Supporting English competence development in university teachers: Principles and practices

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Abstract

In today's world, the English language communicative competence is a major soft skill of university teachers which is needed for personal and professional fulfilment and career development. This study aimed at the design and practical realisation of the 72-hour English course stimulating the teaching staff's engagement in language learning and English communicative competence development at the Omsk State Agrarian University. The authors have discussed the principles and approaches to the course content design and efficacy of four classroom management strategies: the use of real life communication situations, making presentations, visual thinking strategy and short-film-based discussions for developing EFL communicative competence in university teachers. The situational approach to the content design introduced 'real-life' communicative situations serving as a teaching method and an assessment tool. The participants of the course took an online test: 'Evaluation of Readiness for The Certificate Exam in English', developed by the Tomsk Polytechnic University, at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the course..

Keywords: Communicative competence, adult language learning, university teaching staff, visual thinking, situational approach, communicative environment.

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1. Introduction

In today's fast-changing world, the range of competences required in a teaching position at the university is wide. University teaching staffs need to develop new competences, soft skills and attitudes to constantly innovate and adapt to new standards and requirements (Ngang, 2018; Pachauri & Yadav, 2014). These include communicative competence both in the mother tongue and foreign languages, critical thinking, ICT skills, social intelligence and cultural awareness (Hadar & Brody, 2018; Yermentaeyeva, Aurenova, Uaidullakyzy, Ayapbergenova & Muldabekova, 2014). The roles of university teaching staff are diverse, and so are expectations about them: apart from their main teaching responsibilities, teachers are expected to participate in the international academic mobility programmes, publish research papers in international scientific journals, and make speeches in international conferences. For personal and professional fulfilment and development in the scientific international environment, teachers should possess EFL communicative competence (Masalimova et al., 2017; Simon & Crick, 2012; Zlatic, Bjekic, Marinkovic & Bojovic, 2014).

In spite of the fact that the Foreign Language has always been a compulsory subject in the curriculum in all the universities and colleges in Russia, in the recent past, foreign language education for non-English majors failed to develop communicative competence in students. University undergraduates have been taught reading and translating skills mostly with some focus on English vocabulary and grammar. The efforts were made to prepare students to pass English exams rather than develop their practical ability to use the language for communication.

It is important to mention that the English textbooks made in Britain do not have official approval from the Russian Ministry of Education. So, they are not allowed for use in universities. In this situation, EFL teachers can use English textbooks made by Russian scholars or they prepare their own teaching materials. Usually, they are based on the traditional reproductive approach and have little focus on the communication. Due to these factors, the teachers and professors of the Omsk State Agrarian University (OSAU) did not gain sufficient proficiency in a foreign language when they were university undergraduates and postgraduates. At present, they have to admit that the EFL communicative competence is most in need for their successful career development.

Recently, the concept of communicative competence has become a topic of special interest to EFL teachers at OSAU. The model of the communicative competence in undergraduates has been developed by Kulamikhina and Yesmurzaeva (2016). The EFL programme has been redesigned with the infusion of critical-thinking approach to EFL teaching (Kulamikhina & Yesmurzaeva, 2018). A lot of research has been done in relation to the most efficient classroom management strategies and extra-curricular activities aimed specifically at the development of communicative competence in students (Golubkova, Masalimova & Birova, 2017; Kulamikhina & Lebedenko, 2017; Novikova, Alipichev, Kalugina, Esmurzaeva & Grigoryeva, 2018).

This study aims at the design and practical implementation of the EFL course stimulating the teaching staff's engagement in language learning and EFL communicative competence development at OSAU.

This study focuses on the following theoretical questions: (1) What is teachers' EFL communicative competence and how is it revealed? (2) What are the appropriate pedagogical principles and approaches to designing the content and instruction of the language course?

2. Literature review

Many researchers have made efforts to elaborate on the concept of communicative competence. Being first introduced by Hymes (1972), the concept of communicative competence was defined as 'the socially appropriate use of language'. He made the distinction between linguistic and communicative competence emphasising in the latter two important aspects: linguistic and social. According to Hymes (1972), the concept of communicative competence comprises both the

