



# Sociolinguistic Competence in Teaching Foreign Languages

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**ABSTRACT**

The importance of considering sociolinguistic factors in the process and methodology of teaching a foreign language has become one of the main requirements in developing and improving the foreign language competence of students of non-linguistic universities. This can be due to the need for students to be capable of using language not only linguistically appropriate but also socially pertinent. As the focus is on the development of the sociolinguistic competence of future specialists, there is a need to select and incorporate relevant approaches to reinforce students' professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence. Reflecting on the CEFR "can-do" statements targeted to stimulate students to act in real-life situations, the paper emphasizes the importance of sociolinguistically-oriented teaching in non-linguistic universities. Also, the article highlights the approaches and the sort of activities teachers can use to facilitate students' learning and development of professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence. It is highly recommended to create a learning process where students can take an active part by participating in various authentic, hands-on, or student-led activities that can promote the student-centered sociolinguistically-oriented model of teaching.

**Keywords:**

Sociolinguistic competence, digital materials, authentic materials, CEFR, sociolinguistically-oriented teaching, sociolinguistic approaches, the learning process .

**Introduction**

It is widely known that one of the ways in which language is used in society is to create and maintain relationships between people. When for the first time in a social context a conversation takes place between two interlocutors, usually their first reaction often includes assumptions based on their spoken language about where they came from and what social class they belong to. In the course of a conversation, reflection leads to a fuller representation and understanding of people,

which may or may not be accurate. This context is analyzed from the point of view of sociolinguistic perspectives and means that sociolinguistics (social linguistics) is a branch of linguistics that studies language in connection with the social conditions of its existence [1,2,3]. Similarly, Alpatov states that sociolinguistics is interested in how languages function, especially, how people communicate with one another [4]. This is one of the topical disciplines in linguistics, interacting with many other

disciplines, including teaching foreign languages and international relations [1,4].

In the formation, development, and improvement of the foreign language competence of students of non-linguistic universities, the need to consider sociolinguistic factors in the methodology and process of teaching a language is becoming increasingly important [5]. This is due, as we believe, to the need not only to manage linguistic knowledge in appropriate situations but also how to use it for successful communication or in a foreign environment, being able to switch promptly from informal discourse to formal or neutral. In our opinion, taking into account sociolinguistic factors in teaching a foreign language for special purposes can quite successfully lead students to a willingness to participate in the creation of new mutual understandings in the social core of the culture where this language is spoken. Based on this, it is difficult to disagree with the fact that sociocultural competence allows one to go beyond grammar, basic vocabulary, levels of formality, style, and register. This is precisely the competence that stimulates the acquired knowledge and skills, allowing learners to practice in society to create new paradigms through communication. This process of socialization, as we think, is extralinguistic in nature, where taking into account the national and cultural specifics of the people whose language is being studied affects the level of specificity, which determines the effectiveness of communication in a foreign language. For example, in the last fifty years, the term *Cohousing* has been actively used in the West, which means a lifestyle in which spaces such as a kitchen or lounges are common to residents of a house, although each person has his own space or house. This concept has become the focus of attention of many researchers who, in their scientific work, demonstrate the positive aspects of Cohousing, such as reducing social isolation and loneliness, increasing active communication and affordable housing, as well as strengthening community life and a sense of place. This concept can be perceived differently in Eastern culture, where for people the house is a sacred place, hidden from prying eyes, where both rest and dinners are organized in the

family circle. Therefore, wrongly accepted, the concept can affect the effectiveness of communication and perception. This implies the importance of knowing the national and cultural specifics of foreign language learning.

