INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS

Adrian LESENCIUC*
Aura CODREANU**

* Lecturer, *"Henri Coanda" Air Force Academy, Brasov, Romania*
** Junior Lecturer, Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, Brasov, Romania

The concepts of interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence and intercultural competence are prone to frequent misunderstanding as a result of an epistemic field that does not draw clear cut distinctions among the disciplines the former are subject of. With a view to facilitating future research in the fields of the aforementioned concepts, this paper will focus on their operationalization by delineating not only the differences among them, but also their inherent marginal overlapping.

Key words: *interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence, intercultural competence, culture, multidisciplinary approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence and intercultural competence are prone to frequent misunderstanding as a result of an epistemic field that does not draw clear cut distinctions among the disciplines the former are subject of. With a view to facilitating future research in the fields of the aforementioned concepts, this paper will focus on their operationalization by delineating not only the differences among them, but also their inherent marginal overlapping.

In this respect, the first distinction to be made is between interpersonal communication and intercultural communication. Thus, the former is culturally grounded, while the latter completes it and develops based on it.

Moreover, the intercultural dimension of the communication competence does not lead to narrowing the perspective on communication to the intercultural context generating it. On the contrary, it involves extending its definition by focusing on inter and multidisciplinary approaches to a concept that by its dynamic nature becomes difficult to pin down in a static definition. In this respect, Sercu notes that: *"The concept of 'intercultural communicative competence' is relatively new, interdisciplinary in nature, so widely used and under so many different conditions that, in the end, as Seelye poignantly puts it, „only the reader of any publication of intercultural communication holds its true definition".*

Thus, intercultural communication can be viewed as an instantiation of interpersonal communication. However, its features

depend on the context within which communication occurs.

For a clearer distinction between the two concepts, their analysis can be better performed by juxtaposing them on two defining axes: inter-personal communication vs. medi-ated communication on one hand and interactive studies vs. compara-tive studies (Assante şi Gudykunst), on the other hand. Starting from this, intercultural communication is part of the cultural studies- interpersonal communication quarter.
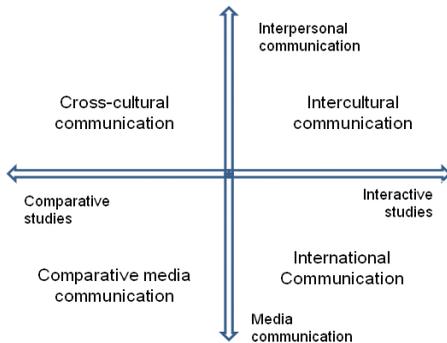

Fig.1. Intercultural communication framework
(apud Ammon, 2005:1675)

In addition, *"according to this model, both cross- and intercultural communication are about interpersonal communication. Cross-cultural communication focuses on comparative studies of interpersonal communication in different cultures, and intercultural communication focuses on interaction between persons representing different cultures (and international communication is concerned with mass communication across national media structures). However, there is some terminological confusion here, as the terms intercultural and cross-cultural sometimes appear to be used interchangeably"*. (Ammon, 2005:1674).

2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

A better understanding of the concept of "intercultural communication competence" requires an insight into the meaning of the overall concept of "competence", as well as into the one of "communication competence". Moreover, its correct usage imposes an overview of its origins and development. Consequently, this subchapter will focus on all of these.

As far as the concept of "competence" is concerned, the latter refers to the *"fitness or ability to perform"* (Spitzberg, Cupach, 1989:6) and, more specifically, to the ability of any individual to adequately perform in a given environment. Thus, it is inherently interrelated with the *"individual features that are tightly connected to personal values and knowledge"* (Levy-Leboyer, apud Şoitu, 2006:58), as well as to the overall anatomical, neurological, neurophysiological and behavioural feedback to the surrounding environment (Larousse, 2006:218). Thus, the concept of communication competence refers not only to the capacity to adapt to the surrounding environment, but also to the physical and psychological features of an individual that enable the latter's communicative performance in a given environment.

