COMPETENCE AS A FUNDAMENTAL DIMENSION IN THE ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *Competence is a widely used concept whose connotations differ slightly from one field to another. It operates in the educational, economic and technical areas and is generally rendered as skill, ability, performance or qualification. Competence as a multidimensional reality is an individual or collective characteristic that involves an accumulation of cognitive concepts, skills and attitudes. The three dimensions of competence, knowledge, skills and attitudes are widely accepted by experts and represent the internal structure, which has added another three elements: task, situation and context which form the external structure. Starting from these premises, the present work aims to analyse how competence is perceived in the acquisition of a foreign language. It also lays emphasis on the types of competence that transform the educational process into a dynamic mechanism whose role is not only to convey information, but also to turn information into action.*

Keywords: *competence, attitude, performance.*

The conceptual framework of competence

With a wide range of applicability, the concept of *competence* is used in a synonymous series with terms like: *responsibility*, *skill*, *ability*, *capacity*, *qualification* etc., each of them being transferred to a specific area of activity.

A legal organization assumes a degree of *responsibility* in decision making, a multinational company promotes the term of *qualification* (an individual holds the expertise needed to perform tasks specific to his domain of activity), whereas the educational system focuses on broader terms such as: *performance*, *skills*, *abilities* etc.

Expanding the scope of competence, we can say that it operates both economically and technically. A person is competent to the extent that he gains value in the hierarchy of social positions, when he becomes competitive, skilled and able to meet the required expectations.

Beyond the theory developed by N. Chomsky, according to whom competence is a source of linguistic creativity, subsequent research distinguishes the type of communicative competence that incorporates not only language skills but also cultural factors, social context, a set of attitudes and values. "The concept of communicative competence is based on the idea that the production and interpretation of statements is not only governed by a system of grammatical rules, but also a system of social and cultural rules and conventions... " (*DSL*, 2005: 120)

There must be a clear distinction between *holding competences* as an accumulation of resources by means of which we act, and *being competent* that involves putting these resources into practice. In terms of English didactics, the competences we acquire are translated into *action*. For instance, learning idioms involves several stages: learning idioms as simple lexical structures, ability to establish collocations and associations, differentiation between their literal and metaphorical meanings, understanding of meanings etc.

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Competence as a multidimensional reality is an individual or collective characteristic that involves an accumulation of cognitive concepts, skills and attitudes. The three dimensions of competence, knowledge, skills and attitudes are widely accepted by experts and represent the internal structure, which has added other three elements: task, situation and context which form the external structure.

The learner who acquires the grammatical category of comparison in English familiarizes with a problem of knowledge, which he explores both in terms of similarities and contrasts with the native language; he develops the ability to use the degrees of comparison in various contexts, solves the tasks consisting of specific type of exercises and learns how to place adjectives in the sentence.

Whether it is a morphosyntactic structure, a grammatical category or a text, they all follow specific stages and their thoroughness eventually generates competence.

The cognitive space, skills, attitudes, values
The cognitive space

As part of competence, knowledge is seen as a well-structured information system, based on clearly defined principles. Beyond the classical structure of the notion, knowledge in its wider acceptance comprises real elements that are analyzed, ordered, evaluated and integrated into the competence. Knowledge organization is a complex process in which elements are logically structured, based on cognitive strategies (analysis, comparison, inference, generalization etc.).

Knowledge of the world

Human beings are generally endowed with a model of the world and its mechanisms closely correlated with the lexicon and grammar of their native tongue. Every piece of knowledge is acquired into a system of associations and linguistic contrast. Both source language and target language overlap to a certain extent and it depends on learners to develop their ability to establish similarities and differences between languages.

Therefore, the cultural factor should prevail in teaching or learning a new language. This ability is shaped during early childhood, but it is further improved through experience and education. Although ordinary language is developed in a more structured way, the relation between form and meaning differs from one language to another. It is not the object and its meaning that matter most, but the significance that the respective object receives in various cultural areas or within the community life. When acquiring English, it is better for learners to have some previous knowledge of the world in order to successfully carry out their tasks.

