

STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract. Communicative competence is the ability to send messages which promote attainment of goals while maintaining social acceptability. Competent communicators attempt to align themselves with each others goals and methods to produce a smooth, productive and often enjoyable dialogue. The aim of this research was to investigate self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC) of students of Engineering Management in General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). A longitudinal study was carried out starting with the first year students at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad and was repeated with the same sample of students during their second and third year of study. Participation was voluntary and took place during regular class time. The measure of communicative competence employed was the Self-perceived Communication Competence Scale. The results of the study indicated that differences in SPCC between the years do exist. The SPCC gradually improved between the first, the second and the third year. The research was also motivated by gaining better overview of the teaching activity. An anonymous questionnaire provided many useful hints and ideas for further work and thus, language teacher made a thorough analysis of the overall teaching procedure. However, it is essential to get some feedback and talk to students in order to evaluate both them and ourselves as well as the teaching syllabus.

Key words: communicative competence, self-perception, teaching ESP.

Introduction

A communicative approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as "communicative competence". Hymes coins this term in order to contrast a communicative view of language and Chomsky's theory of competence. Chomsky held that linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance (Chomsky, 1965: 3).

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For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in language. Hymes held that such a view of linguistic theory was sterile, that linguist theory needed to be seen as part of a more general theory incorporating communication and culture. Hymes theory of communicative competence was a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes view (1972: 281) a person/student who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability/skill for language use with respect to:

- whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
- whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
- whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
- whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

Another linguistic theory of communication is Halliday's functional account of language use. "Linguistics... is concerned... with the description of speech acts or texts, since only through the study of language in use are all the functions of language, and therefore all components of meaning, brought into focus" (Halliday, 1970: 145). In a number of influential books and papers, Halliday has elaborated a powerful theory of the functions of language, which complements Hymes's view of communicative competence for many writers on Communicative Language Teaching (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979; Savignon, 1983). He described (1975: 11-17) seven basic functions that language performs for a person learning his first language:

- the instrumental function: using language to get things;
- the regulatory function: using language to control the behaviour of others;
- the interactional function: using language to create interaction with others;
- the personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings;
- the heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover;
- the imaginative function: using language to create a world of the imagination;
- the representational function: using language to communicate information.

Learning a second language or Language for Specific Purposes is similarly viewed as acquiring the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions. Canale and Swain are also frequently cited for their views in the communicative nature of language and they presented a view of the relationship between linguistic systems and their communicative values in the ability to use language for different purposes. They identified four dimensions of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. *Grammatical competence* refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intends by what is “formally possible”. It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants and the communicative purpose for their interaction. *Discourse competence* refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. *Strategic competence* refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication.

At the level of language theory, Communicative Language Teaching has a rich, if somewhat eclectic, theoretical base. Some of the characteristics of this communicative view of language follow.

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

Communication is also a strategic procedure as much as it is goal-driven. Craig (1999: 272) says, “it would be pointless not to assume that discourse is in some sense and to some degree intentionally directed toward goals.” This perspective is shared by many prominent communication researchers (Berger, 1995; Canary & Cody, 2000; Kellermann, 1992; Roloff, Soule & Carey, 2001).

But the question is how do we know if communication is competent? Initially, Spitzberg (1988: 68) defined communication competence as “the ability to interact well with others”. He explains, “the term 'well' refers to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness.” A much more complete definition is provided by Phillips

(2000) when he suggests that communication competence is best understood as “a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances.” Thus, communicative competence is measured by determining if, and to what degree, the goals of interaction are achieved. As stated earlier, the function of communication is to maximize the achievement of shared meaning. Canary and Cody (2000) provide six criteria for assessing competence which include, but are not limited to, perceived appropriateness and effectiveness. The criteria include:

- Adaptability (the ability to change behaviours and goals to meet the needs of interaction).
- Conversational Involvement (behavioural and cognitive activity, cognitive involvement demonstrated through interaction behaviours, assessed according to responsiveness, perceptiveness, attentiveness).
- Conversational Management (how communicators regulate their interactions, adaptation and control of social situations, who controls the interaction ebb and flow and how smoothly the interaction proceeds, how topics proceed and change).
- Empathy (the ability to demonstrate understanding and share emotional reactions to the situation, need not lead to “helping” the other person’s cognitive understanding; parallel emotions).
- Effectiveness (achieving the objectives of the conversation, achieving personal goals, a fundamental criteria for determining competence).
- Appropriateness (upholding the expectations for a given situation, fundamental criteria for determining competence).