Currently, the communication competence is viewed as adequately performing in a given context and in front of a specific audience. However, the concept has been the subject of

debate over time. In this respect, it is worth reminding the specialists' opinion that the communication competence is not solely a matter of communication performance, but also an issue of being able to evaluate other communicators' performance.

2.1. A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE CONCEPT

The linguistic perspective on communication established by Chomsky (2006:4) focuses on the ability of an ideal receiver to produce/ understand infinity of grammatically correct sentences, but overlooks the pragmatic dimension of the concept. Thus, as Young notices, the linguists view this competence as *"the capacity to produce grammatically well-formed utterances in a language – utterances which convey the intended semantic meaning, presumably"* (Young, 1996:122).

However, such a perspective is quite a restrictive one and, hence, does not take into account how the interlocutor perceives reality, nor the norms that govern social relationships. As a result, the concept has evolved under the influence of interactionist schools. In this respect, the Frankfurt School, and more specifically Jürgen Habermas, had a notable influence. Starting with 1971 the latter rejects the restrictive notion of linguistic competence as explained by Chomsky on the grounds that it does not account for the cultural interpretation of meanings, nor for their negotiation. As a result, Habermas views the communication competence not in terms of an ideal meaning receiver/producer, but in terms of an ideal speaking situation that requires the receiver's/ producer's ability to:

(1) to enact an ideal communication instance and

(2) to use the knowledge and competence required by the role to be played.

Thus, the ideal speaking situation underlies the theory developed by Habermas, while the role played by a speaker is referred to as symbolic interaction and the communication instance is associated with the communication competence.

In 1979, Habermas defines the concept of communication competence as *"a speaker's capacity to introduce a correctly formulated sentence that is in accordance with reality and with the latter's orientation towards mutual understanding"* (Habermas, 1979:29).

Understanding is possible if the actors of the communicative stance simultaneously access the level of inter-subjectivity and the level of the objects upon which they agree. In line with Habermas, Hans-Eberhard Piepho (apud Berns, 1990:97), a specialist in language pedagogy defined communication competence as *"the ability to make oneself understood, without hesitation and inhibitions, by linguistic means which the individual comprehends and has learned to assess in terms of their effects, and the ability to comprehend communicative intentions even when they are expressed in a code which the speaker him or herself does not yet know well enough to use and is only partially available in his or her own idiolect"*.

Another definition of the concept is provided by sociolinguistics. Unlike Chomsky who focused on the syntactic dimension of communication or Habermas who

emphasized the semantic view, Dell Hymes (1972:284) takes a pragmatic view to the concept. As a result, it defines communication competence as the knowledge participants to the speech act need in order to interact at a social level and in order to be communicationally successful and that they employ by adapting themselves to concrete communication situations. Thus, the concept is redefined as the linguistic instantiation of the knowledge necessary for interaction within a given context that requires ability for the use of such knowledge. Canale and Swain take the concept even further and define it in terms of three components: grammar competence (similar to the one postulated by Chomsky), sociolinguistic competence (sociocultural and discursive) and strategic competence. Moreover, in 1986, Jan A. van Ek defined the concept as the sum of linguistic competence,sociolinguistic competence, discursive competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence, and social competence. Lyle F. Bachman (1990:87-97), takes a similar view by criticizing at the same time the static nature of the Canale-Swain model. As a result, the theorist proposes a model of analysis for the communication competence called the communicative language ability (CLA) model focusing on the linguistic and strategic competence, as well as on the psycho-physiological mechanisms of the individual.

