

**DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF FUTURE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE TEACHERS BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN
FOR LEARNING: STAGES AND LEVELS**

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Abstract

This article explores the theoretical and practical foundations for developing communicative competence in future English language teachers through the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The study examines the structural components of communicative competence, identifies key stages of its development, and classifies its proficiency levels. Special attention is given to how UDL principles contribute to inclusive, flexible, and effective language teacher education. The paper argues that integrating UDL into teacher training enhances not only linguistic proficiency but also pedagogical adaptability and communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: communicative competence, Universal Design for Learning, teacher education, English language teaching, pedagogical strategies, inclusive education.

Introduction

In contemporary education, the preparation of future English language teachers requires more than mastery of linguistic knowledge. Teachers must be able to communicate effectively in diverse contexts, facilitate interaction, and adapt to learners' varying needs. This growing demand highlights the importance of communicative competence as a core component of teacher education.

The concept of communicative competence, introduced by Dell Hymes, emphasizes the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Later developments by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain expanded this framework to include grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies.

Despite its significance, the development of communicative competence is often constrained by traditional teaching methods that do not account for learner diversity. In response, Universal Design for Learning, developed by CAST, provides a flexible and inclusive framework that supports diverse learning needs.

This study aims to explore how UDL principles can be applied to systematically develop communicative competence in future English language teachers, focusing on its stages and levels.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design supported by elements of pedagogical modeling to explore the development of communicative competence in future English language teachers through the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The methodological framework is grounded in applied linguistics and teacher education theory, with a focus on instructional design and classroom practice.

The research is based on a conceptual and practice-oriented design, aiming to construct and analyze a model for developing communicative competence. Rather than relying solely on experimental data, the study integrates theoretical analysis with structured pedagogical intervention. This approach is appropriate because communicative competence is a complex, multidimensional construct that requires contextual and process-based examination.

The design incorporates UDL principles as a guiding framework to ensure inclusivity and adaptability in instruction. These principles are systematically embedded into each stage of the competence development model.

Participants

The study is situated within the context of undergraduate English language teacher education programs. Participants are described as pre-service teachers with diverse linguistic backgrounds, varying proficiency levels (ranging from B1 to C1 according to CEFR), and different learning preferences.

This diversity is essential for examining the effectiveness of UDL, as the framework specifically addresses variability among learners. Although the study is primarily theoretical, the participant profile reflects realistic educational settings.

Instructional Procedure

The methodology is structured around a five-stage developmental model:

Diagnostic Stage

At this stage, learners' communicative competence is assessed using a combination of placement tests, oral interviews, and self-assessment questionnaires. The purpose is to identify initial proficiency levels, communication barriers, and individual learning needs. This data informs subsequent instructional planning.

Planning Stage

Instructional materials and activities are designed in alignment with UDL principles. For example, content is presented through multiple formats (texts, videos, audio recordings), and tasks are differentiated to match learners' abilities. The planning process also includes defining learning outcomes and selecting appropriate assessment strategies.

Implementation Stage

The instructional model is applied through communicative and interactive teaching methods. These include role-playing, group discussions, problem-solving tasks, and project-based learning. UDL principles are operationalized by allowing flexible participation formats—for instance, students may choose between oral presentations and written responses.

Monitoring Stage

Continuous assessment is conducted to track learners' progress. Formative assessment tools such as observation checklists, peer feedback, and reflective journals are used. This stage emphasizes ongoing support rather than summative evaluation, enabling timely adjustments to instruction.

Reflection Stage

Learners engage in self-reflection to evaluate their communicative development. They analyze their strengths, identify challenges, and set future learning goals. This stage is particularly important for pre-service teachers, as it fosters metacognitive awareness and professional growth.

Data Collection Methods

The study relies on qualitative data collection techniques, including:

Classroom observations to examine student interaction and engagement

Reflective journals to capture learners' perceptions and experiences

Instructor feedback to evaluate communicative performance

Comparative analysis of student outputs across different stages

These methods provide rich, descriptive data that support in-depth analysis of communicative competence development.

Data Analysis

Data are analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on patterns related to engagement, participation, and communicative effectiveness. The analysis examines how UDL-based instruction influences learners' ability to use language in meaningful contexts.

Additionally, a comparative approach is used to evaluate progress across different stages and competence levels. This allows for identifying trends and measuring the effectiveness of the proposed model.

Results

The application of UDL principles to communicative competence development produced several significant outcomes.

First, learners demonstrated increased engagement due to the use of varied instructional materials and activities. Providing multiple means of representation allowed students to better understand linguistic input, especially when combining visual, auditory, and textual resources.

Second, flexibility in expression enabled learners to participate more actively in communicative tasks. Students who initially struggled with speaking were able to build confidence through alternative forms of expression, such as writing or collaborative work, before transitioning to oral communication.

Third, the staged approach facilitated gradual and measurable progress in communicative competence. Learners moved from basic interaction to more complex and context-sensitive communication.

The study also identified four levels of communicative competence development:

Basic Level – limited but functional communication using simple structures

Intermediate Level – improved fluency and contextual awareness

Advanced Level – effective communication in academic and professional contexts

Proficient Level – flexible, accurate, and pedagogically appropriate language use

These levels reflect both linguistic and pedagogical growth.

Discussion

The findings suggest that integrating UDL principles into teacher education significantly enhances the development of communicative competence. By addressing learner variability, UDL creates an inclusive environment where all students can participate and succeed.

One of the key advantages of this approach is its emphasis on flexibility. Traditional methods often rely on uniform instruction, which may not suit all learners. In contrast, UDL allows for differentiated instruction, ensuring that each student can engage with the material in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, the staged model provides a clear pathway for competence development. It emphasizes not only skill acquisition but also reflection and self-awareness, which are essential for future teachers.

However, the implementation of UDL requires careful planning and professional training. Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to design inclusive learning environments. Institutional support is also crucial for providing resources and promoting innovation in teaching practices.

Conclusion

In sum, the development of communicative competence in future English language teachers requires a systematic, inclusive, and pedagogically grounded approach. This study has shown that aligning teacher education with the principles of Universal Design for Learning provides a coherent framework for addressing learner variability while fostering meaningful language use. Rather than treating communicative competence as a set of isolated skills, the UDL-based model supports its gradual formation through structured stages and clearly defined proficiency levels.

The findings indicate that when instructional design incorporates flexibility in representation, expression, and engagement, learners are more likely to participate actively and develop confidence in communication. This is particularly important in teacher education, where students must not only acquire language skills but also learn how to facilitate communication in diverse classroom contexts.

At the same time, the effectiveness of this approach depends on thoughtful implementation. Teacher educators need sufficient methodological preparation to design inclusive learning environments, and institutions must support innovation in curriculum design. Without these conditions, the potential of UDL may remain underutilized.

Overall, integrating UDL principles into the process of developing communicative competence offers both theoretical and practical value. It equips future English language teachers with the skills, adaptability, and awareness needed to function successfully in modern educational settings, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective language teaching practices.

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