According to Canary and Cody (2000) communicative competence is the ability to send messages which promote attainment of goals while maintaining social acceptability. Competent communicators attempt to align themselves with each others goals and methods to produce a smooth, productive and often enjoyable dialogue. The aim of our research was to investigate the self- perceived communicative competence of students learning General English and English for Specific Purposes during the first, the second and the third year of their studies.

A communicative syllabus for english courses

Students at Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad require English for certain very specific purposes. The English courses at the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management comprise both General English and ESP oriented subject-matter (Šafranj, 2005: 740). As such, they make heavy

demands on the students, so, in time they gain knowledge of the language of scientific discourse and an awareness of General English as well.

Since the first year students start the English course with different level of prior knowledge, it was decided that they learn General English at pre-intermediate level with four hours per week. The level of students' language knowledge raised and adjusted at the end of the school year. According to the language syllabus General English was taught at the second year as well, but teaching material included some subject-matter of relevant technical and engineering subjects at intermediate level. The course was taught with four hours per week. It was organised and conducted at the same way as it was at the previous year of study. Finally, at the third year of study, students took up an ESP course. The language course syllabus was ESP oriented and subject specific at the same time, as it included Business English and subject-matter of different technical subjects. The course was taught with four hours per week.

Since the groups were up to 50-60 students, large classes were not very appropriate for effective language learning, but they created an atmosphere challenging for the teacher and students as well. Even if the classroom was well equipped and full of students willing to learn, we still had to cope with limited resources and there was little time we could devote to each student and therefore, it was absolutely necessary to introduce pair and group work. Working in adjacent pairs was our common practice since students have grown used to it and expected it very often. It was used for vocabulary/comprehension sections and information gap exercises, sometimes for structure drills and new grammar. However, it had both advantages and disadvantages. Not many students could be controlled while they were engaged in pairwork and there was no full feedback before pairwork had ended. On the other hand, pairwork allowed the students to use language freely and increased the amount of student practice. We have also noticed that students became very co-operative and willing to help their peers only about a month after the beginning of the course. Groupwork faced exactly the same obstacles. The number of groups and of people in them depended on the number of students present, which was between 6 and 9 people in a group. We have noticed that groupwork provided more people to react with and it increased the amount of student talking time. Even if they did not use English whenever they were asked to, they at least had to activate their knowledge in order to complete the tasks set. Giving instructions was facilitated: if working individually, some students were likely to misunderstand the instructions and failed to do their tasks properly. At the same time, it also built self-confidence and created better relationships between group members and in

the whole class. Since groups could not be formed according to abilities, there were always some weak and shy students in each group, which gave them more opportunity for practicing the language freely. Our groups did not always have leaders, because such an environment gave every member enough opportunity to express themselves, made a "democratic" atmosphere and there was no pressure. Monitoring groups was again a problem, but they were welcome to get any help they needed.

Methods

A longitudinal study was carried out on a total of 106 subjects (57 females and 49 males). The research started with the sample of 162 students, who were attending the first year of Faculty, but gradually, during the years, the number of students diminished and 106 students enrolled the third year of studying. Participation was voluntary and took place during regular class time.