In order to learn English we need a privileged culture and a favourable environment. The social status of a new language influences learning because “The place where language comes into contact is not a geographical place, but a bilingual individual.” (U. Weinreich, 1951). Learning a language in general involves a reconstruction of the world with a major resonance of the phonetic, lexical and semantic structures. With the acquisition of the second language, we form a broader horizon of social mechanisms, ideas and approaches, while our minds abandon pre-existing cultural routines.

Peculiarity of each language is a widely debated topic for teachers and students, since contact between the two languages is not limited to the overlap of the two linguistic systems, but emphasizes a complex individual analysis. “The appeal to

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the native language helps students to structure the two systems and build hypotheses about L2." (Giacobbe, 1990)

Cultural knowledge

Education through cultural perspectives requires us to explore the world from a variety of angles. The relation to knowledge is a relation with the world. The learner does not intend to master an inventory of cultural objects, but build a relation with culture. Thus, "reconciling school and life through culture" becomes an essential task of the teacher. (Montférier, 1999:12).

Unfortunately, the culture has changed gradually over time, along with the teacher's role. The cultural ideal, deeply rooted in the school environment has now become a desideratum. The cultural heritage used to be valued by the learning community because it increased the teacher's prestige.

Nowadays, due to the lack of cultural homogeneity, and challenges of society, culture has undergone substantial changes. New working areas have emerged, giving rise to numerous interpretations of the world, and hence the clash of ideas and principles. We have become culture consumers and minimized our vision of cultural heritage.

However, in terms of English language teaching, and not only, one speaks about the phenomenon of enculturation. The syllabus should contain a cultivated everyday culture that forms a conception about a set of values and a culture that addresses man in all his diversity. The special merit of the English textbooks is that they bring culture and civilization to the fore. The cultural facts accompany each learning unit: *living standards*, *family*, *manners*, *economy*, *religious rites* and *social conventions* are only a few of the topics covered in the current educational resources. Teachers think about teaching grammar from a thorough cultural perspective that provides students with key points about the media, advertising, socialization processes etc. Plurilingual teaching offers great opportunities for the student to capture elements of culture and explore them in terms of communication, partnerships and relational behaviours.

In their endeavour to build a *classroom culture*, teachers try to implement values, means and communication methods that are valued by all learners. Discussions should be linked to social situations in which individual contributions lead to understanding, pleasure and discoveries. Cultural identity and practices should be critically examined, enriched and diversified. As long as the pedagogical act is presented as a relationship between ideas, educational forms, cultural history, instruction and socialization, learners will be able to exhibit a critical understanding of the knowledge accumulated.

Metaknowledge / Metacognition is among one of the most important challenges of cognitive psychology. The basic idea of this process is "to teach the students how to learn." They need to form knowledge about knowledge, so as to become less dependent on external control and capable of self-improvement.

Although recently employed in the scholarly literature, the concept of metacognition promotes the appeal to self-control and self-improvement. Metacognition is what makes the difference between novice and professional. According to J. Delacour (2001: 35) metacognition is "the learner's capacity to represent his own cognitive activity, assess the means and results, adjust different types of problems or situations by

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deliberate choosing of strategies and rules, and determine the falseness or truthfulness of a representation." (our translation)

In more accurate terms, the student must know what he knows, what he needs, in order to implement intervention strategies in the tasks required. Metaknowledge is when knowledge about a task aims at knowledge of objectives, level of difficulty and proper factors to achieve the respective task. For example, the student should be able to distinguish between a non-literary text (scientific) *The human brain at work* and a literary text extracted from *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte. The first is based on existing realities and conveys information about how the brain works. In such a text, the student only surprises sobriety and precision of terms, compared to the literary text that thrills by the colourful language and the use of tropes.

In terms of task-solving strategies, it is recommended to analyze the task, and find optimal strategies for solving, setting goals and managing time effectively.

To identify and select the most appropriate aims, we need to ask ourselves two fundamental questions. *What do my learners already know?, What do they need to know?* Thus, we make sure that the aims are the right ones for a particular group of learners.

Self-control and self-regulation are other two essential components which help the student to measure and value his own intellectual potential, dose the effort required and calculate the chances of success or failure in performing tasks. From this point of view, it establishes a clear difference between a novice who perceives the real world in a simple concrete way and an expert who organizes perceptive information better, operates with fundamental concepts, being able to form abstract judgments, formulate viable solutions to problems and rediscover new aspects of communication situations. When facing the unexpected, the novice becomes hesitant, unlike the expert who does not make a substantial effort in collecting and analyzing information, because he develops reflective thinking and transfer of knowledge in new contexts. The semantic connections that experts work with in the classroom are much wider and more consistent, and their behaviour is more flexible and interactive as compared to novices who are restrictive, direct and authoritative.