A synthetic model presenting the functional relationships among the strategic, actional, linguistic and discursive competences is suggested by Marianne Celce-Murcia et al. (**Fig.2**). In their later studies (2000, 2008) the authors replace the name of "actional competence" with the one of "interactional competence" and also introduce the overall term of formulaic competence in order to refer the conventional aspects of language such "as the oral speech acts or the written rhetorical moves that function as part of communicative competence" (Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000:71).
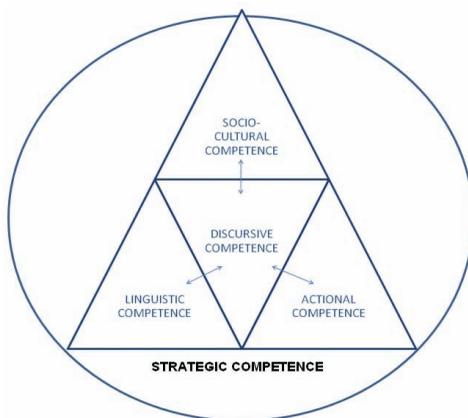

Fig.2. A schematic overview of the communication competence (Celce-Murcia et al.,1995:10)
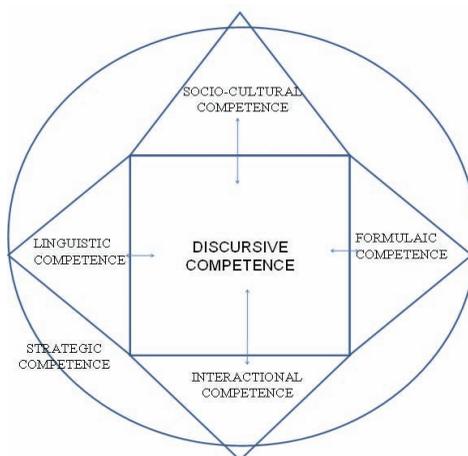

Fig.3. A reviewed schematic overview of the communication competence (Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000:45)

According to Henry G. Widdowson, the communication competence is not only a matter of matching different forms of knowledge, but also a matter of complex negotiation of the common knowledge framework within which the linguistic instantiation takes place (2007:25).

All of the above models contributed to the definition of the general competences and of the communication competence, in particular, within the Common European Framework, which represents the nexus of the theories underlying current training programs in foreign languages at the level of the European Union. (2002:5).

2.2. THE CULTURAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THE CONCEPT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

As it results from the brief theoretical background provided in the previous subchapterm the communication competence is made up of two distinct dimensions: a linguistic one and a performing one. Thus, while the former actually covers the linguistic competence, the latter refers to the communication competence. This one involves, besides factual linguistic performance, a communication capacity alongside with the ability to evaluate it. As a result, the communication competence is about interpersonal communication and communication skills that specialists view as *"specific components that make up or contribute to the manifestation or judgment of competence"* (Spitzberg, Cupach, 1989:6).

The difference between the two is delineated by Spitzberg and Cupach's dyadic model of the interpersonal competence that is described from a relational perspective. The model actually takes further the terminology imposed by Habermas, Piepho, Hymes, Canale&Swain, Bachman and Widdowson and it views competence as the result of effectiveness and appropriateness, while interpersonal competence is explained as follows: *"Effectiveness is pertinent to goal attainment, such as satisfaction, desired change, or creativity. The importance of appropriateness indicates the contextuality, or relation/context specificity. One's knowledge, motivation, and skills affect the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness, and ultimately influences other's judgment of competence."* (Wieman et al., 1997:31).

The distinction between competence and communication skills can be viewed from a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, from an inclusive viewpoint that subordinates communication skills to interpersonal competence. In this respect, Hajek şi Giles (2003:936) remark: *"(...) communication competence has been regarded as social judgement about behavior, in contrast to the notion of communication „skills", which refers to interlocutors' specific verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors."* (Hammer, 1989)".

On the other hand, competence is only a matter of establishing a relationship between effectiveness and appropriateness since *"interpersonal competence is intimately bound to the maintenance of mutually satisfying, effective relational systems... In fact, from an interactional perspective, it makes no sense to talk about a person*

being competent apart from a specific relationship or set of relationships" (Wieman et al., 1997:26).

