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**PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND OPERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS
OF THE SPEECH COMPETENCE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN****K. SAADI***(Mozyr State Pedagogical University named after I.P. Shamyakin)***A. CHEKINA***(Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno)*

Based on a retrospective analysis of the academic discourse of several decades, the article shows that the term “speech competence” has not received a commonly accepted definition, especially when it comes to the preschool age. The study conducted by the authors has made it possible to determine the phenomenological characteristics of the preschoolers’ speech competence, considering it as a dynamic integral personal quality, manifested in the ability and willingness to successfully listen, perceive and reproduce information, be engaged in conversation, express personal opinions and points of view in the oral form in accordance with the age norm. Its lexical, phonological, grammatical, dialogical and monological functional components have been identified and defined subject to pedagogical impact. These components contain operational characteristics of the speech competence of preschoolers. The speech competence of preschool children includes also the following meta-components: awareness of the ways and means of speech interaction; adequacy of selection of available speech skills, their application in speech activity; orientation in a communication situation; complex, variable and creative application of speech and non-speech means in accordance with the set goal. Following the internal structure of the speech competence of preschool children in the educational process should make it more systematic and the results of this process easier to measure in their complex, integrative wholeness.

Keywords: *speech competence, preschool children, preschool education.*

Introduction. One of preschoolers’ most significant developmental milestones is speech and language development. Unfortunately, recently academicians and practitioners have noted a tendency of increasing the identified disorders of speech development in children, caused not so much by innate organic causes as by environmental factors, one of which is an unreasonably early acquaintance of children with electronic devices (computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.), prolonged and uncontrolled interaction with them. In this context, it would be pertinent to explore phenomenological and operational characteristics of the speech competence of preschool children, since the mentioned competence implies a holistic picture of the target speech ability of a child. Competence as such is considered to reflect the entirety and integrative essence of the outcome of education at any level and in any aspect. This issue seems to be of great importance when it comes to reflection on the general nature of the children’s speech competence without reference to any educational curriculum or syllabus requirements which apparently may differ in different countries, as well as without reference to a particular language a child is acquiring as their mother tongue.

As our literature analysis shows, the number of works devoted to problems of the speech competence of preschool children is extremely limited by single and fragmented studies, while the notion of competence in general and speech competence in particular has been widely used in academic discourse for years, although not having a conventional definition especially as for that what is concerned the preschool children’s speech competence.

Main body. The concept of competence, which R. White introduced into the scientific discussion of motivational psychology six decades ago as a “motivational concept” in thinking about drive-reduction theory and psychoanalytic-instinct theory, is now increasingly a research topic in other disciplines, educational science included. R. White defined competence as “... an organism’s capacity to interact effectively with its environment...” [1, p. 298]. One of the most influential definitions was developed much later in the OECD DeSeCo Project: “A competence is defined as the ability to meet individual or social demands successfully, or to carry out an activity or task” [2, p. 43].

Almost ten years after the concept of competence was introduced in psychology, N. Chomsky distanced himself in 1960s from the then-prevailing behavioristic linguistics, which equated language with observable sound and sentence patterns, by introducing the technical term of linguistic competence in connection with language acquisition. N. Chomsky presupposes an inherited cognitive system, a knowledge and belief system acquired in childhood that underpins linguistic abilities [3].

While discussing competence-based tests, N. Gronlund uses the term “competence” as a synonym for operational abilities (writing skills, reading skills, and so on) [4]. Competences are not regarded to be fixed structures in this context, but rather individual abilities that can be developed through training. The linked competence-based assessments are most likely equivalent to performance tests.

Competences, according to R. Barnett, are related with unpredictable behaviors in unpredictable and unexpected settings [5]. Coping with such novel problems in a creative manner is regarded to be a fundamental component of the competency idea. R. Barnett chooses an operational approach to the concept of competence, which includes skills, outcomes, transferability, enterprise, and credit accumulation. P. Kirschner et al. agree with R. Barnett in defining competence as “the ability to make good and effective decisions in a certain place or scenario” [6, p. 37]. All of these thoughts on competences as extended capabilities are about conscious and intentional decision making rather than routine

behaviors. Indeed, competences appear to entail metacognition, because competent individuals are supposed to reflect on their knowledge, skills, and functioning.