Abilities

As defined in *DULR*, 2007 the ability describes "the capacity to proceed with deftness and wit; dexterity, skill." In other words, the concept highlights the easiness, speed and accuracy with which the individual carries out certain activities. The term acts in a two-dimensioned direction *quality - quantity*. To determine the quality of a learning act we take into account indicators such as task difficulty, novelty, product value, etc., whereas quantity is evaluated in the amount of tasks, time required and effort etc.

Competence is inextricably linked to the formation of abilities in their interaction with knowledge. In the context of an approach by competences, there have occurred remarkable changes in terms of how abilities influence the formation of competences. Researchers in cognitive psychology have outlined various classifications of abilities, based on three fundamental links: cognitive, emotional and psychomotor.

Romiszowski (1981) proposes a system of abilities as follows: cognitive (decision-making, problem solving, logical judgments etc.), psychomotor (physical actions, perceptive acuity), reactive (self-control, attitudes, emotions, habits, etc.) interactive (social interaction).

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Recent research insists on transferring abilities from the procedural status (implementation of knowledge), to the level of metacognition. From this point of view, abilities incorporate intellectual actions, values and principles and are defined as active metaknowledge relating to knowledge, and leading to the formation of competences. The main features of abilities are:

a. abilities are life-long processes and develop during different stages of the individual's life, being related to age and environment.
b. abilities relate to already existing knowledge
c. abilities are specific to more fields of activity
d. abilities are processes that allow the approach of knowledge in terms of memory, understanding, application, evaluation and communication.

G. Paquette (2002: 221 and next) proposes a taxonomy of abilities which involves several stages: receiving (retention), reproduction (illustration, explanation, application), production (deduction, classification, diagnosis, construction) and self-management (influence, adaption). Aptitudes have a complex classification and capture different coordinates of human personality. From the point of view of the educational process, teaching foreign languages rely on the well-known abilities: reading, writing, listening and speaking. All the four skills incorporate and operate on grammatical and lexical principles.

Grammar includes a large number of terms, structures, uses and forms. Grammar rules are not fixed due to the constantly changing language over time. However, today's trends highlight a visible transformation of the teaching process which has moved away from grammar and focused more on functions, language skills and fluency. As regards the selective choice of materials, teachers resort more and more to the most explanatory workbooks in order to provide students with the most adequate and up-to-date information. Lexis, on the other hand, is taught in a well-organized way. Words are not selected at random. They convey us with knowledge of their meaning and knowledge of the syntactic category, and learners should be able to connect the two. Words are meant to be inserted into newly formed contexts, and learners are to become familiar with the use of suffixes and prefixes and the use of phrases and collocations: *to take a nap, to kick the bucket, full moon, take a rest, take a break* etc.

In terms of semantic relationships, words are organized in series of synonyms, antonyms or lexical sets. Understanding these relations is useful for enriching learners' understanding of words. Miller (1999) shows that a very important aspect of knowing a word is having a cognitive representation of the set of contexts in which a given form can be used to express a given meaning.

For example, the adjective *hard* is analysed according to the following coordinates:

a. denotation – difficult to do, not easy to bend or break
b. synonyms - *firm, solid, rigid, dense, stiff*
c. antonym – *easy*
d. base word + suffix – *hardly*
e. phrases and collocations – *hard work, hard way, hard time, take a hard line*
f. compounds – *hard-earned, hard-headed, hard-nosed*
g. figurative meaning – *hard-headed* - lacking mercy

The adventure of a word makes us know all its forms and meanings, its parts of speech, grammatical mechanism, spelling and so on.

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The phonological apparatus highlights such features as: phonemes, word stress, sentence stress and intonation. For example, how do students pronounce *transport* as a noun and a verb? Can you recognize the symbols of the following words? *conduct /k*ən'dΛkt/, *logical /lod3ikl/*. The use of dictionaries with phonemic script should be encouraged by all teachers, so that learners should familiarize with the right pronunciation.