### **Sociolinguistic competence**

According to Usvyat, sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of speech and language units with national-cultural semantics, the ability to correctly use cultural, historical, and nationally-specific information in foreign language communication, and the ability to correlate the phenomena of the native and studied culture [6]. Bayyurt believes that the main theoretical features of sociolinguistics and the context of its practice endow foreign language education with its rich social content. The application of sociolinguistics in the context of classroom studies can make a huge contribution to the development of methods for teaching a foreign language [1]. Gusev and Flerov state that the sociolinguistic component is the ability to use language forms and transform them in accordance with the existing context. For that, the language learner needs to know the features of the meaning of words and expressions, as they change depending on the style and nature of communication and the effects they may have on another person [7]. Mede and Dikilitas define sociolinguistic competence as the specific ability to use a foreign language in different ways that can fit into multifarious social situations in which communication takes place [8]. Great importance sociolinguistics places on the social dimensions of the language. Several factors may influence the communication and choice of proper words such as age, gender, geographical location, formality, cultural norms, occupation and status of speakers. A doctor, for instance, would be much more likely to employ medical jargon than a lawyer would. This jargon can be perceived correctly by the same group of people – medical personnel while this can be completely difficult to understand for the people out of this group. Another example can be the impact of gender. It is commonly perceived that women tend to be more polite, sensitive, and expressive whereas men can be more direct, competitive, and harsh. If we look

at the age category, then due to neologisms entering the dictionary annually, numerous once-common words are not in use anymore. This creates some misconceptions while communicating with the older generation. Specifically, the neologism *Goblin mode*, which was considered the new word of 2023 by the Oxford dictionary, is referred to as a mode of behavior, especially, greedy and lazy, and is typically thought to be hilarious. However, this can be perceived wrongly by the older generation. Subsequently, disregarding one of the factors may result in misunderstanding as what is appropriate in one socio-cultural setting may be inappropriate in a different socio-cultural environment.

Bayyurt claims that in research on foreign language teaching, sociolinguistics has been ignored or overlooked as a field of study. As a rule, FLT researchers do not make any connections between them, even if they draw conclusions about the value of context in the development of the communicative competence of foreign language learners [1]. Therefore, it is important to see the attributes of both sociolinguistics and the disciplines of teaching foreign languages, such as language relations, language, and culture, as well as the policies governing the choice of foreign languages for teaching. The development of sociolinguistics as we know it now is frequently attributed to American linguist William Labov. He demonstrated through his empirical synchronous observations the correlations between social and language structures [9].

In the past, the foreign language was learnt just as part of the curriculum to complete classroom tasks and take tests. However, now students should learn the language to use it actively, communicate properly selecting the right words, and style, react to changes in style and register, and understand jokes and realia. Therefore, Mede and Dikilitas claim that sociolinguistic competence as an integral part of communicative competence should be taught to let students know how to use language linguistically and socially pertinent [8]. Though students might possess the grammatical and lexical knowledge of the foreign language, still they may struggle while communicating with

native speakers in various social settings. Kramersch, Mede and Dikilitas highlight the inconsistency between the methodology used for teaching a foreign language and actual communication in real life [10,8].

### **Teaching sociolinguistic competence**

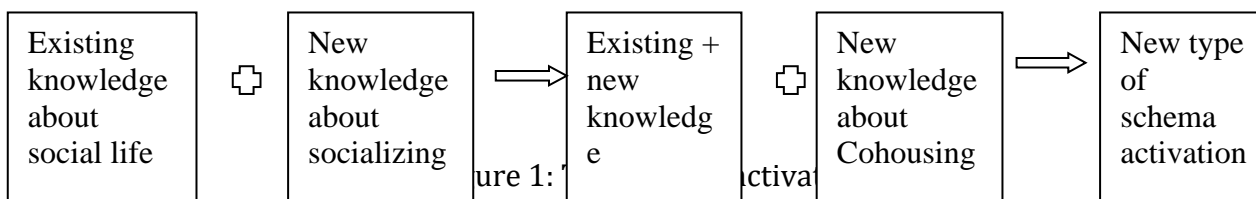
Acquisition of sociolinguistic competence (SC) may be observed if students are exposed directly to the culture of the language they learn. However, it is not always possible for many universities to organise student exchange programs or invite foreign experts to conduct workshops. Therefore, injecting activities targeted at building SC is of great importance to increase gradually students' awareness of social and cultural aspects. Commonly known, nowadays students are exposed to a number of digital materials that can provide authentic context to learn and develop sociolinguistic fluency. However, they can ail students as well if not used properly. Therefore, the role of a teacher in analyzing, evaluating, and implementing digital tools and social media in the classroom and letting students learn independently are critical issues in teaching SC.