knowledge of the language as well as the ability to use the language for real communicative purposes. Since then, a great amount of the research work has been done to further develop and enrich the concept of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Chen, Gorbunova, Masalimova & Birova, 2017; Crick, 2008; Savignon, 1983; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Widdowson, 1978; Wiemann, Takai, Ota & Wiemann, 1997; Wiseman, 2001). For example, Widdowson (1978) describes the relationship between linguistic systems and their communicative values. He points out that the competence reveals through performance, in meaningful communicative behaviour (Wiseman, 2001). The competence is described as a complex combination of knowledge, values, dispositions, attitudes and skills which lead to effective, embodied action in the world, in a particular domain (Crick, 2008). Therefore, 'competence' is distinguished from 'skill', which is defined as the ability to perform complex acts with precision and adaptability. According to the Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence, it is the ability to use the language system appropriately in cross-cultural circumstances, with regard to the functions and the varieties of language, as well as shared sociocultural suppositions (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Thus, the communicative competence is not just a linguistic competence, as communication involves more than just knowing language rules. It is a combination of the knowledge of the language and sociocultural norms, values and attitudes and practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in a variety of settings (sociocultural, educational, professional) (Frolova, Kalugina, Artamonova & Boykov, 2016; Kalugina, 2016; Kazakov, Zakirova & Birova, 2017; Kulamikhina & Yesmurzaeva, 2016). The evaluation of communicative competence, therefore, involves the assessment of the language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) in the context and practical language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) in different settings. The communicative competence is revealed by producing or receiving texts in the oral or written forms in various contexts with a certain communicative purpose. These contexts correspond to various situations of personal, social, educational and professional life.

The next important issue about the pedagogical principles and approaches to the content design of the course is considered in relation to adult language learning. Motivation and responsibility are the two strong factors that can bring adult learners to success in language learning. In the beginning, it is important to assess the learners' needs and goals to establish the content that is relevant to and usable in social life and work. The content relevance will increase learners' motivation and determination to complete the course. Also, while adapting teaching materials to the learners' needs, it is essential to draw on learners' personal experiences and strengths with language learning. It will produce a feeling of involvement and responsibility for learning outcomes (Melnichuk & Osipova, 2017).

Making meaning in adult language learning is also very important. Learning a language in the context gives adult learners more understanding of how to use vocabulary and grammar rules in meaningful communication. The situational approach to the content design introduces 'real-life' communicative situations. The essential feature of this approach is that the language is seen as a social medium, not as an educational aim. This approach may motivate learners to see that what they are learning is 'real-life' language that meets their communication needs (Ash-Shammari & Al-Sibai, 2005).

The selection of classroom management strategies for developing communicative competence is based on the following principles: active learning, cooperative learning and using visuals in the classroom.

1. Active learning promotes better involvement of participants of the course in the educational process. With this model of instruction, adult learners are more responsible for their outcomes. Active learning engages adult learners in two aspects—doing things and thinking about the things they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Kong, Kayumova & Zakirova, 2017).
2. Cooperative learning gives participants more opportunities for meaningful communication. Learning cooperatively, they can capitalise on one another's resources and skills (asking one

another for information, evaluating one another's ideas, monitoring one another's work, etc.) (Gilles & Adrian, 2003). Besides, participants in cooperative learning settings compared to those in individualistic or competitive learning settings, achieve more, reason better, gain higher self-esteem and have social support (Johnson, 2009).

3. Using visuals in the classroom is essential in today's increasingly visual world. Visualisation in the form of diagrams, charts, drawings and pictures can help adult learners understand and remember information better than mere verbal or textual descriptions (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). Also, a visual object has become a significant component of communication in a foreign language (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). It is difficult to imagine the language classroom without using cartoons, comics, YouTube videos, films, etc. They can stimulate thinking, help in creating ideas and engage in a discussion (Kalugina & Tarasevich, 2018). Videos can provide even more opportunities for language learning.

Thus, we employ a number of instructional approaches (situational and visual thinking approaches) and base on the pedagogical principles (active and cooperative learning) for the course design and instruction to meet adult learners' needs, motivations and goals, and provide the communicative environment in the classroom.

3. Methods and materials

3.1. Research questions and objectives

Research questions:

1. How will the instructional content meet the participants' needs?
2. What are the most effective classroom management strategies for developing communicative competence?
3. What are the best assessment practices for measuring the participants' progress?
4. The research objectives are as follows:

- To identify the instructional content which will meet participants' needs;
- To identify classroom management strategies and techniques to provide the most effective instruction of the content;
- To identify participants' progress in the communicative competence in the middle and at the end of the course.

3.2. Research methods

The following research methods were used to map the participants' improvement in communicative competence: direct observation, questionnaire method, pedagogical diagnostics, pre-testing and post-testing.