Compare the stress in such words as: *important, follow, component*. Intonation is another important part of pronunciation, since it expresses emotions, attitudes, and shows when we start or finish speaking, when we ask a question or make a statement. Different intonation patterns can show very different meanings. *What a weather!* may induce a feeling of joy, and happiness, because the weather is fine, or sadness because it is raining heavily and this hinders us from carrying out different tasks. English learning is to begin with phonetics which can improve or depreciate communication.

Reading helps us to respond to a text and to make a sense of it. In order to have a good reading, we should be able to cope with the new words, understand the language of the text and grasp the whole message, which we further connect to our knowledge of the world. To understand a sentence of the type *Mike is never reluctant to make tough decisions as a manager* is to understand the meaning of the words, the grammar of the words, and the sentence as a whole. At a higher level of interpretation, one may infer that making tough decisions is usually correlated with a feeling of reluctance.

Reading also involves making the difference between text types. Some are examples of letters, postcards, brochures, leaflets (non-literal), other are literal (novels, fables, lyrics, legends etc.). Reading comes in many forms, according to its purpose: specific information, gist, skimming and extensive reading. It is perceived as a complex process that requires understanding, coherence, cohesion and reflexivity. Reading authentic materials give us the possibility to adhere to a more varied and richer language that will further broaden our cultural horizon.

By ***writing*** we produce language. Regardless of the complexity of the writing act (shopping list, e-mail, diary, letters etc.) we all practise writing, but we should not ignore the main features of this productive skill. The text we intend to write is to follow some strict coordinates: accuracy (correct forms of the language), style appropriateness, brainstorming, organisation of ideas, proof-reading etc.

When approaching a topic of the type: *Do you agree that the state has a role to play in advising parents on how to bring up their children?,* learners must keep in mind the writing stages, so that their final product should be accurate and worth-reading. They should be taught from the beginning that their outcome must communicate a message and have an appropriate layout.

Listening involves our participation and our giving sense to the sounds of language. To understand spoken language, we need to connect it to our knowledge of the world. It is essential to form an attitude towards the words, their stress and intonation, the speaker's intention, the text type, etc. Tonality, speed of speech and body language are also relevant aspects to be taken into account during the listening process.

When ***speaking***, people pronounce words, use intonation, ask for an explanation, take part in discussions, persuade, use body language, etc. Among the things students should pay attention to are: keeping eye contact, using facial expressions, fluency, accuracy etc. Eye contact designates self-confidence and courage, facial expressions help us to conceal or show our feelings towards the topic**,** whereas fluency and accuracy justify our mastering the language.

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Except for the learning abilities, we cannot ignore the importance of other abilities formed throughout life. Social abilities enable us to act according to certain rules or conventions, living skills are required for routine actions and professional abilities open perspectives for mental and physical actions in the areas we work. Intercultural abilities aim at the boundary between cultures and the development of sensitivity to identify strategies for contact with different cultural areas.

Abilities are formed throughout our existence; some are essential (general), others ensure performance (special). Acquisition of a foreign language may be included in the category of special abilities, underpinned by each person's personality predisposition. To have an aptitude for foreign languages involves outlining an array with a large value continuum from the basic to the proficiency level.

Attitudes / Values

In social sciences, the term designates "a direction of behaviour or reasoning, which displays a specific coherence and stability". (*Dictionary of Sociology*, 1996). Researchers did not make a clear distinction between attitudes and personality traits and their studies about the relation between attitude and behaviour have often had conflicting results. They have argued that an attitude is not the only determining factor of behaviour, the latter also including constraints, interests and other attitudes.

The concept of attitude lies at the boundary of two fundamental areas: psychology and sociology. From a psychological perspective, the term sets the relation between the individual's character and the various aspects of his personal and social life. In other words, attitudes reflect the human behaviour in conjunction with a social context.

Most researchers recognize three dimensions of attitudes that are approached cognitively (formation of ideas and opinions), emotionally (emotions) and behaviourally (actions).

We usually form an attitude in relation to the external environment, with others and with ourselves.

In discursive psychology, there is a different approach to the concept of attitude, which is conceived as a rhetorical dimension of expressing opinions on controversial issues. Attitudes reveal human evolution in its dynamics. This refers to unexpected situations, changes in personality, or character of the individual. The flexible approach of attitudes helps us to create an appropriate framework for all events in various environments.