Besides the variety of meanings of competence, we can find two different concepts in British and American academic papers: *competence* in Britain and *competency* in America, according to S. Mitchelmore and J. Rowley [7]. While *competence* refers to behavior a person should be able to demonstrate, as D. Moore et al. put it [8], *competency* is defined as an underlying set of personal characteristics that facilitate superior performance, according to R. Boyatzis [9]. The ambiguity of the concept of competence has been making a problem for years despite the currently frequent usage in science, educational policy and practice, which burdens academic communication and makes it impossible to evaluate research findings [10].

Thus, competence has evolved into “one of the most controversial and confusing terms in the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics” since N. Chomsky’s division of competence and performance [11]. It is no less interesting to find out how the concept of speech competence has been developing for the time of its formation. For decades, scholars have used sometimes interchangeably a plethora of terms connected with speech per se: linguistic competence, grammatical competence, communicative competence, language competence, speech competence, etc. No doubt, all these competencies are inextricably linked, but academic discourse acutely needs further delineation of their meanings.

The original concept put forth by N. Chomsky in 1965 focused on making and comprehending speech. Although grammatical knowledge serves as the foundation for actual language use, phrases that are grammatically accurate in one context may not make sense in another. N. Chomsky eventually agreed that in addition to grammatical competence (i.e., “knowledge of form and meaning”), there existed pragmatic competence (i.e., “knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use”). N. Chomsky stated that competence is “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of the language” [12, p. 188]. It specifically refers to the body of linguistic information that native speakers of a language possess, which enables users to produce an endless number of grammatically sound phrases and to spot errors and ambiguities in the sentences. Performance, on the other hand, refers to a speaker’s actual speech, which frequently represents their capacity to employ that information in an imprecise way. However, N. Chomsky believed his own idea to be superior since it views language as “a system of generative process” as opposed to “merely a systematic inventory of items” [3, p. 89]. In other words, rather than being a static process, language production—whether it is oral or written—is a dynamic and innovative activity. This likely explains why there are stable expressions in specific contexts and linguistic developments in unanticipated settings.

D. Hymes proposed the idea of communicative competence, building on N. Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance. According to D. Hymes, communication competence is a system of skills that enables a person to determine whether and to what extent something is “formally possible”, “feasible”, “appropriate”, and “done” [13].

Contrarily, the appropriateness and context of the utterances generated are not taken into account in N. Chomsky’s concept of competence. Producing statements “appropriate to the context in which they are made” is more crucial, claim R. Campbell and R. Wales [14]. In other words, our ability to express, interpret, and negotiate meanings interpersonally within certain situations is a function of our communicative competence. As a result, the term “communicative competence” is used to describe people’s capacity to communicate in a variety of sociocultural contexts as well as their grammatical knowledge of how to make appropriate utterances.

N. Chomsky’s definition of competence focuses on one’s abstract knowledge system rather than their physical capacity or language use, and it is defined from a cognitive and biological standpoint. In other words, from N. Chomsky’s perspective, competence is a mental state made up of systematic knowledge that creates and connects different kinds of mental representations. D. Hymes made the observation that competence was not just about knowledge but also about capacity to use, based on Chomsky’s definition of competence. According to his assertion, “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” [13, p. 270]. As G. Teachman and B. E. Gibson point out, D. Hymes’ communicative competence, however, can be seen as a combination of performance and competence, as he incorporated ability into his conception of competence, which differs significantly from N. Chomsky’s original intent, according to which competence is about knowledge of grammar and use rather than ability [15].