Due to the fact that learning is an active process, the use of theoretical principles through practice efficiently influences students' understanding and construction of new information on the basis of prior knowledge and leads to intended learning outcomes. Therefore, creating for students the learning process where they take an active part by participating in various authentic, hands-on or student-led activities can become the most significant student-centered model of teaching. This process of learning is important and clearly demonstrated in the theory of constructivism. This theory emphasizes the view that students construct their knowledge via active and participatory learning. Students learn best when they construct their own understanding themselves. Therefore, the use of impromptu speaking, pair work and small group discussion can engage students in constructing knowledge actively rather than receiving it.

It is necessary to underline that cognitivism as one of the forms of constructivism concentrates on the relationship

between thinking and active learning. The primary ideas of Piaget formed the notion of cognitive development, accentuating that active learning on the basis of prior knowledge leads to development. This can be better represented by the schema theory, created by cognitive psychologists. Pritchard describes schema theory as a framework with a considerable number of knowledge units that are connected. As he emphasizes, new schemas are regularly created, whereas existing schemas are constantly updated [11]. It is a fact that students have their existing schemas before starting an unfamiliar topic, and whenever new learning

occurs, a new schema is created. In classes, teachers can regularly apply most of the principles of cognitive constructivism. Specifically, before teaching a specific topic, a teacher can elicit from students what they know about it, and then, align a new topic to the prior knowledge of students. When students are given another topic, they can be involved in the next stage of new information, which occurs gradually considering the schema activation among all students. The following diagram might explain our present vision of schema activation (Figure 1).



According to Piaget, learning is a process of adjustment to environmental influences and this process occurs through assimilation and accommodation, and cognitive development happens through equilibration [11]. It can be observed in the following figure (Figure 2):

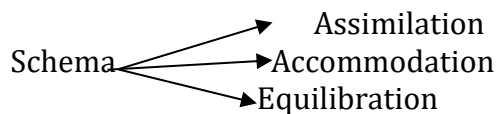


Figure2: Learning processes

As can be seen in the figure, assimilation occurs when new information is perceived and becomes a part of the learner’s existing knowledge. Accommodation happens when the existing schema is not valid and needs to be changed to adapt to a new piece of information. Consequently, equilibration takes place which indicates the balance between existing knowledge and new information. In this process, the schema is organized constantly to incorporate new information. In our teaching practice, we consider the process of adaptation (adjustment) to new units of knowledge among students. Acknowledging the fact that students coming into classes might have definite background information, before creating a new schema for one topic, an impromptu speaking method can be utilized to review what is already known about this topic. Whenever we enable them to gain new material on the ways of socializing in the modern world (assimilation) and establishing positive relationships with

people around them (accommodation), we add new information to the existing model – the concept of Cohousing, and after sufficient practice, equilibration occurs in students’ minds which results in eliminating the conflict between new and existing knowledge. Thus, we form sociocultural traits of different ways of socializing focusing on a new concept of Cohousing.

The learners’ interaction with each other and communication with a teacher are significant to make learning more dynamic, positive, and enjoyable. This process relates to social constructivism, founded by Vygotsky. Though Piaget believes that a learner is more independent and that development occurs through individual and self-centered activities, Vygotsky indicates the great value of collaboration and support [11]. He suggests the importance of considering the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the process of teaching and learning. Being a crucial principle of social

constructivism, ZPD indicates the significance of considering the learner's current level of understanding and according to it planning and organizing the new material teaching. The teacher's role is to provide students with the material appropriate to their level. When we teach B2-level students, impromptu speaking helps us to see the students' current and potential levels of development and create an appropriate level for their learning. Impromptu speaking in the classroom enables us to set communication with the students and know their level of knowledge while small group work enables students to be aware of their own level of actual development and realize the potential level of further development.