As essential elements of character, attitudes have a major influence on competence through such characteristics as: responsibility, honesty, perseverance, etc. The attitude towards the knowledge we accumulate assumes its importance or value, interpretation depending on the context required, positive approach of information, respect for the cultural identity of each people, etc. A correct attitude towards information involves a partnership, a friendship with it. For example, when acquiring a grammatical structure related to the use of the English subjunctive, the learner may exhibit different attitudes.

As a beginner, he may be reluctant to acquire information, at an intermediate level of knowledge he may have difficulties in understanding, perceiving this grammatical mood in an abstract way, and at an advanced level he can approach the subjunctive positively, willing to understand how it works in contrastive analysis. Therefore, from a cognitive perspective, attitude to information is determined

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individually, depending on the speaker's intention and his need to put into practice what he has learned or depending on his emotional availability.
Attitude in relation to others or social attitude includes all our subjective or objective reactions in relationships with others. Having an attitude outside the school context, for example, requires you to form a specific behaviour based on a well defined axiological code that agglutinates thinking, emotion, conduct and automated mechanisms.

Social attitudes refer to an impeccable physical and moral conduct within desirable socio-cultural parameters. They are achieved through a process of symbolic and semantic comparison that the subject makes with the other to determine if reality interpretation is adequate and relevant.

Self-attitude is another essential component in social psychology that involves the adoption of qualities such as modesty, dignity, self-control, self-confidence, confidence in one's abilities, self-esteem, etc. Some of these attributes are formed both in school with the teacher's support, and the external environment sustained by family and society. The teacher who helps students to boost their self-confidence, and motivates them permanently in the educational process has a real chance to integrate them into society and persuade them to form a set of values. All facets of attitudes open new perspectives of interpretation, depending on the type of personality and the environment we work in.

Communicative language competences

Communication as a psycho-social interaction trains the individuals of a group or part of them. They interact with each other and establish a balance between the information sent and received. As a social phenomenon, communication is the amount of acts by which a person transmits and the other receives information, without any of the participants in the dialogue losing identity.

Those who communicate must share the same articulated language and acquire the laws governing relations between people. This is known as linguistic communication and refers not only to the transmission of information but also the transformation of the interlocutor who is determined to act in a specific way. Recent studies of rhetoric approach communication in terms of the effects it produces. We send information in order to communicate a message of certain intensity. As J. Goebbels says that we do not talk to say something, but to produce an effect.

For the acknowledgment of communicative intentions, students need to develop their communicative competence that includes: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence.

Linguistic competence

Language is a dynamic mechanism in constant evolution, a spiritual structure revealing an architecture whose components run at different levels, areas or styles. Every language has a structure of elements that form a functional unit with multiple values. These elements are involved in the chain of communication and ensure the transmission of information. The phonetic system includes phonemes, morphology comprises parts of speech and grammatical categories, the syntactic system includes units, functions and syntactic relations, vocabulary is made up of all words and their formation, and stylistics renders the expressive ways and features of the discourse. Linguistic competence includes a lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological and orthographic component.

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Lexical competence is the ability to use the vocabulary of a language and its grammatical elements. Vocabulary is to be acquired as an assembly of phrasal idioms (*take at word, from top to toe, come into service*), phrasal verbs (*bring about, come up with, show off*), collocations (*fast train, printed circuit, take a chance*) etc.
Grammatical competence is the ability to use grammatical resources of a language, to understand and express meaning by producing sentences in accordance with the grammar norms. It extends from the basic elements (morphemes, words) to categories, classes, structures and relations. Depending on the language level, the scale A1 – C2 shows different stages of grammar acquisition from simple grammatical structures to complex language.
Semantic competence is in general not a well-defined concept, but it is responsible for the organization of meaning and deals with reference, connotation, interlexical relations (synonymy, antonymy, collocation, translation equivalence etc.)
Phonological competence deals with the production of sounds and their usage in particular contexts. Stress, word tones, rhythm and intonation are also component elements of this competence. Considering the level of competence A1 – C2, one takes into account pronunciation of a limited number of words and phrases at levels A1 – A2, intelligible pronunciation even with a foreign accent B1- B2, and natural pronunciation and revelation of finer nuances of meaning C1 – C2.
Ortographic competence

Ortography represents words, whereas words reveal our experience of all things, actions and relationships in the world around us. Symbols put together form words and modern icons on charts, mechanical or electronic equipment form messages that can be expressed as single words: e.g *sunny* on a weather map, *print* on a computer.