The delineations made between the components of competence, in general, and of the interpersonal communication competence, in particular, as well as those between the communication competence and communication skills can contribute to the construction of a functional whole that allows the analysis of those elements that are characteristic of the psychological processes, of the observable activities, of the values that are an inherent part of any individual and, in the end, facilitates the development of the interpersonal communication competence. In this respect, the best model that summarizes the constitutents of the interpersonal communication competence is the one described by Wiemann&Wiemann (1992) and presented in **Figure 4**.
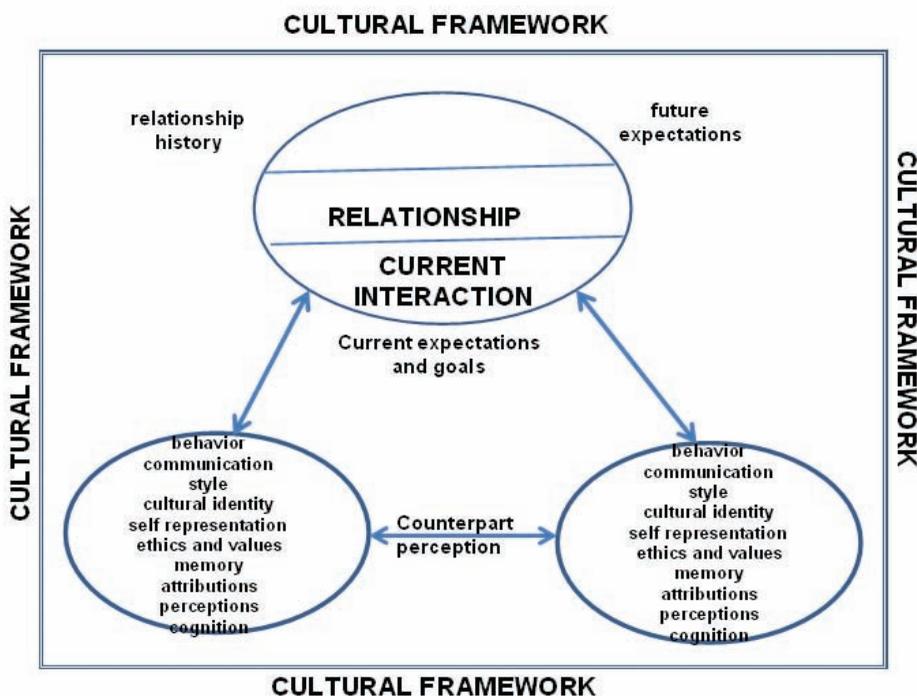

Fig.4. Reviewed schematic representation of the communication competence (Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000:45)

The interpersonal communication competence is, among other characteristics, a matter of a mutual cultural background. The latter, as an instantiation of the cultural identities of communication actors, is the result of a negotiation process between their cultural identities involving both self-perception and the perception and evaluation of the other in a game of identity and status disclosure. Thus, in the context of a new concept's emergence (i.e. intercultural communication competence) that imposes the alignment of the intercultural communication competence to the cultural background of the communication actors and

not its limitation to its pluri-cultural manifestation, cultural identity gains importance and relevance.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The intercultural communication competence requires an intercultural system of reference. Concerning this, Hajek şi Giles (2003:937) notice the following: "We generally consider communication to be "intercultural" to the extent that interlocutors perceive their group membership(s) to be salient in any given encounter (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986), but we also acknowledge, and adopt the view, that communication is "intercultural" when the group membership involved pertain to relatively large group of individuals (e.g., national or ethnic groups, with their unique histories, values, artifacts, customs, and communication patterns)".

Thus, intercultural communication allows both a broad and restrictive perspective. In this respect, according to Redder and Rehbein (apud Ammon, 2005:1677), the restrictive view concerns communication within a single society/community in a single language, while the general perspective refers to communication among members of different communities who employ their native language. Thus, once the system of reference allowing for the interpersonal communication to be characterized as intercultural is defined, then one can

also employ the terms of efficiency and appropriateness (characteristic of competences in general) to refer to the intercultural communication competence.

Simply put, the intercultural communication competence is defined as the efficient and appropriate communication in a given context (Samovar et al., 2010:384). However, a more complex definition of this type of competence would require viewing it as the ability to act efficiently and appropriately regardless of the cultural context. Hence, it would involve the following psychological profile of the communicator: motivated to communicate; adequate cultural knowledge; sensitivity; character (Samovar et al., 2010:386).