3.3. Research sample: participants, settings

The practical implementation of the communicative EFL course for the teaching staff was held at OSAU in the academic year of 2017–2018. The participants of this programme were 18 teachers in different University positions (one Dean, five Heads of Chair, one Professor, eight Assistant Professors, three Senior Teachers). The enrolled participants were of different age and demonstrated different levels of language ability.

3.4. Research procedure

While designing the course, we took into consideration the factors that may have an impact on learners' participation in the programme. The learner factors included work schedules, workload,

family responsibilities, learners' previous EFL experience, learners' needs and interests. Among other factors were the course duration, class location, flexible class schedule and frequency of classes.

The hallmark of our programmes was flexibility. To be effective in serving the adult learners' needs and reaching educational outcomes, the programme needed to offer classes that varied in terms of scheduling, location, duration and content in order to maximise learning opportunities.

The course had 72 hours of classroom work. We had a flexible class schedule of 3–6 hours of classroom work during a week with little homework.

Prior to designing the course, we conducted Needs Analysis and Entry Test. We asked the participants to complete the Needs Analysis questionnaire. It included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The participants were asked to show their preference for communication skills and communication topics they would like to focus on. 'How much time do you want to spend on different communication skills: making contacts, making arrangements, asking and giving information, telephoning, personal and business correspondence, etc.' 'Which topics are you interested in? Choose from the list below. You can add your topics in the end'. The suggested topics were social English, work and jobs, cities and city facilities, traveling, shopping, entertainment, etc. 'How much grammar would you like to do'? 'What grammar areas are you interested in'?

The Learner Needs Analysis helped us identify the domains of the instructional content:

Module I. Social and Travel (48 hours):

Meeting people

Family matters

Leisure time

Eating out

Shopping

Past experiences

Travelling

Healthy lifestyle

Module II. Work and Business Skills (24 hours):

Working responsibilities

Telephoning

Business correspondence

Presentations

The results of the Entry test revealed that at the start of the programme most of the participants possessed basic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and elementary reading and writing skills with some difficulty in listening and speaking. These findings helped us define our approaches to the language content and instruction.

In order to engage the participants of the programme into communicative language learning, we chose four instructional strategies: (1) visual thinking strategy; (2) short-film-based discussions; (3) use of real-life communication situations and (4) making presentations.

Now, we describe how we implemented the above strategies to promote language learning and communication in the classroom.

Since elementary EFL adult learners had to deal with a lot of new vocabulary and grammar rules, they found it difficult to memorise and keep in mind the language studied. In this relation, various visual forms such as signs, symbols, codes, graphs, tables, spidergrams, mind maps, pictures, etc., being infused with meanings, assisted elementary EFL learning. The role of the teacher was to provide visuals in the classroom or encourage learners to create their own visuals for better understanding, structuring, memorising or revising new information.

Using photos, art pictures or still images in the EFL classroom helped establish the topic and get learners talking. The teacher's role was to select meaningful visual objects which would serve as motivators of thinking and talking about a certain topic, and prepare a set of thought-provoking questions. Based on Bloom's taxonomy of learning, we classified questions into lower order and higher order types (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krahtwohl, 1956). Lower order questions enabled learners: (1) to revise previously learned materials (grammar rules, vocabulary); (2) to understand how to use the language forms giving descriptions, stating ideas about the topic and (3) to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in a new situation or just practice the language in the context. Higher order questions went beyond simple information about the topic provoking deeper critical thinking and contributing to free communication in the foreign language. Answering higher order questions, adult learners could: (1) make an analysis of the situation; (2) state new ideas about the situation and (3) give and justify their opinions about the situation. Therefore, both types of questions were very useful in the teaching–learning process as they served different educational purposes.

We would like to illustrate how we used this strategy in the classroom. We showed the following picture which we connected with the topic 'Meeting people':

Table 1. Examples of lower order and higher order questioning techniques

	Level of expertise		Examples of questions
Lower Order level	1.	Recall	Who can you see in the picture? Is it a woman or a man? What is the person wearing?
	2.	Understanding	How old is the person? Is he/she married? What is his/her family like? What does he/she do?
	3.	Application	What is strange about the person? Why does he/she have a dinosaur's head? How is the person feeling at the moment? What is he/she trying to say? Who is he speaking to?
Higher Order level	4.	Analysis	What kind of person is he/she? How can you classify his/her feelings and emotions? Have you ever been in similar situations?
	5.	Synthesis	What would you say in a similar situation? Can you think of a better way to express your ideas and feelings?
	6.	Evaluation	What do you think of people communicating their ideas like this?
			Is it a successful way of making people agree to do what you want? What makes people effective communicators?