Grammar is also related to orthography. Sentences can be marked with capital letters or commas, a final *–s* may stand for a plural mark (*pictures*), or a false plural as in *physics, economics, mathematics* etc.

Ortography is based on principles specific to foreign languages and it helps learners to have a proper word spelling and use punctuation marks according to some language conventions.

Sociolinguistic competence

In simple terms, sociolinguistic competence is the learner's ability to produce and understand language in various sociolinguistic contexts, considering such variables as: social status, purpose of communication, social conventions etc. In other words, this refers to expressing an attitude, an emotion, dealing with formal and informal language and recognizing slang and idioms. For example, how can I express an attitude about *apologies, authority, making compliments, respect, code of manners* etc.?

Sociolinguistic competence is sometimes hard to acquire due to the large amount of cultural diversity in terms of speaking rules. What is appropriate in one culture may be completely unsuitable in another, which frequently causes breakdowns in the chain of communication.

Pragmatic competence aims at the learner's ability to grasp all the nuances of an intended message in any socio-cultural context and to interpret them accordingly.

A thorough analysis of humour, for example, highlights a series of cultural differences and interpretations. People of all ages and cultures respond to humour. This is expressed in different variants and intensities: amusement, fun, laugh, smile etc. and

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the way we react to humorous situations depends on a host of variables such as: geographical area, culture, level of education, intelligence and setting.

In Ancient Greece, humour was associated with ignorance of the weak or ridicule. In western civilization humour is expressed spontaneously and serves different functions: to attract attention, to get better communication, to establish contact, to reduce tension etc. In the Asian countries humour is a good response to emotional reactions. British people are known for their sophisticated senses of humour which pervaded their everyday language. Anecdotes, black humour (treating taboo topics in a humorous manner while retaining their seriousness), conundrum, gag, innuendo (an indirect rude remark about something or somebody), satire, sarcasm are all forms of humour manifested cross-culturally.

Competence is based on knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and action. The action is performed depending on three coordinates: to know (to have the ability to put resources into action), to want (to have the motivation to do something) to be able (there is a framework for action). Current studies of didactics deal with such concepts as transferable and professional competences, individual and collective competences, key competences etc.

Transferable competences or competences for life, as they were called, occur in professional and non-professional, formal and non-formal local or global areas. The concept *transferability* is more or less accepted by specialists and refers to competences that can be transferred from one discipline to another. D. Crutzen (2005: 11) establishes three fundamental concepts specific to the concept of *transferability*: *decentring* (look for a sense of rules and codes), *the paradox of complexity* (overcome the linear and speak about plurality, diversity), *analogy and transfer* (determine similarities and differences).

Transferable competences in higher education aim at exploring high-level cognitive abilities, development of life-long abilities and personal development. In other words, there are intellectual, personal, social and communicative abilities.

Individual and collective competences

As shown, the individual can act alone or as part of a group. Social psychology has demonstrated that groups, as they evolve, acquire a certain *personality*, which helps group members to respond favourably to different tasks. The need for collective competence was generated by increasingly diversified work environments, advanced technologies and the development of team spirit. Therefore, individual competences are closely related to the group success.

Key competences refer to a diverse range of skills and knowledge that enable the individual to integrate into a dynamic society with high standards and competitive spirit. Life-long learning is the modern concept designed to operate in all social media. Key competences highlight continuous personal development, active participation in the community life and employability. In terms of foreign languages, the European Reference Framework includes six levels of competence that assess oral and written skills and facilitate students' mobility. From the threshold level to proficiency, learners are offered a full range of materials to give them a chance to receive a European certification in accordance with the level of knowledge.

Approaches by competences should ensure a balance with a local educational culture that effectively meets the needs of learners. Also, the European stage requires a policy of homogenization of syllabuses and curricula and opening to foreign language teaching-learning perspectives in an efficient framework, consistent with the student's needs.

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