its aim to consider the different communication situations that the speaker must face. At the methodological level, this involves internalising multiple discursive genres. In effect, a variety of genres are identified in the curriculum proposal, including monologic, dialogic and multimodal ones; however, most of the production processes are realised

through expository texts, as well as this being the favoured medium for evaluating oral communication skills. The other genres are, in general, regarded as means for demonstrating comprehension of the textual content.

Finally, an overall evaluation of the curriculum proposal for the area of oral expression reveals a lack of focus on the criteria of progression and growing complexity in meeting the stated objectives, something that is probably explained by the lack of an organised structure that articulates the theoretical and methodological knowledge specific to the oral competences to ensure adoption of the model by the teacher and its subsequent transposition into the classroom.

Based on the preceding analysis, we have identified some of the general challenges for teaching oral communication in the context of the competences identified in the study programmes for years 5 to 8 of elementary school.

TABLE 1. Challenges for teaching Oral Communication.

Grammatical Competence		**Pragmatic Competence**		
Linguistic Competence	**Discourse Competence**	**Functional Competence**	**Strategic Competence**	**Sociolinguistic Competence**
Incorporate vocabulary in the most balanced way, along with the other levels of the language. Integrate the units and levels of the language in the framework of a communicative teaching perspective.	Apply a relevant methodological and evaluation instrument for the systematic treatment of discourse genres.	Incorporate this competence explicitly, at least from year 5 in elementary school and consider communicative objectives, beyond the argumentative functions that predominate in the study programmes.	Guide the development of the skills and attitudes to various types of communicative interactions, considering both the role of the speaker and of the listener.	Value the diverse linguistic varieties that the students bring and integrate them into the teaching of the standard language.

Source: Own elaboration.

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