Concerning the psychosocial features, the intercultural communication competence is not a matter of an individual's availability, willingness and capacity to communicate within the limits of his/her own psychological, cognitive processes. On the contrary, it is characterized by dynamism, interaction, coordination. As a result, this kind of communication cannot be equaled to adaptive availability, nor to communication efficiency within a pluricultural framework, as Samovar et al. (2009:399) put it "(...) intercultural communication competence is a multidimensional concept comprising the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of human interaction. Intercultural effectiveness represents only the behavioral aspects of intercultural communication competence; it is inconceivable to treat intercultural effectiveness and intercultural communication competence interchangeably". Intercultural efficiency is easy to develop/train

and involves resorting to the sum of knowledge and skills that should be put into practice in an intercultural context but which are difficult to use if compared to the strategic competence described by Canale & Swain and Bachman. According to the aforementioned theoreticians, the development of the latter is based on a sensitivity to subtle differences, that is "developing strong intercultural communicative competence means that we have to open our eyes to the tacit differences (hidden dimensions) of intercultural encounters in order to understand why we want to say something, what to say, how to say it, when it is an appropriate time to say it, and to whom we would say it" (Tuleja, 2009:135).

The concepts of efficiency and appropriateness focus on a set of personal skills that involve performing in a communication context. Thus, efficiency is about an individual's ability to generate the envisaged results by interacting with a given environment (Chen, Starosta, 2008:217). Such a skill is viewed either as a manner of activating knowledge through learning, as well as the socialization of a human predisposition (White, 1959:297-333), or as being developed outside a system of reference with a forming role. "In addition, ideally competent communicators should be able to control and manipulate their environments to attain personal goals. In order to maximize such goals, individuals must be able to identify them, get relevant information about them, accurately predict others' responses, select communication strategies, implement those communication strategies, and accurately access the interaction result". (Chen, Starosta, 2008:217).

In this respect, generally speaking, the communication competence can be viewed as a set of personal abilities used in establishing and achieving objectives, in efficiently collaborating with the others and in adapting to varied situations. At a more particular level, this competence can be viewed not only as the efficient and appropriate interaction among different persons, but also as the efficient and appropriate interaction among people who identify themselves with a given physical or symbolic environment (Chen, Starosta, 2008:219). Thus, the intercultural communication competence can be defined as the ability to negotiate cultural meanings while efficiently and appropriately transferring information, namely as the identification and evaluation of multiple identities in a specific communication environment.

The intercultural communication competence is not the result of activating a single type of competence. Thus, the efficient and appropriate interaction is not solely about interpersonal communication, but also involves a certain inherent cultural profile of the actors involved in the communication process. In this respect, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) identified a set of seven competences that should be enacted when communicating with representatives of other cultures. These competences area as follows: the fundamental competence (the general ability to efficiently adapt to a new environment in order achieve the established objectives); the social competence (empathy, role enactment, cognitive complexity, interaction management); social abilities; interpersonal competence (adequate interaction in order to accomplish

goals and fulfill responsibilities by resorting to communication); linguistic competence (ability to use language); communication competence (knowledge of linguistic norms, of the rules required to enact the latter, namely of the means to adequate to language to the context that generates it); relational competence (related to interactions and involving the correlation of the other six competences by trespassing the limits they involve).

Such a perspective as the above characterizing intercultural communication as an event involving the activation of a number of competences renders a complex view. However, without simplifying, it is correct to say that the basic elements of all these competences are actually part of the intercultural communication competences. Aligned with the set of competences described by Spitzberg-Cupach, as well as with the psychological view on the communicator taken by Chen and Starosta (2008:221-229) I suggest a multilevel approach to intercultural communication that captures the interdependence between the processes of adaptation, interaction and communication, an interdependence that can be best explained through three perspectives:

a) intercultural sensitivity characterized by the view on oneself, open-mindedness, nonjudgmental attitudes and social relaxation;

b) intercultural awareness understood as self-awareness and cultural awareness);

c) intercultural adroitness defined through message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, interaction management and social skills.