In an effort to “determine the feasibility and practicality of measuring” communication competence, M. Canale and M. Swain extended D. Hyme’s concept of communicative competence and offered a theoretical framework. M. Canale and M. Swain accepted that communicative competence encompasses knowledge of the rules of language usage in addition to linguistic competence, but they later failed to make a distinction between knowledge and ability [16]. Instead, they equated knowledge with aptitude or competence. N. Chomsky’s biological and cognitive perspective of competence is possibly still the most influential construct, despite the fact that the idea of competence has been altered, contextualized, and changed repeatedly. This is because scholars frequently concur with the knowledge-centered definition of competence, pointing out that competence includes not only knowledge of grammar rules but also knowledge of using those rules in communication [17].

The idea of “speech competence” is actively used in contemporary pedagogical language. However, the scientific literature uses this term in many ways that makes its meaning unclear. Speech competence, according to M. Pentyluk, is a part of communicative competence, and is a human action that is carried out during speech activity and is targeted at understanding or producing a text (oral or written). He defines speech competence as “the ability to use knowledge in practice, to use linguistic units” and views it as a basic concept in the structure of communicative competence which,

in turn, is defined by him as “the ability to use a language depending on the situation, the particular quality of the speech personality acquired in the course of communication or specially organized learning” [18, p. 230]. Speech competence is defined by A. Bogush as the capacity to effectively and appropriately utilize a language in a given setting, as well as to use it for extra-linguistic (facial expressions, gestures, and intonational) and linguistic methods of conveying speech [19].

M. Hreb, N. Hrona, V. Chumak, O. Vyshnyk and V. Hreb consider speech competence as “an integral quality of a person, manifested in the ability and willingness to use linguistic means, laws of their functioning for construction and understanding of speech utterances in accordance with the communicative purpose”, and they formulate the definition specifically for the speech competence of primary school students as follows: “the ability to listen, perceive and reproduce information, read and understand a text, be engaged in discussions, persuade and defend their point of view, express their own opinions, points of view, in oral and written forms” [20, p. 98].

Thus, scholars recognize the inextricable connection of knowledge and skills with competence to be indisputable, but at the same time they interpret the latter as a more extensive concept. Differentiating competence from knowledge allows us to establish that its presence should mean not simple possession of some information by a person, but the ability to use it in a given activity. The applicability of competence in solving diverse problems distinguishes it from skills. The ability of a person to unambiguously act in various situations, including non-standard ones, determines the difference between competence and skills.

Based on all the ideas mentioned above, we have developed the *contextual definition of the speech competence of preschoolers* that is a dynamic integral personal quality manifested in the ability and willingness to successfully listen, perceive and reproduce information, be engaged in conversation, express personal opinions and points of view in the oral form in accordance with the age norm.

Defining criteria and indicators of the speech competence of preschoolers, that forms the basis for a proper assessment of the level of speech competence, we relied on certain scholars’ ideas regarding language components.

L. Bloom, and M. Lahey identified three major language components: the form, content, and use of language [21]. Language form includes *phonology, morphology, and syntax*. These language areas are similar in that they define the structure and rules of language. Language content refers to the area of *semantics*, or the meaning of words and the relationship of these words to one another. Language use describes the *pragmatic and social* components of language.

In line with this, K. P. Zaitseva points out that the child’s speech competence includes these five aspects: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics [22].

Despite the fact that each of these five aspects is described quite separately, they actively interact with one another. For instance, preschoolers’ ability to construct longer phrases develops as their vocabulary grows. This interaction proves the integral nature of speech competence and makes it necessary to establish the so-called meta-components in that competence, uniting its functional structure into wholeness.

All the analytical discussion given allows us to build a model of the speech competence of preschool children (table).

