

The Competency-Based Approach to Passing First Certificate in English

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Abstract: In this article the influence of competency-based approach of foreign language teaching to successful passing First Certificate in English (FCE) has been shown and the empirical analysis of the effectiveness of this approach for students of non-linguistic specialties has been conducted. The range of research methods (theoretical, empirical, statistical) has been used to reach the research purpose and justify the research finding. It has been confirmed that the most relevant type of a competency-based approach to teaching a foreign language for specific purposes is the communicative competency-based one. The linguistic competence, which is considered by authors to be the central multicomponent notion has been defined and characterized from the perspective of teaching English as a foreign language. The linguistic competence is based on five practical competences: Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Use of English. To check the effectiveness of the applying competency-based approach of teaching foreign language (English) for specific purposes the empirical (diagnostic) methods such as: testing (oral and written), observation, discussion were used; the pedagogical experiment was also conducted with the students. Statistical methods (Student's t-test) helped to evaluate the results of the pedagogical experiment. The t-value result ranged from 3 to 4.7 shows the difference between the sample data and the null hypothesis that is significant, which proves the statistical importance of the obtained results.

Keywords: *Competence; FCE exam; teaching; student; experiment.*

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1. Introduction

The digitization of the society has caused significant changes in the ways of acquiring, processing and perceiving knowledge, which in its turn have led to reshaping of educational paradigm in the post-secondary schooling: the necessity of the revision of higher education landscape, its role and focuses and also the status of higher education institutions that now evolve from being the centre of knowledge dissemination to the core of forming certain competences needed for professional and social life of an individual. Thus, competency-based approach has become one of the most progressive and efficient nowadays.

On the other hand, the globalization processes have facilitated to the increase of the role of intercultural communication and consequently to the necessity of knowledge of foreign languages. Hence higher education institutions must provide future specialists with proficiency at least in one of the foreign languages. So, it is especially important to find the effective ways of this subject teaching.

Among the number of languages spoken across Europe, English heads the list as the one chosen by the majority of young people as the most useful. English is considered as the opportunity to meet employer's demands, to go on studying in another country, to pass professional exams, to take part in international students' exchange programs etc.

However, for most career or academic purposes the knowledge of elementary English is not enough, many employers and educationalists require a reliable proof of English proficiency. Cambridge ESOL exams are recognized by many European educators and employers, thus being preferable for those who aim at working or studying in the countries of Europe. So, the preparation for such exams usually involves the development of certain practical language competences.

A brief review of publications on the subject of research allows us to state that the relationship of successful passing First Certificate in English (FCE) and competency-based approach was not the subject of an investigation of a wide range of scholars. The most considered question was the specification of certain foreign-language communicative skills such as competence in listening (Rost, 1991; Rost, 2011; Vandergrift, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004; Ling-hui, 2007; Fang, 2008; Marx et al, 2017); competence in writing (Whitaker, n.d; Smith, 2006; Rodriguez, 2008; Stephanie & Kerschbaum, 2016; Ingale, 2017); competence in speaking

(Paakki, 2013; Kwiatkowska, 2015); competence in reading (Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2007) etc.

However, the issue of the relationship between passing FCE and the competency-based approach to teaching foreign languages to students of non-linguistic specialties from the standpoint of its effectiveness was not the subject of a detailed study of scholars.

The purpose of the article is to identify the correlation between learning English for passing FCE and the competency-based approach as well as its effectiveness. The tasks are: to confirm theoretically the importance of the competency-based approach to teaching a foreign language; to check experimentally the effectiveness of the competency-based approach of teaching foreign language (English) for specific purposes (for students of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University).

2. Material and Method

In accordance with the purpose of the research and the solution of the tasks set in the work were used:

1) theoretical methods of the research: analysis and synthesis of scientific literature. They were applied to characterize the mentioned approach, its distinctive features from the point of view of higher education, the interpretation of communicative competency-based approach, systematization of generalized theoretical information and formulation of conclusions;

2) empirical (diagnostic) methods: testing (oral and written), observation, discussion; pedagogical experiment on the study of the effectiveness of teaching the foreign language for non-linguistic students with the use of a competent approach. They were applied for conducting an experiment;

3) statistical methods for evaluating the results of the experiment: Student's t-test in which the test statistics follows a Student's t-distribution under the null hypothesis.