The starting point of the research was to propose a testable hypothesis which concerns self-perceived communication competence. It predicts that students will develop their communicative competence over a period of three years learning General English and English for Specific Purposes according to the stated syllabi. Thus, they will be aware of improved language performance which positively correlates with their communicative competence. Instruments were completed with no personal identification (except sex and code) to insure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses. The measure of communication competence employed was the *Self-perceived Communication Competence Scale* (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). It was developed to obtain information concerning how competent people feel they are in a variety of communication contexts and with a variety of types of receivers. Early self-report measures of competence were structured to represent what the creators of the measures felt were the components of communication competence. This scale is intended to let the respondent define communication competence. Since people make decisions with regard to communication (for example, whether they will even do it), it is their perception that is important, not that of an outside observer. It is important that users of this measure recognize that this is *not* a measure of actual communication competence, it is a measure of *perceived* competence. While these two different types of measures may be substantially correlated, they are not the same thing. This measure has generated good alpha reliability estimates (above .85) and had strong face validity. It also has been found to have substantial predictive validity.

The scale comprises twelve situations in which people might need to communicate. People's abilities to communicate effectively vary a lot, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another. Therefore, the examinee is asked to indicate how competent he believes to be while communicating in each of the situations described. Self-competence has been evaluated from 0 (completely incompetent) to 100 (competent). The items are the following: (1) Present a talk to a group of strangers; (2) Talk with an acquaintance; (3) Talk in a large meeting of friends; (4) Talk in a small group of strangers; (5) Talk with a friend; (6) Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances; (7) Talk with a stranger; (8) Present a talk to a group of friends; (9) Talk in a small group of acquaintances; (10) Talk in a large meeting of strangers; (11) Talk in a small group of friends; (12) Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

Higher SPCC scores indicate higher self-perceived communication competence with basic communication contexts (public, meeting, group, dyad) and receivers (strangers, acquaintance, friend). In earlier studies, internal (alpha) reliability estimates of .92 (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988) and .93 (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990) have been observed. Scores above 85 indicate high SPCC; scores below 59 indicate low SPCC. The reliability of the scale in this investigation is .83 and the results from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The difference between communication competences among the years was investigated by paired T-tests.

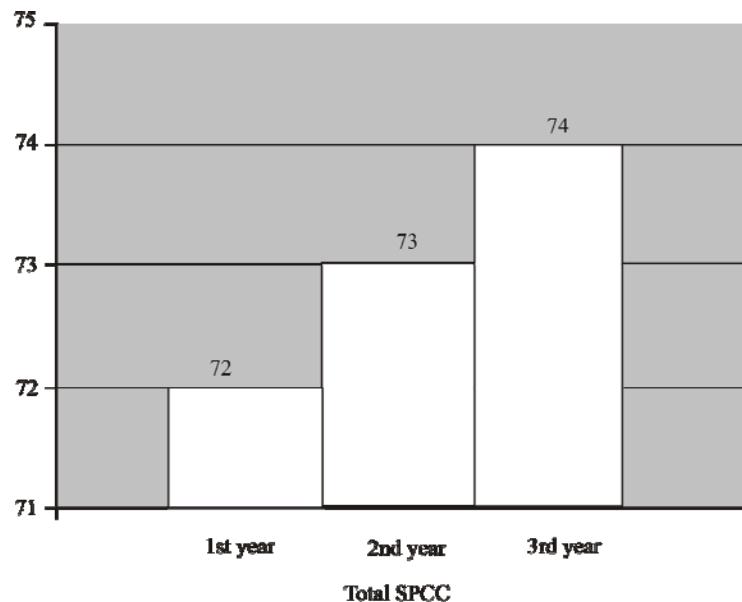
Results and discussion

As it was stated before, communicative competence is how well people interact with others (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Hargie *et al.*, 1998; Rubin, 1991). There are appropriate behaviours that are more effective in certain situations. Competence has to do with knowing these behaviours, when to use them and actually using them. During the General English and ESP classes students learn to apply communication skills of listening, perception, language usage, nonverbal communication competence and conflict resolution. Emphasis is placed on effective communication and methods for overcoming barriers to communication, specially during presentations, meetings and negotiations.

An examination of the data reported in Table 1 indicates large differences in mean scores among the years studied.