### **The CEFR in sociolinguistically-oriented teaching**

One of the main aims of developing the Common European Framework of Reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) was to encourage teachers working in the language field to consider their current methods in light of student needs, creation of appropriate goals, and monitoring of student progress. It implies an "action-oriented approach," educating about what people need [12]. North claims that in the workshops with teachers, and in the statistical analysis of teachers' use of descriptors to assess their students, formulation of socio-linguistic competence components proved to be remarkably challenging [12]. However, Foley states that CEFR's "can do" statements of proficiency are meant to serve as a common learning road map and a more flexible method of assessing development rather than concentrating on test or examination scores [13]. According to the CEFR document, language learning should be targeted at stimulating students to act in real-life situations, express their ideas, and complete tasks of various natures. If we consider university undergraduate students, then according to the CEFR, B2 level students should be able to "use polite forms and show awareness of politeness conventions; socializing, without requiring the interlocutor(s) to behave differently; recognize sociocultural cues, especially those pointing to

differences, and acting accordingly; adopting an appropriate register" [14]. Therefore, the incorporation of impromptu speech and small group work can be helpful to attain the learning outcomes of sociolinguistically-oriented teaching. One of the "can statements" in sociolinguistic appropriateness demonstrates the ability of a student to maintain and contribute to group discussions even when the speech is fast and informal. Thus, the integration of sociolinguistically-oriented activities is of utmost importance to contribute to the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

### **Professionally-oriented sociolinguistic approaches**

Particular problems arise regarding the development of the sociolinguistic competence of future specialists ensuring high-quality education of students of non-linguistic universities. Today the purpose of teaching foreign language classes at a non-linguistic university is to develop professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competencies in students to ensure effective communication in a professional environment, achieve an understanding of the social problems of a particular culture, and find ways to solve problems in any professional situation. According to Cherezova, Shestakova, and Kushnareva, sociolinguistic competence, regulated by linguistic competence, makes it possible to carry out the linguistic activity as required by the situation of real communication. In the learning process, students learn not only to use a foreign language in oral and written form in the professional field but also learn the features of language and speech behavior in accordance with the situation in which communication takes place directly [15]. In this case, the social status of the speakers is taken into account, as well as the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the interlocutors. Cherezova, Shestakova and Kushnareva (2020) claim that the sociolinguistic component is of the greatest interest for research since this competence reflects the unity of social and cultural conditions under which the direct use of the language occurs in a real communication situation [15]. The situation can be among

people of different age categories, gender, social status, dialect, location, and occupation. Moreover, peculiarities of the use of language (formal, informal) by an interlocutor also play a significant role in maintaining effective communication. A number of sociolinguistically-oriented approaches can be integrated to reinforce students' professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence. These can be communicative, explicit instruction, collaborative learning, decision-making, problem-solving, and reflective approaches.

The communicative approach is based on the use of different communicative functions such as apologizing, describing, inviting, and promising [16]. It is argued by Mede and Dikilitas and Badarna that the textbooks oriented on the development of students' sociolinguistic competence have less variety of communicative oral activities, which cannot guarantee the active participation of all the students in the classroom [8,16]. The preference should be given to more authentic and interesting topics for discussion through organizing small group or big group discussions in a structured or unstructured format, small oral presentations, conversations, dialogues, impromptu speeches and role-plays. They are the most practical and logical ways for students to develop their professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence (POSC). Students can adapt to certain verbal interaction situations using role-playing or simulation elements that incorporate the reality of life communication. Specifically, role-plays as an activity for integrating native speaker speech patterns and the target language's cultural traits and social norms help form students' POSC.