3. Results

It is known that the quality of teaching foreign languages to a large extent depends on the implementation by the teacher of the basic requirements of the theory of linguistic activity while teaching foreign languages. Therefore, in order to achieve the best results in mastering a

foreign language, it is important to find out whether there is a relationship between modern educational paradigms, namely a competency-based approach and passing FCE.

The main characteristic of a competency-based approach is that the student's attention is focused on the result of his education, that is, on his ability to act in specific practical situations. Consequently, from the standpoint of a competency-based approach, education forms the basis of the formation and development of the competence phenomenon. The analysis of scientific literature allows specifying the distinctive features of this approach from the position of higher education. They are: the social and personal significance of the acquired knowledge, skills and abilities, qualities and methods of professional productive activity of the future specialist; a clear definition of the goals of professional and personal improvement, expressed in behavioural and evaluation terms; the existence of a clear system of measurement criteria that can be fixed, measured and processed by statistical methods.

For the teaching foreign languages the most relevant kind of a competency-based approach is the communicative competency-based one. It serves the achievement of pragmatic goals due to the activation of a wide range of multilevel speech means owned by the student at the moment; actualization of his adaptive capabilities, experience and methods of transformative activity.

To confirm theoretically the existence of the relationship of the competency-based approach to teaching a foreign language and passing FCE it seems to be expedient to consider the main components of linguistic competence, which is the central point of the communicative-competence approach applied to foreign language teaching. Definitely, they are foreign-language communicative competencies, based on skills, they are usually five practical competences, Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Use of English, included in the linguistic competence.

Taking these arguments into account, it is possible to sum up that linguistic competence gives the specialist an opportunity to analyze personal experience in the field of intercultural communication, to improve humanitarian and socio-cultural competences, to correct students' practice of language interaction and application.

To all intends the notion of 'linguistic competence' in this study is regarded as central since it helps to apprehend the connection of passing FCE and competency-based approach, and moreover, the term 'linguistic

competence' can be used to demonstrate how effective is the application of competency-based approach to teaching English for specific purposes, another yet no less important question which requires careful consideration and detailed analysis.

In this regard the 'linguistic competence' is interpreted as the combination of practical language competences based on skills which reflect a person's ability to use the foreign language as a tool to adapt to the English language environment and solve the range of tasks involving the use of a foreign language. These skills are usually grouped into five practical competences: Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Use of English.

To comprehend schematically a theoretical model of competency-based approach to passing FCE exam Figure 1 is constructed. We can imagine the process as building a house where the communicative competence is the foundation, the basic linguistic competence is the ground floor, the bricks are five practical competences such as Writing, Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Use of English, and, finally, the top of our house is the reached goal FCE exam (see figure 1).

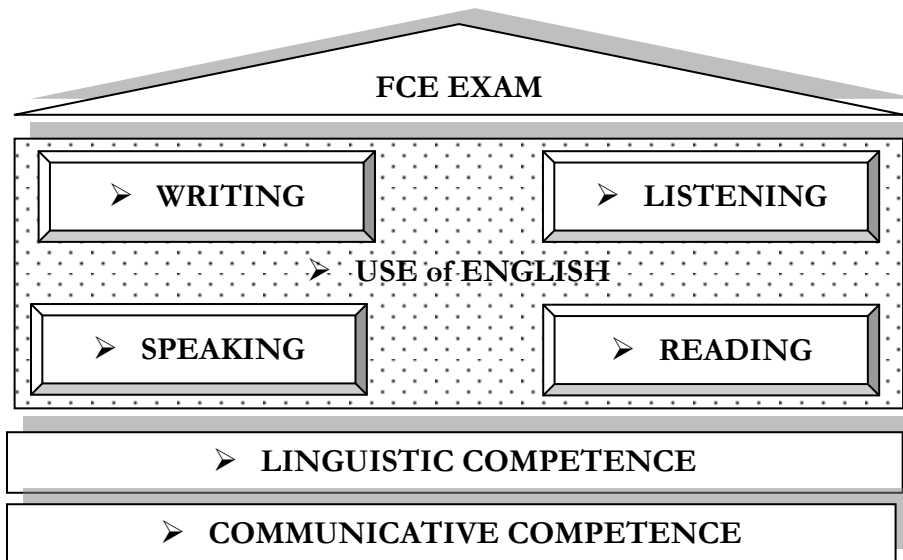


Figure 1. A Theoretical Model of Competency-Based Approach to Passing FCE Exam

So, in order to solve this task the pedagogical experiment was carried out in H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University in 2016/2018. The focus group chosen for

the experiment included 30 third- and fourth-year students of the H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University who apart from the curriculum course of English were attending an optional FCE preparation course that lasted for 2 academic years. Besides, the following features of uniformity of the group can be pointed out: 1) the students were about the same age (from 20 to 22 years old); 2) they are the students; 3) all of them successfully completed the compulsory university course of English; 4) they were highly motivated and dedicated (in view of the fact that their purpose was receiving a Certificate that could enable them to be enrolled for various international student programmes); 5) their academic performance in other subjects demonstrated their critical thinking and high learning and academic potential.