Table 1: Mean scores by years

| Measures | Range | 1 st year | 2 nd year | 3 rd year |
|--------------|---------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Public | Q = 100 | 48 | 56 | 68 |
| Meeting | Q = 100 | 46 | 51 | 58 |
| Group | Q = 100 | 53 | 60 | 70 |
| Dyad | Q = 100 | 62 | 67 | 70 |
| Stranger | Q = 100 | 72 | 71 | 73 |
| Acquaintance | Q = 100 | 67 | 69 | 72 |
| Friend | Q = 100 | 84 | 86 | 87 |
| Total SPCC | Q = 100 | 73 | 74 | 75 |

Graph 1: SPCC – total scores

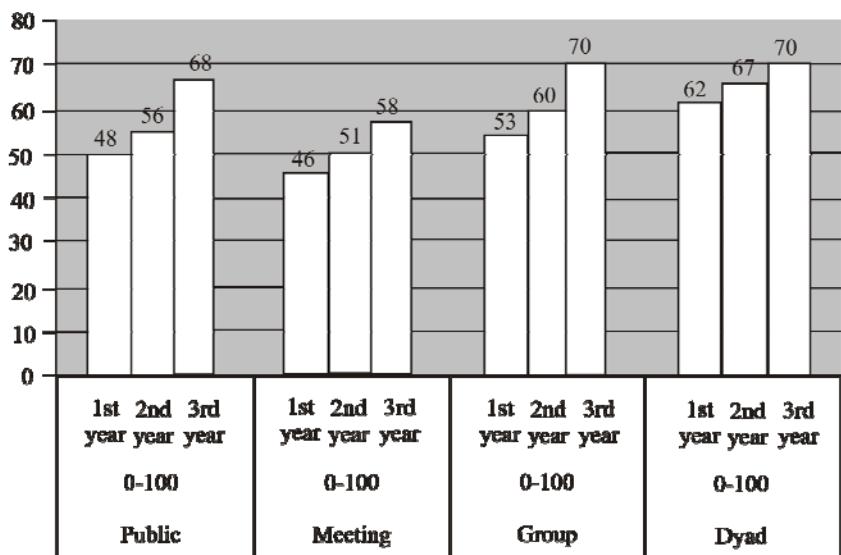
Norms for SPCC scores: > 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

With regard to the total SPCC scores it could be concluded that our students believe that their communicative competence is medium. In the third year the SPCC is higher than it was in the first and second. The third year students reported the highest communicative competence while the first year students reported the lowest (Graph 1).

We wanted to investigate the difference in communicative competence among the years and that is why a paired t-tests was applied. A paired samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference

between the years. Second year students SPCC was significantly higher than the first year students ($t_{(106)} = 5.725$; $p < .001$). Third year students SPCC was significantly higher than the second year students ($t_{(106)} = 10.315$; $p < .001$). Third year students was significantly higher than the first year students ($t_{(106)} = 15.749$; $p < .001$).