The next strategy we used was short-film-based discussions. Using short films in the EFL classroom contributed to meaningful language practice and communication. In addition, short-film-based discussions promoted critical thinking and encouraged adult learners to reflect on values while learning a language.

We picked out short films, which were directly connected with the domains, from different resources such as youtube.com, film-english.com, vimeo.com (Table 2).

Table 2. A list of short films relevant to the content domains

No	Content domains	Short film
1	Meeting people	'Teeth'
2	Family matters	'Le Miroir'
3	Leisure time	'A Single Life'
4	Eating out	'Western Spaghetti'
5	Shopping	'Mouse For Sale'
6	Past experiences	'Memories'
7	Travelling	'Overweight'
8	Healthy lifestyle	'The Present'
9	Working responsibilities	'The Employment'
10	Telephoning	'I Forgot My Phone'
11	Business correspondence	'Paper Plane'
12	Presentations	'The Power Of Words'

In order to engage adult learners in the discussion, we used Socratic-type questions. Based on the formal mechanics of Socratic questioning suggested by Paul and Elder (2006), we used exploratory-type and focused-type Socratic questions. Exploratory-type questions were useful in introducing a topic, activating topical vocabulary, stimulating the recall of grammar norms, promote general comprehension of the film by making predictions in the pre-watching discussion. Focused-type Socratic questions promoted deep thinking by focusing on specific issues or details of the film and requiring adult learners to analyse and evaluate specific context, understand the message of the film. The teachers used them to guide after-watching discussions. Focused Socratic questioning helped adult learners analyse and evaluate ideas about the film, express their opinions about the message of the film.

For example, we chose a short film called 'A Single Life' which we connected with the 'Leisure activities' topic. Since the film showed a woman named Pia at her different stages of life, we started the pre-watch discussion with exploratory-type questions like 'What are the different ages of life'?, 'How do people feel in different ages'?, 'What are the popular free-time activities at each age'? After watching the film we focused on the details of the film. The learners answered the questions: 'What stages of Pia's life did you see in the film'?, 'What kind of things helped you identify her age'?, 'How did the objects in her room speak about her hobbies and interests? What are they at her different ages'? We finished the discussion with questions about the message of the film.

The instructional strategy of using learners' presentations as a way of presenting information on a topic to the group was a fun and engaging method of mastering EFL communicative competence. This activity not only helped adult learners use the language in a new situation but also provided them with practice in public speaking. All the learners were actively involved in performing their roles as presenters or listeners which was very beneficial for developing speaking and listening skills.

The learners had to deliver their presentations at the end of the topic study. The participants made their presentations on the following topics:

Module I Social and Travel:

1. Let me introduce myself and my family
2. My lifestyle
3. My favourite restaurant
4. The world's largest shopping malls
5. My best travelling experience
6. Is my lifestyle really healthy?
7. Module II Work and Business Skills (32 hours):
8. The most unusual job
9. Presenting an educational institution

While working on presentations, the learners consolidated the language they had studied, searched the Internet for relevant information about the topic and, therefore, they enriched their vocabulary and improved their reading skills. Also, this teaching strategy provided learners with an opportunity for personalised language practice which increased their motivation and interest in language learning. It is important to understand that adult learners' motivation depends largely on the immediate payoff in terms of the usefulness for practical purposes of what was learnt.

The application of the situational approach to the EFL teaching meant the introduction of real-life communicative situations both into the teaching–learning content and assessment of learners' outcomes. For this purpose, the teachers had to work out the content of real-life situations relevant to the syllabus. The communicative situation consisted of the following elements:

1. The target language (grammar structures and vocabulary) to be used in the situation;
2. The specific setting of the situation (e.g.: at the restaurant, shopping for clothes, staying at the hotel, etc.);
3. The channel of communication (oral, written);
4. The communicative problem to be solved in the situation (e.g.: to rent a car, to book a table at the restaurant, to buy a dress in the clothes shop, etc.);
5. The description of the roles to be played in the situation
6. Let us give an example of the real-life communicative situation relevant to the topic 'Eating out':

1. Target language:
   Vocabulary: menu, starter, the main dish, dessert, bill, to order, wine list, etc.

   Grammar structures: Can I have…? I'd like to have…., I'll have… Are you ready to order? Would you like …? Anything else? Yes, please. No, thank you., etc.