The instruction was supported by the use of information and communication technologies (Kostikova, 2018), multimedia technology (Holubnycha & Shatrava, 2017) that enabled to expose the students to sound, video, animation of the authentic target language, which gave the students the strong visual impact and made them get involved in the authentic language environment more completely (Miasoiedova, 2016).

The main objective of the course was achieving level B2 on CEFR which, according to the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), means that by the end of the course students have to obtain the following real-life language competencies (The ALTE, 2002) (see table 1).

Table 1. Real-life Language Competencies for Level B2 on CEFR

Reading	Use of English	Writing	Listening	Speaking
CAN scan texts for relevant information.		CAN express opinions and give reasons.	CAN interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.	
CAN read the media for information quickly and with good understanding.		CAN write a letter including non-standard requests.	CAN ask for clarification and further information, and is likely to understand the answer.	
CAN understand the general meaning of non-routine letters and understand most of the content.		CAN write a simple report of a factual nature and begin to evaluate, advise, etc.	CAN ask for factual	
CAN understand the		CAN produce clear, detailed text on a		

main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialization.

wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. CAN present arguments, using a limited range of expression (vocabulary, grammatical structures).

information and understand the answer. CAN express own opinion, and express arguments to a limited extent. CAN answer predictable or factual questions. CAN make notes while someone is talking. CAN check that all instructions are understood.

In order to provide the credibility of the results, the students were given a series of placement tests (both oral and written) at the beginning of the experiment, which allowed us to define their level of the competence in English according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale (see figure 2).

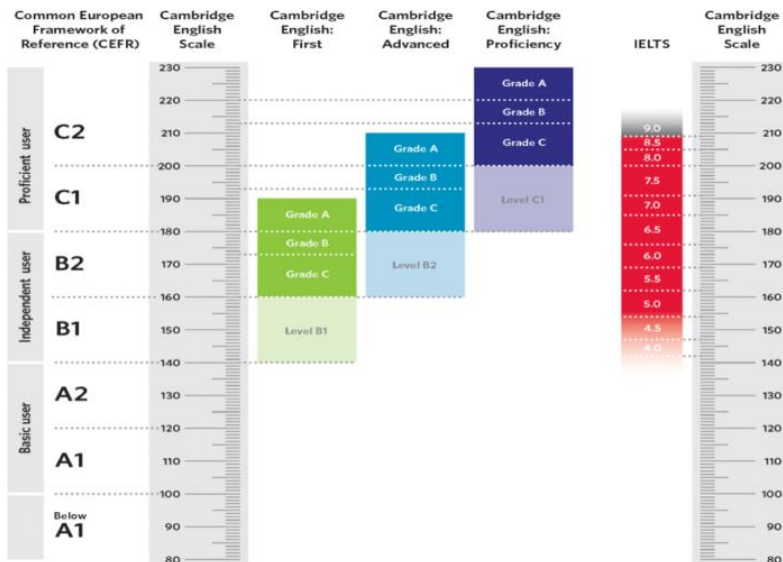


Figure 2. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Scale

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been adopted for this investigation in view of the fact that being an international standard for describing language ability, it is convenient and universal. It describes the knowledge of a learner on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who are proficient in English making it easy to understand the level and compare the results.

Correspondingly, at the end of the course the students were assessed by University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in five English language practical competences (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Use of English), and the statements of results contained detailed information on the performance of every student, which has given the opportunity of analyzing this data and to determine the best learning strategies to facilitate the process of learning acquisition and sustaining (see figure 3).