Graph 2: SPCC – four communicational contexts

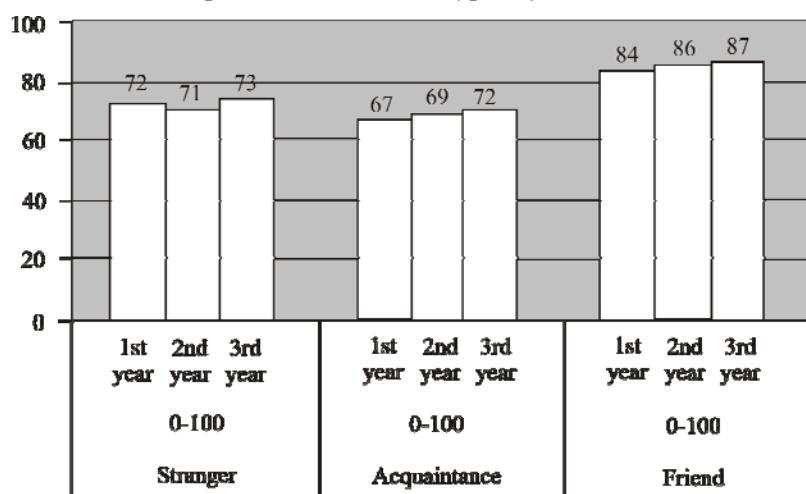


Norms for SPCC scores: > 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

From the Graph 2 it is obvious that the third year students believe they are more competent to communicate in all four communicational contexts in comparison with the results acquired two and three years ago. For all students talking in large meetings drew the least self-perceived communication competence while talking in a dyad the most. Thus, first year students reported low SPCC for public talking, talking in a meeting and group talking and medium SPCC in talking in a dyad. Only the first year students reported low SPCC for group talking. The primary goal of small group communication is to share meaning which leads to effective decision-making and problem-solving. Sorensen (1981) coined the term group hate to describe how many people hate working in groups. She showed a direct relationship between group hate and communicative competence. Furthermore, most people are not trained in group work. When people lack the training and skills to function competently, they tend to avoid group membership. The

results show that after learning to apply communicational skills our students, already in the second year, reported medium SPCC for group talking. Although second year students believe that they are not competent in talking in large meetings and public speaking, they believe that they may communicate in a group and talking in a dyad. Third year students reported medium SPCC for all communicational situations except for talking in meetings where they reported low SPCC.

Graph 3: SPCC – three types of receivers



Norms for SPCC scores: > 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

According to the results presented in the Graph 3, nowadays our students believe that they are more competent to communicate than two and three years ago. All students reported a generally medium SPCC for talking to strangers and acquaintances, but high SPCC for talking to friends. It is interesting that students reported higher SPCC for talking to strangers than acquaintances. The previous research (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990; Baraciough, Christophe & McCroskey, 1998) reported different results. They reported low SPCC for talking to strangers. Apart from raising language fluency through classroom activities, we assume that our students reported rather high SPCC for talking to strangers because of frequent contact with them. Nowdays, many students travel abroad, specially to USA, and work or learn English for several months during summer months, so they have a good opportunity to practice language skills in different surroundings and

speak with native speakers. The majority of students work as waiters, pool guards, tourist animators and in that way they practice their English, too.

Conclusions

Examination of the data reported in the paper and graphs indicates large differences in mean scores among the years studied. The proposed hypothesis at the beginning of the research was confirmed by the obtained results. Students have successfully developed their communicative competence over a period of three years learning General English and English for Specific Purposes according to the stated syllabi, and they are aware of improved language performance which positively correlates with their communicative competence. According to the norms from the SPCC scores our students believe that their communicative competence is medium. They reported the higher communicative competence for talking with friends and lower for talking in meetings. When one speaks a language that is not his first language, it is likely that he will see himself as less competent as a communicator. Their SPCC gradually improved, the lowest was in the first year and the highest in the third.

The stated objective of the courses and syllabi, which were appropriately designed according to the desired outcome and followed over a period of three years, was to equip Engineering Management undergraduates with four language skills necessary to develop language fluency and thus, communicate effectively in their chosen professions. The communicative course meant realising learning aims by crucial teaching skills such as:

- setting up interactive and functional activities,
- monitoring activities,
- giving positive and negative feedback,
- correcting errors,
- developing students' self-monitoring and self-evaluating abilities,
- motivating, raising and sustaining students' interests.

In our opinion a good language teacher should make a thorough analysis of the overall teaching activity. However, it is essential to get some feedback and talk to students in order to evaluate both them and ourselves as well as the teaching syllabus. An anonymous questionnaire can give many useful hints and ideas for further work. It is likely to provide objective answers since students are not required to reveal their names and know that there will be no consequences whatever they have written. Even a seemingly insignificant remark should be taken into account and carefully analyzed or discussed with colleagues.