This perspective is in line with Habermas' on communication competence and that is based on simultaneous social relations, reality and one's own identity. This complex delineation of the communication relationships with the Other who belongs to a different cultural environment from the one of the interlocutor can be included in the overall and global concept of intercultural communication competence. The latter includes two types of competences: communication competence and intercultural competence. Such a synthetic two-fold model was suggested by Wen (2004:175). Thus, according to this theoretician, the communication competence includes the linguistic, pragmatic and strategic competences, while the intercultural competence is based on the emotional, cognitive and behavioral levels.
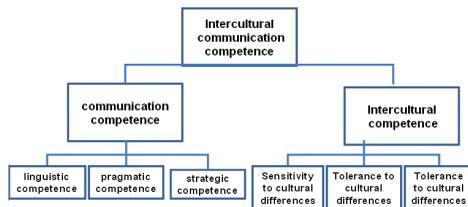

Fig.5. The intercultural communication competence: the Wen model (2004:175)

Apparently, sensitivity, tolerance and flexibility are characteristic only of the emotional and behavioral levels. Upon a detailed analysis, the three components of the intercultural competence also characterize the cognitive dimension and the latter becomes obvious in the logical relationship between the three Wen (2004:175). The relationships between the interpersonal communication competence and the intercultural communication can be viewed from a different perspective, as well.
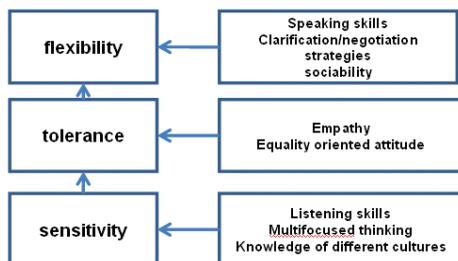
Fig.6. The logical relationship between the components of the intercultural competence

Thus, the phrase "communication competence" viewed through the theoretical delineations drawn by Hymes – Bachman – Celce-Murcia was further developed by including among its elements the "intercultural competence". The Usó-Juan – Martinez-Flor views the intercultural competence and the linguistic, strategic and pragmatic competences as equal, directly related to the discursive component and as an integral part of the interpersonal comunication competence. According to this model, the intercultural competence is about "how to interpret and produce a spoken or written piece of discourse within a particular sociocultural context" (Usó-Juan, Alicia Martinez-Flor, 2008:161), namely about simplifying the phrase compared to the Wen model.   .

4. CONCLUSIONS

The key concepts underlying interculturality as a field of study are: culture and communication. As far as the former is concerned, when relating its to the intercultural field it was used from an anthropological perspective to define those collective cultural experiences characteristic of a nation or of a community. However, the complexity of social relationships characteristic of contemporrary life renders such a meaning obsolete for the description of the relationships established by individuals belonging to an increasing number of social groups and, hence, performing a variety of roles imposed by their status within each of these. Thus, alongside the concept of culture, the concept of communication, as operationalized by disciplines like cultural anthropology, communication psychology, sociology, etc. is employed in order to better and more thoroughly define interculturality. As a result, one of the most often used concepts in referring to the intercultural field is the one of intercultural communication that is based on the meanings associated to the related concepts of intracultural communication and cross-cultural communication.

The current article is an attempt at providing a comprehensive and yet brief overview of the most significant theoretical models in the interrelated fields of intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence, and intercultural competence. In the long run, its goal is to offer clear-cut theoretical delineations that can be further used in developing future research projects in the fields of communication (whether of an intercultural or personal nature) or training programs for the people who are likely to establish relationships in intercultural contexts.

REFERENCES

[1] SERCU, Lies. (2000). Acquiring Intercultural Communicative Competence from Textbooks. The case of Flemish Adolescent Pupils Learning German. Leuven: Leuven University Press, col Studia Paedagogica 28: 61-74.