Table. – The model of the speech competence of preschool children

Meta-components	
– awareness of the ways and means of speech interaction; – adequacy of selection of available speech skills, their application in speech activity; – orientation in a speech situation; – complex, variable, and creative application of speech means according to the set goal	
Functional components	Content of functional components
Lexical	vocabulary within the age norm (synonyms, homonyms, related and multi-valued words, basic and figurative meanings of words, single-root words, figurative expressions, proverbs, sayings, idioms)
Phonologic	speech hearing for perceiving and distinguishing phonological means of language; phonetic and orthoepic correctness of speech; a command of speech sound expressiveness (tempo, timbre, voice strength, stress)
Grammatical	word formation skills; the use of various grammatical forms; the ability to handle syntactic units for conscious language selection in specific communication situations
Dialogical	dialogic skills that provide constructive communication with others: understanding of a coherent text (sounding speech); the ability to answer questions; the ability to start and maintain a dialogue
Monological	the ability to listen and understand the sounding speech, the ability to retell; the ability to independently build coherent statements of different types; the ability to talk about events from personal experience, about the content of plot paintings, on the proposed or selected topic

Although being versatile, the model, however, contains the operational characteristics of the competence, which makes the concept applicable to the formation process and measurable. The model includes five functional components of the speech competence: lexical, phonologic, grammatical, dialogical, and monological ones. It also contains meta-components of the speech competence that describe the holistic and integral essence of it.

As it is seen from the model, the basic phenomenological characteristics of the preschoolers' speech competence can be generalized as follows:

- speech skills per se,
- perception skills and abilities,
- speech interaction skills and willingness.

These phenomenological characteristics have been drawn from synthetic analysis of the existing disparate approaches to the term, our understanding of it, and the nature of speech as such that, in turn, has allowed us to offer the set of functional components of the model.

Conclusion. The summative conclusion is that the usage of the term speech competence has not had a conventional definition in pedagogical discourse for years especially when it comes to preschool age. Our study has allowed us to define its phenomenological characteristics through considering the preschool child's speech competence as a dynamic integral personal quality manifested in the ability and willingness to successfully listen, perceive and reproduce information, be engaged in conversation, express personal opinions and points of view in the oral form in accordance with the age norm. The operational characteristics of the preschool child speech competence have been defined as its functional components subjected to pedagogical impact. Those components are the lexical, phonologic, grammatical, dialogical, and monological ones. The speech competence of preschool children contains also meta-components that are as follows: awareness of the ways and means of speech interaction; adequacy of selection of available speech skills, their application in speech activity; orientation in a speech situation; complex, variable, and creative application of speech means according to the set goal. Following the inner structure of the preschool child's speech competence in the educational process should make preschool education more effective and its outcomes more easily measurable in an integral way.

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ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ И ОПЕРАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ РЕЧЕВОЙ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ ДЕТЕЙ ДОШКОЛЬНОГО ВОЗРАСТА

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На основе ретроспективного анализа научного дискурса нескольких десятилетий показано, что термин «речевая компетентность» не получил общепринятого определения, особенно когда речь идет о дошкольном возрасте. Проведенное авторами исследование позволило определить феноменологические характеристики речевой компетентности дошкольника, рассматривая ее как динамичное интегральное личностное качество, проявляющееся в умении и готовности успешно слушать, воспринимать и воспроизводить информацию, вести беседу, выражать личные мнения и точки зрения в устной форме в соответствии с возрастной нормой. В качестве функциональных компонентов, подлежащих педагогическому воздействию, определены лексический, фонологический, грамматический, диалогический и монологический. Эти компоненты содержат операциональные характеристики речи ребенка дошкольного возраста. Речевая компетентность детей дошкольного возраста также включает следующие мета-компоненты: осознание путей и средств речевого взаимодействия; адекватность выбора имеющихся речевых навыков, их применение в речевой деятельности; ориентация в коммуникативной ситуации; комплексное, переменное и творческое применение речевых и неречевых средств в соответствии с поставленной целью. Следование внутренней структуре речевой компетентности ребенка дошкольного возраста в образовательном процессе должно сделать его более системным, а результаты этого процесса – легче измеримыми в их комплексной, интегративной совокупности.

Ключевые слова: речевая компетентность, дети дошкольного возраста, дошкольное образование.