According to Rehner and Lasan, studies looking into methods for developing the sociolinguistic competence of FL students in classroom settings have found that explicit instruction is essential and most effective when it is incorporated into the curriculum in a way that is systematic, repeated and adheres to the awareness-practice-feedback sequence [17]. As for the use of authentic materials, films, television series watching with and without subtitles and the process of scriptwriting can be used to promote authenticity [18]. Watching

films in a foreign language, the use of social media for academic purposes can let students observe a character's choice of sociolinguistic options in communication that differ in terms of their conversation partner, setting, and communication purpose—importantly, also at various stages of relationship development [17].

The collaborative learning approach is becoming one of the crucial aspects of learning within a small group of students, where they work together to brainstorm and generate ideas, analyze meaning, or find solutions to complete a certain task. Students can collaborate in pairs, in small groups of 4-5 people, or larger groups of 8-10. Students while collaborating can assign roles and responsibilities for definite actions and coordinate their respective parts together [19]. The activities can be group projects, debates, roundtable discussions, and small-scale research. The group members can actively interact with each other sharing ideas and experiences and taking on different roles. This can be close to real life as students depending on their future occupations take on the role of, for example, doctors, journalists, cabin attendants, accountants, and others.

Consideration of sociolinguistic factors in teaching a particular foreign language entails the consideration of sociolinguistic competence as one of the constituent components of foreign language communicative competence of the students. Subsequently, the development of POSC should be targeted at the formation and development of their capacities to be responsible, to take part in group decision-making, encourage others to work together to achieve goals, resolve conflicts, and mitigate differences [5]. Most activities listed in the previous paragraphs require students to be involved in the decision-making process. Therefore, this approach is regarded as one the most important as it urges students to think, evaluate and analyze the problems, ideas, and concepts that emerge during pair, small group, or big group discussions, preparing the role plays, or considering the controversial arguments and analyzing the evidence to support the ideas in debates and roundtable discussions. All these elements lead to the

formation of proper decision-making skills. Especially, the implementation of this approach is essential for students' future professional skills at work.

Certainly, together with the decision-making approach, problem –solving approach can be equally incorporated to promote POSC. The problem-based approach enables students to engage in real-life issues to tackle and come up with achievable solutions. Benade states that in problem-based classes, “students work collaboratively, solving real-world problems, along with content knowledge and a range of skills, which help to motivate students” [20]. When this approach is applied, teachers can provide different authentic problems to let students employ their problem-solving skills, analyze the case/problem, collaborate with mates, and come up with the most relevant and realistic solutions. The activities helpful for the promotion of POSC can be case studies, peer teaching (find a problem and teach how to minimize its negative effects or how to eradicate the problem), Think Outside the Box, Survivor scenarios, flipped language learning, and blog writing. Specifically, case studies can be one of the most effective activities to provide an environment for developing students' intercultural competencies, critical thinking, and other life skills.

The reflective approach is very focal on stimulating students' self-directed learning, self-monitoring of their academic studies, achievement of goals, self-evaluating their progress, analyzing flaws in learning and planning the next actions. This approach can direct students to be in real life with their learning, analyzing current situations and inferring future needs. A potential benefit to making the link between learners' engagement with authentic materials and success can be obtained through promoting a reflective approach to learning where they take responsibility for what and how they learn [21]. After each lesson, we can instruct the students to draft a written journal in which they can reflect on what they have learned, how they learned the content, and their own strengths and flaws. For that, reflective journals, a one-minute speech at the end of lessons, and

conclusive statements can be used to promote students' reflectivity.

## Conclusions

The development of professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence is important for students' awareness of sociolinguistic use of the language, nuances of the target culture, social norms, and professionally-oriented language peculiarities. The creation of a real-life atmosphere aids in practicing the acquired language skills, interaction patterns, and choice of suitable context words, register, and behavior supposedly considering the gender, age, occupation, education, and other categories to be more effective in communication. Finally, sociolinguistically-oriented teaching contributes to developing professionally-oriented sociolinguistic competence. The proper employment of the approaches and integration of the activities in the classroom, aligning the lesson materials to student needs are useful strategies for academic success.

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