[2] Molefi K. Asante, William B. Gudykunst, Eileen Newmark (1989) Handbook of international and intercultural communication, Sage Publications

[3] AMMON, Ulrich (ed.). (2005). Sociolinguistics: An International Handbook of the Science of language and Society / Sozioliguistik: ein internationales handbuch zur Wissenschaft von Sprache und gesellschaft, 2nd completely rev. & extended ed. Berlin:Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co

[4] Spitzberg, B. & Cupach, W. (1989) Handbook of Interpersonal Competence Research. New York, Springer, p. 6

[5] ȘOITU, Laurențiu. (2002). Pedagogia comunicării. Iași: Institutul European, seria Psiho-pedagogie, colecția Universitaria

[6] CHOMSKY, Noam A. (2006). Language and Mind, third edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[7] YOUNG, Robert. (1996). Intercultural Communication. Pragmatics, genealogy, Deconstruction. Clevedon, Bristol, PA, Adelaide Multilingual matters, Ltd.

[8] Habermas, J. (1979) Communication and the evolution of society, Beacon Press, p. 29

[9] Hans-Eberhard Piepho apud Berns, M. S. (1990) Contexts of competence: social and cultural considerations in communicative language teaching, Springer, p.97.

[10] Dell Hymes (1972) Reinventing anthropology, University of Michigan Press, p. 284

[11] Canale and Swain (1979) Communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing, Ministry of Education : [available] from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Publications Sales.

[12] Lyle F. Bachman (1990) Fundamental considerations in language testing, OUP, pp.87-97.

[13] Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, E. (2000) Discourse and Context in Language Teaching: A Guide for Language Teachers, CUP, p.71.

[14] WIDDOWSON, H.G. (2007). Discourse Analysis. Oxford : Oxford University Press, Oxford Introductions to Language Study

[15] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, http://books.google.ro/books?id=PygQ8Gk4k4YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Common+European+Framework&hl=ro&sa=X&ei=ZLhfT778C8X5sgajhP2KBg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Common%20European%20Framework&f=false

[16] Spitzberg, B., Cupach, W. (1989) Handbook of Interpersonal Competence Research, Springer-Verlag, p. 6.

[17] HAJEK, Christopher, GILES, Howard. (2003). „New directions in intercultural communication competence. The process model". În John O. Green, Brant R. Burleson (eds.), Handbook of Commmunication and Social Interaction, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

[18] Hammer, (1989) apud Hajek and Giles

[19] WIEMANN, John M., TAKAI, Jiro, OTA, Hiroshi,. WIEMANN, Mary O. (1997). „A relational model of comunication competence". În Branislav Kovačić (ed.), Emerging Theories of Human Commmunication, Albany: State University of New York Press

[20] Redder and Rehbein (apud Ammon, 2005:1677),

[21] SAMOVAR, Larry A., PORTER, Richard E., McDANIEL, Edwin R. (2010). Communication between Cultures. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning

[22] SAMOVAR, Larry A., PORTER, Richard E., McDANIEL, Edwin R. (2009). Intercultural Communication: A Reader, twefth edition. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning

[23] TULEJA, Elisabeth A. (2009). Intercultural Commmunication for Business. Mason, OH: South-Western cengage Learning, Managerial Communication Series 4

[24] CHEN, Guo-Ming, STAROSTA, William J. (2008). "Intercultural communication competence". În Molefi Kete Asanta, Yoshitaka Miike, Jing Yin, The Global Intercultural Communication Reader, New York, NY, Abingdon, UK : Routledge

[25] Robert W. White, in Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence, Psychological Review, nr.66/1959, pp.297-333, suggests the phrase "effectance motivation" understood as the tendency to exploit and influence the environment. In this respect, White defines interpersonal competence as "the ability to inteact effectively with the environment";

[26] WEN, Qiufang. (2004). „Globalization and intercultural competence". În Kwok-Kan Tam, Timothy Weiss (eds.), English and Globalization. Perspectives from Hong Kong and mainland China. Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

[27] USÓ-JUAN, Esther, MARTINEZ-FLOR, Alicia. (2008). "Teaching intercultural communicative competence through the four skills". Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses, 21

[28] Berger, Gh. R., Michael E. Roloff, David R. Roskos- Ewoldsen (2010) The Handbook of Communication Science, Sage Publications.