2. The specific setting of the situation: You are eating out with your friend in one of the expensive restaurants where you have reserved a table for two.
3. The channel of communication: an oral dialogue.
4. The communicative problem to be solved in the situation: order the meal.
5. The description of the roles:

   Customer: You'd like to start with an appetiser followed by an entree. You asked for a rare steak and now wish to ask the waiter for a well-done steak. Also, ask for your friend's wine order to be changed from red to white. Tell the waiter that everything was excellent and you especially liked the steak sauce.

   Waiter: Ask if the customer has reserved a table. Advise the customer to take a daily specialty as an appetiser. Recommend steak for the main course. Say that changing the steak order is OK but that there is no more white wine left. Ask if the customer would like to order a different drink instead.

4. Results

For language assessment and evaluation of learners' progress, we used the online test 'Evaluation of Readiness for The Certificate Exam in English' developed by the Tomsk Polytechnic University (Becker, Nekrasova-Beker & Petrashova, 2017). The test consisted of two parts: Listening and Use of English & Reading. The test was of A-level and aimed at checking the language (grammar and vocabulary) ability in the context and communication skills in reading and listening. Testing materials corresponded to the A1–B1 level of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Petrashova & Parnugin, 2018).

Table 3. Correspondence of test scores (test A) with the levels of CEFR

Scores	% (max. 100%)	Correspondent level of CEFR
0–9	0–16	-
10–27	17–47	A1
28–38	48–66	A2.1
39–48	67–83	A2.2
49–58	84–100	Higher than A2

During the course, the learners went through assessment three times: at the beginning, in the middle (after 36 instructional hours) and at the end of the course in order to fix their learning progress.

The entry test aimed at evaluating the participants' EFL communicative competence at the start. The results were as follows:

Table 4. Entry test results

Level	Number of participants	Percentage of participants (%)
Higher thanA2	0	0
A2.2	1	5
A2.1	3	17
A1	14	78
-	0	0

The results showed that the majority of the participants had an A1-level of English at the start. The analysis of the performance of the language skills indicated that most of the participants had difficulty with listening: only 34% of all listening activities were successfully done by the participants. The least difficult tasks were those which tested reading skills: 52% of all reading activities were done. As for the language ability (grammar and vocabulary), the participants were able to cope with the Use of English tasks: 36% of all the tasks were done successfully. So, on the average most of the participants had very basic language skills and abilities at the start of the programme.

These findings defined our approaches to the course design and instruction. The entry test scores allowed the teachers to identify the learners' level of language proficiency. With the assessment data, the teachers could make decisions about the instructional content and programme needs.

The learners' progress in EFL competence was measured by the mid-course and end-course tests.

Table 5. Assessment results of entry test, mid-course test and end-course test in comparison

Level	Number of participants			Percentage of participants (%)		
	Entry test	Mid-course test	End-course test	Entry test	Mid-course test	End-course test
Higher thanA2	0	0	0	0	0	0
A2.2	1	2	3	5	11	16
A2.1	3	7	10	17	39	56
A1	14	9	5	78	50	28

The comparative analysis of the results reveals the considerable growth of the EFL communicative competence in the participants of the programme.

The average percentage of the performance of the tasks aimed to check a particular language ability or a skill correlated with the levels of language proficiency are presented in Figure 1.
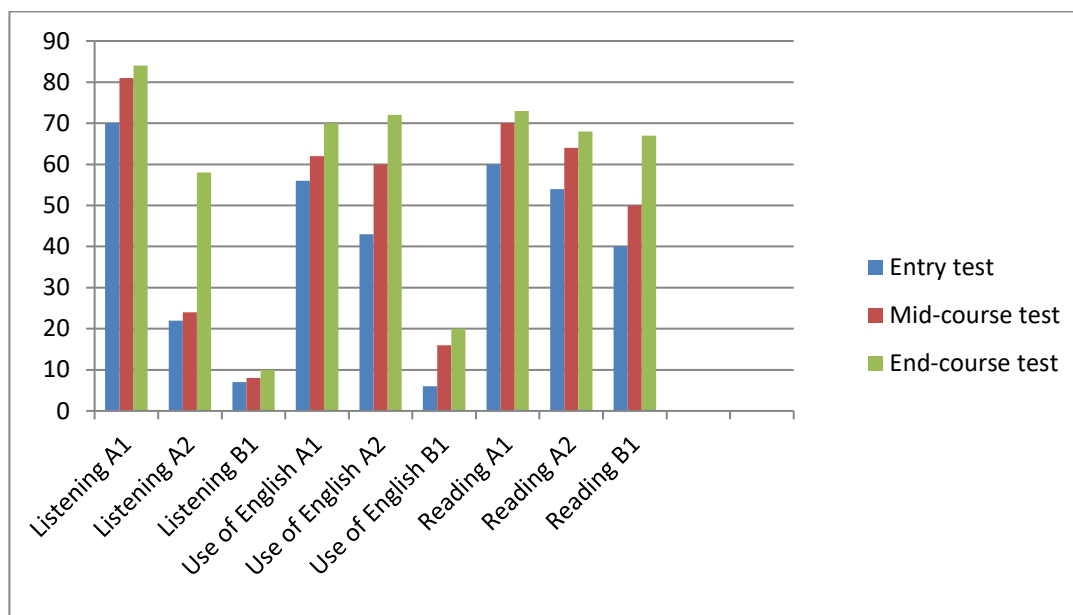