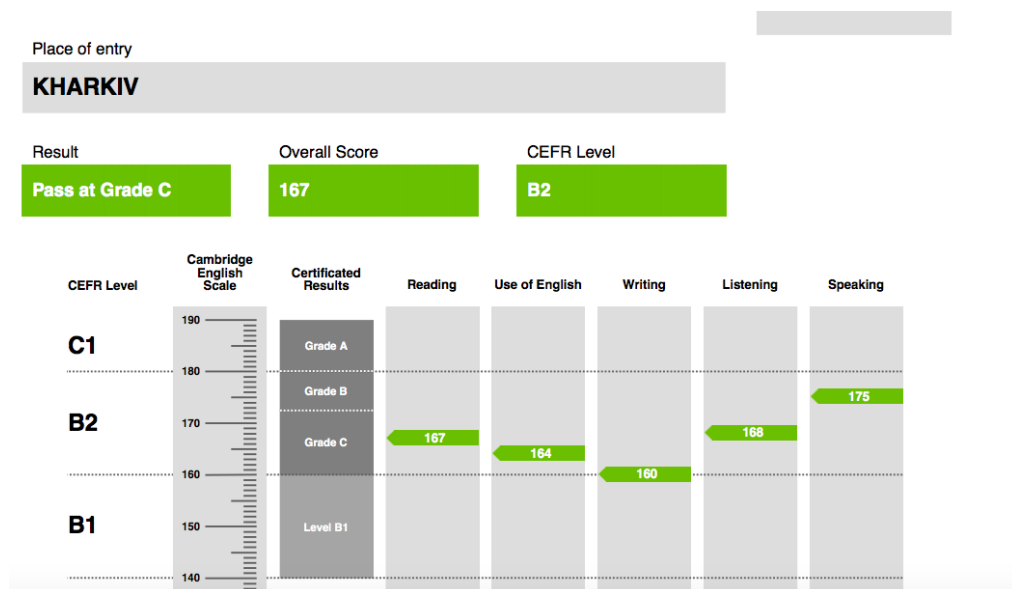


Figure 3. Statement of Results

Having obtained the data of students' performance in five different competences, we managed to compare average scores (means) and to state with some degree of confidence that the obtained difference between the means of the sample group is big enough to be a chance event, and to define if some difference also exists in the people from which the sample was drawn.

The bar chart shown in figure 4 displays the difference in students' score obtained as a result of pretesting (the blue bars) and their performance at the end of the course (the red bars) in five constituents of the linguistic competence: Reading, Use of English, Writing, Listening and Speaking (see figure 4).

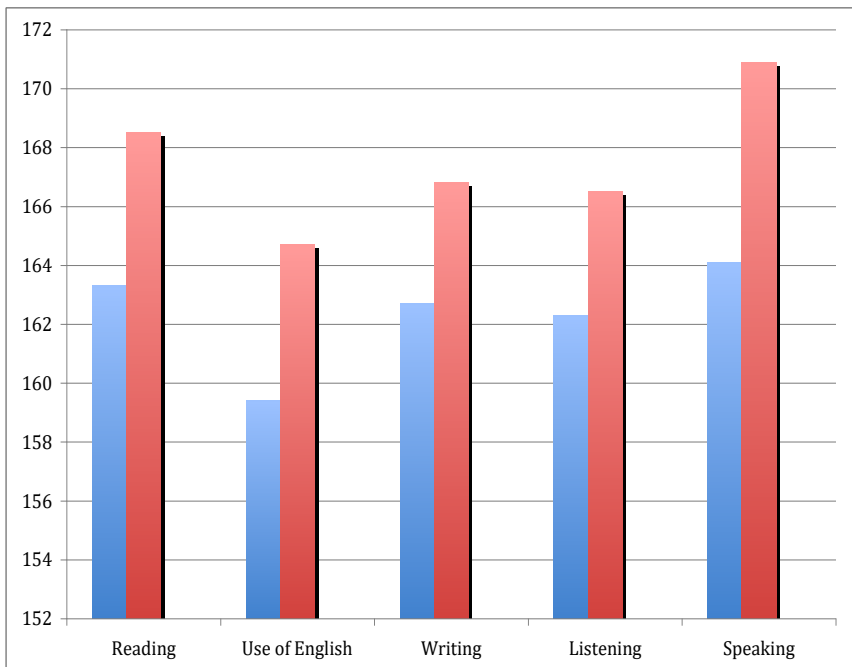


Figure 4. Comparison of the Tests Results

Statistical analysis

The findings are represented as the Mean \pm Standard Deviation/ Standard Error of the Mean ($M \pm SD / SEM$). Since a normal distribution was confirmed, a t-test for dependent samples was performed to define differences between the results. The data were analyzed with the licensed computer program Microsoft EXCEL. Significant levels in all tests were set at $P \leq 0.05$.