Testing students' knowledge is another valuable source of information. Their knowledge can be checked virtually every day. Apart from occasional tests or mock exams, keeping a permanent progress record is very useful. A simple checklist can be more than helpful for this task. Simplified interviews aimed at eliciting certain structures and/or vocabulary test both their speaking and comprehension. These interviews must be carefully directed and notes should be unobtrusively taken so as to avoid the pressure which might arise. Students whose progress is more closely monitored should be regular and of different linguistic abilities. It is easier to monitor weaker students, since their English always requires "corrections" and constant effort to improve their knowledge. A discussion about the syllabus and its requirements can sometimes be more successful than we expect. We were more than surprised to hear some students' comments about their own knowledge and "blanks" in it. After a short debate about the necessity of grammar in language learning, some students said they had problems with certain verb forms (conditionals, perfect forms) and articles. The students are fully aware of the fact that they do not exchange data – they understand information. They believe that communication process is about "sharing meaning" and prefer to define communication as the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning. However, the study has some limitations. SPCC is a self-assessment of competence. The danger of self-assessments is that the relationship between actual competence and self-perceived competence is dubious. Some people have very accurate perceptions of themselves. Others do not. Just as some people believe they are better at communication than they actually are, some believe they are worse. Students who suffer from high levels of communication anxiety tend to report that they are poor communicators. Some are; just as many actually are not. Students' abilities to communicate effectively vary a great deal, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another. Many people are highly critical of their own public speaking performances. They may believe that the speech they just gave was poor, they stuttered, stammered, shook and knocked their knees together. However, to an audience, all of their "mistakes" seemed rather natural and may have gone unnoticed by everyone except the speaker.

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Јелисавета Шафрањ
КОМУНИКАТИВНА КОМПЕТЕНЦИЈА СТУДЕНТА
Апстракт

Комуникативна компетенција је способност генерисања порука са одређеним циљем како би се успоставила успешна комуникација саговорника. Компетентан саговорник усклађује своје поруке са комуникативним циљем саговорника и при томе гради пријатан и продуктиван дијалог. Циљ овог истраживања је самопроцена комуникативне компетенције студената Инжењерског менаџмента при употреби општег енглеског језика и енглеског језика за посебне намене. Сходно томе, спроведено је линеарно истраживање са студентима прве године на Факултету техничких наука у Новом Саду које смо поновили са истим узорком током друге и треће године студија. Учешће студента је било добровољно, а упитник је попуњаван на предавању. Комуникативна компетенција је оцењена Скалом за самопроцену комуникативне компетенције. Резултати истраживања указују да постоје разлике у самопроцени комуникативне компетенције и она се постепено повећавала током година учења страног језика. Истраживање је такође спроведено са циљем бољег увида у наставни процес. На основу анонимног упитника дошло се до корисних запажања и идеја за даљи рад са студентима с обзиром да је наставник могао боље да сагледа и анализира наставни процес. Веома је важно добити повратну информацију од студената да би се реалније оценио њихов рад, ангажовање наставника у наставном процесу и наставни програм.

Кључне речи: комуникативна компетенција, самопроцена, енглески језик за посебне намене.

Елизавета Шафрань
КОММУНИКАТИВНАЯ КОМПЕТЕНЦИЯ СТУДЕНТОВ
Резюме

Коммуникативная компетенция представляет способность генерирования сообщений с целью установления успешного общения между коммуникантами. Компетентный собеседник приспособливает свои сообщения к коммуникативной цели собеседника и при этом конструирует приятный и продуктивный диалог. Цель данного исследования – выявить самооценку коммуникативной компетенции студентов Отделения управления Факультета технических наук в Нови-Саде при употреблении английского языка как языка специальности и в других сферах общения. Автором проведен линейный опрос студентов первого курса, который повторен на том же корпусе испытуемых на втором и третьем году обучения. Участие студентов в опросе базировалось на добровольных началах, а вопросник заполнялся на занятиях. Коммуникативная компетенция оценивалась на основании Шкалы самооценки коммуникативной компетенции. Результаты исследования указывают на наличие отличий в самооценке коммуникативной компетенции, которая постепенно повышалась по мере изучения иностранного языка. Исследование также дало возможность более углубленного рассмотрения учебного процесса. На основании анонимного вопросника, обеспечивающего более объективное рассмотрение и анализ учебного

процесса преподавателями, автор пришел к полезным выводам и идеям о дальнейшей работе со студентами. В заключении подчеркивается важность получения обратной информации от студентов в целях более объективной оценки учебной деятельности студентов, усилий преподавателей и учебных программ.
Ключевые слова: коммуникативная компетенция, самооценка, английский как язык специальности.