Figure 1. Performance of the tasks of A1, A2 and B1 levels (in percentage)

The participants' performance of the tasks checking language ability and skills shows steady growth during the course. We can see a slight increase in listening skills of A1 level during the whole course and a dramatic increase of A2 level towards the end of the course. The number of learners who managed to reach B1 level in listening skills underwent an insignificant change from 7% to 10%. Mastering listening skills remains challenging for Russian adult learners probably due to the fact that adult learners have dominant visual and kinesthetic learning styles mostly. Besides, in Russia, we lack a natural English communication environment.

The language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary in use) of the participants went up steadily during the course with some growth in A2 level which was revealed in the end-course test in comparison with the results of the entry test. There is a significant increase in reading skills at all the levels which was expected.

The online test was useful in assessing learners' skills of reproductive type. Unlike the assessing of achievement, assessing proficiency is not necessarily confined to measuring content knowledge that is taught in the classroom (Kenyon & Van Duzer, 2003). Learners' proficiency in speaking was assessed by means of real-life communicative situations which allowed learners to manifest their communicative competence while solving problems in various contexts.

5. Discussion

The main objective of the study was to design the content of the EFL course and identify the most effective strategies for the successful development of EFL communicative competence in university teaching staff.

The findings show that 56% of the participants of the programme demonstrated their practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in some social settings provided that the other person is ready to help—speaks slowly, repeats phrases, uses simple grammar structures and simple vocabulary. Sixteen percent of the participants showed the A2.2 level of communicative competence which is enough for purposeful communication in personal, social, educational and professional settings.

The findings support our idea that the course content should meet participants' needs and interests in the language and the topics to study. In our case, the content produced a big motivating effect on the learners. However, the content of the course that was taught in the classroom did not correspond completely to the measuring content of the test. It explains the fact that the results of the end-course test were not as high as we expected. Real-life communicative situations served both as a teaching method and an assessment tool.

Classroom management strategies for developing communicative competence were selected with consideration of the specificity of adult learning education. The findings revealed that thinking infused into the learning process, the use of visual objects, communicative environment served as major factors in the successful adult language learning. They made the learning process meaningful, interesting, exciting and creative. From the study, it was found out that the integration of visuals with speaking activities helped the participants communicate with one another. The presentations and short-film-based discussions made adult learners engaged in group communication in the EFL classroom.

6. Conclusion

The study has discussed the principles and approaches to the content design of the EFL course and efficacy of particular classroom management strategies for developing EFL communicative competence in university teachers. The communicative competence is a combination of the language knowledge and sociocultural norms, values and attitudes, and practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in social, educational and professional settings. The evaluation of communicative competence involves the assessment of language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) in the context and practical language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) in different settings.

The content of the course was designed on the basis of the following principles of adult language learning: motivation, responsibility and meaningful communication. The situational approach to the content design introduced 'real-life' communicative situations serving as a teaching method and an assessment tool.

The selection of the teaching strategies was based on the principles of active learning, cooperative learning and using visuals in the classroom. The findings in this study support the fact that the use of real-life communication situations, making presentations, visual thinking strategy, short-film-based discussions contributed to meaningful language learning and practice and purposeful active communication which support the improvement of EFL communicative competence in adult learners. In addition, short-film-based discussions and visual thinking strategy promote critical thinking and encouraged adult learners to reflect on values while learning a language.

Thus, the findings support the methodology of this course and raise questions of infusing specific thinking strategies in the EFL teaching.

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