The results are shown in table 2 (see table 2) with *Mean* standing for average scores for sample population, *t* for *t-value* measuring the size of the difference relative to the variation in the sample data, *p* for *p-value* that indicates strong evidence against the null hypothesis.

Table 2. The Results of Students' Academic Performance at the Beginning and at the End of the Course

Competences	At the beginning of the course	At the end of the course	Average Progress (%)	t	p
	Mean \pm SD	Mean \pm SD			
Reading	163.3 \pm 3.9	168.5 \pm 4.9	3.2	3.2	\leq 0.01
Use of English	159.4 \pm 3.2	164.7 \pm 4.06	3.3	3	\leq 0.01
Writing	162.7 \pm 3.16	166.8 \pm 3.25	2.5	4.09	\leq 0.001
Listening	162.3 \pm 3.46	166.5 \pm 2.7	2.6	3.1	\leq 0.01
Speaking	164.1 \pm 3.8	170.9 \pm 5.08	4.1	4.7	\leq 0.001
Overall Performance	162.37	167.48	3.1	–	–

The resulting data prove that students improved their performance in the linguistic competence on average in 5.11 scores (3.1%); the most significant progress has been in Speaking with the average increase in 6.8 scores (4.1 %) whereas the least advance to be claimed is in Writing with 4.1 scores (2.5%). Such results can be explained by the fact that Speaking was the activity the most frequently applied, and practiced both in the examinational format and as a tool to obtain other educational objectives (e.g. while clarifying a grammar phenomenon, discussing a collocation paradox, analyzing textual contradiction etc.). On balance, it is possible to assume that all the components of the linguistic competence applied within the frameworks of the competency-based approach are realized in Speaking in their entirety making this competence to be the most successful in terms of students' performance and progress.

On the other hand, Writing tasks were performed by students as a part of their home assignment with occasional regularity, which provide for overall success, however less in final score of the test result. Students also demonstrated comparatively low progress in Listening, which can be attributed to the individual capacities of foreign speech recognition and processing.

Thus, the t-value result ranged from 3 to 4.7 let us claim that the difference between the sample data and the null hypothesis is significant, which proves the statistical importance of the results obtained.

4. Discussion

The main results of effectiveness of the competency-based approach are confirmed by many scholars, namely:

- instead of being knowledge-focused, competency-based courses are built around the skills necessary to carry out specified tasks (Kirpal & Gokhale, 2011; Griffith & Lim, 2014); the focus is on what students can *do* rather than on what they *know* (Smith & Patterson, 1998);

- the students are expected to demonstrate value-added skills which are assessed by looking at outcomes rather than process (Bowden, 2004);

- students' performance is evaluated during the instructional process against common learning standards, and all forms of assessment are standards-based and criterion-referenced (Guskey, 2005). After all, the teacher will be able to deliberately choose the most effective direction (Betsis & Mamas, 2015).

Definitely, the main practical competences such as Reading, Use of English, Writing, Listening and Speaking are included in the linguistic competence that is the underpinning of competency-based approach.

The researchers confirm some difficulties of forming the main practical competences and say that it is necessary to improve them hard in terms of difficulty for English as a second language for passing the international exams.

No doubt, our experimental results can be extrapolated for other researchers' data. The resulting data may be similar in terms of different competences. For example, if students have English speaking environment (they go travelling abroad often, have native speakers at universities, etc) speaking and listening competences will increase more. If students have a lot of reading and writing activities (take English notes, write English papers, essays, compositions, take part in writing students' contests, have a lot of professional English reading, read academic English books or journals) reading and writing competences will increase more. And such a competency-based approach helps to pass FCE successfully.

So, the comparison with other experiments of passing FCE shows the importance of forming main skills using competency-based approach. A brief discussion on the subject of our research allows us to underline that there is the correlation of competency-based approach (base on competencies) and successful passing FCE.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the synthesis of the research results allows us to draw the following conclusions: 1) there exists the relationship of passing FCE and the competency-based approach to a foreign language instruction as problems due to the foundations of teaching foreign languages for specific purposes are actualized in competency-based approach, since the components of linguistic competence as of the basic in foreign language instruction in its turn are closely connected with the theory of linguistic activity; 2) the comparison of the tests results conducted at the beginning and at the end of the experiment allowed to confirm statistically the effectiveness of applying competency-based approach of teaching English for specific purposes to passing FCE successfully.

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