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THE PEDAGOGICAL NECESSITY OF DEVELOPING SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract. The increasing internationalization of education and the expansion of intercultural communication have substantially transformed the professional requirements imposed on English language teachers. Contemporary language education requires teachers not only to possess grammatical, lexical, phonological, and methodological knowledge but also to use language appropriately in diverse social and cultural contexts. Within this framework, sociolinguistic competence has become an indispensable component of the professional communicative competence of prospective English language teachers. The present study examines the pedagogical necessity of developing sociolinguistic competence among prospective English language teachers and identifies its role in their professional preparation. The study is based on theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, synthesis, generalization, and interpretation of relevant research in communicative language teaching, sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, and teacher education. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between linguistic forms and social context, including social roles, register, politeness conventions, cultural norms, varieties of English, and contextually appropriate language choices. The findings suggest that traditional language instruction focused predominantly on grammatical accuracy cannot adequately prepare future English teachers for authentic intercultural communication. The development of sociolinguistic competence should therefore be systematically integrated into teacher education through authentic materials, problem-based sociolinguistic tasks, reflective activities, digital resources, simulations, and independent learning. The study argues that such an approach contributes to the formation of teachers who are capable of interpreting social meanings, selecting contextually appropriate linguistic forms, managing intercultural communication, and subsequently developing these abilities in their learners. The article concludes that sociolinguistic competence should be regarded not as an optional supplement but as a pedagogically necessary component of professional English teacher education.

Keywords: sociolinguistic competence, prospective English language teachers, communicative competence, teacher education, intercultural communication, independent learning, sociolinguistic appropriateness, professional competence.

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1. Introduction

Globalization, international academic mobility, digital communication, and the increasing interaction between representatives of different linguistic and cultural communities have significantly changed the role of English in contemporary society. English is no longer used exclusively as a means of communication between native speakers or between learners and native speakers. It functions as an international language employed by individuals from diverse linguistic, social, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, effective communication in English cannot be reduced to knowledge of grammatical structures and lexical units.

A speaker may construct a grammatically correct sentence and still communicate inappropriately if the utterance does not correspond to the social relationship between interlocutors, the level of formality, cultural expectations, communicative intention, or situational context. Therefore, successful communication requires an understanding of how linguistic choices interact with social and cultural factors.

This requirement is particularly important in the professional preparation of prospective English language teachers. A future teacher is expected not only to communicate effectively but also to become a model of appropriate language use for learners. The teacher must be able to explain why a particular linguistic form is appropriate in one situation but unsuitable in another, distinguish formal and informal registers, interpret culturally determined meanings, and prepare learners for authentic communication outside the classroom.

The concept of communicative competence provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding this requirement. Hymes (1972) challenged approaches that considered linguistic competence independently of social context and emphasized the ability to use language appropriately within a speech community. Later, Canale and Swain (1980) conceptualized communicative competence as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than simple mastery of linguistic rules. Within subsequent models of communicative language ability, sociolinguistic competence became a significant component connecting linguistic knowledge with socially appropriate language use.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) further institutionalized this perspective by recognizing sociolinguistic competence as part of communicative language competence. It includes sensitivity to social relations, politeness conventions, registers, linguistic markers of social relations, and varieties of language. Such a perspective demonstrates that knowing English means not merely knowing what can be said, but also understanding what should be said, to whom, under what circumstances, and in what manner.

Nevertheless, in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, language instruction continues to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and examination-oriented skills. As a result, prospective teachers may achieve relatively advanced linguistic proficiency while experiencing difficulty interpreting socially marked language, adapting speech to different

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interlocutors, or managing intercultural misunderstandings. Accordingly, the purpose of the present article is to theoretically substantiate the pedagogical necessity of developing sociolinguistic competence in prospective English language teachers and to identify major pedagogical directions for its systematic formation within higher education.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Sociolinguistic competence is closely related to the broader concept of communicative competence. Hymes introduced communicative competence to demonstrate that successful language use depends on knowledge of both linguistic rules and socially acceptable patterns of communication. From this perspective, speakers need to understand not only whether an utterance is grammatically possible but also whether it is appropriate in a particular communicative situation.

Canale and Swain (1980) subsequently developed a framework that distinguished grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions of communicative competence. Their theoretical contribution was particularly important because it established a systematic relationship between formal language knowledge and the social conditions governing language use.

In contemporary language education, sociolinguistic competence generally refers to the ability to recognize and employ linguistic resources according to the social and cultural characteristics of a communicative situation. It involves such dimensions as social distance, power relations, age, professional status, degree of formality, register, politeness, cultural conventions, dialectal and regional variation, idiomatic expressions, and socially marked forms of communication.

For prospective English language teachers, this competence operates at two interconnected levels. First, future teachers need sociolinguistic competence as language users. They must be capable of communicating appropriately in academic, professional, formal, informal, intercultural, and digitally mediated contexts. Second, they need sociolinguistic competence as educators because they will be responsible for developing communicative abilities in their own students.

The CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) reinforces this understanding by distinguishing linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences. Sociolinguistic appropriateness is particularly important because language users must recognize the social implications of linguistic choices and adapt communication to the context.

A useful example is the realization of requests. Expressions such as “Give me your report,” “Can you send me the report?”, “Could you possibly send me the report when you have a moment?”, and “I was wondering whether you might be able to send me the report” may perform a similar communicative function, but they differ substantially in directness, politeness, social distance, and contextual appropriateness. Knowing the grammatical construction of these expressions is insufficient. A competent speaker must understand when and why one form is preferable to another.

Similarly, greetings, apologies, compliments, disagreement, refusals, invitations, requests, and expressions of gratitude vary across linguistic cultures. Direct transfer of communicative norms from the first language into English may therefore produce pragmatic failure even when the speaker's

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grammar is accurate. This issue becomes more significant in the context of English as an international language. Prospective teachers encounter multiple varieties of English and communicate with speakers representing different sociocultural backgrounds. Consequently, teacher education should avoid presenting appropriate communication as imitation of a single idealized native-speaker model. Instead, future teachers should develop flexibility, awareness of variation, intercultural sensitivity, and the ability to negotiate meaning.

3. Research Methodology

The present research is theoretical and analytical in nature. It employs qualitative research methods to identify the pedagogical significance of sociolinguistic competence in the professional preparation of prospective English language teachers. The methodological framework includes analysis of theoretical literature on communicative competence, sociolinguistics, foreign language teaching, intercultural communication, and language teacher education. Comparative analysis was used to examine different interpretations of communicative and sociolinguistic competence. Synthesis and generalization were employed to identify common characteristics and pedagogical implications of the concepts analyzed.

The study considers the principles reflected in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and contemporary research addressing sociolinguistic competence in EFL education. Particular emphasis is placed on four analytical dimensions: the professional relevance of sociolinguistic competence for prospective English teachers; the limitations of predominantly linguistic approaches to teacher preparation; the pedagogical conditions required for sociolinguistic development; and the potential contribution of independent and authentic learning activities.

Based on the theoretical analysis, sociolinguistic competence is interpreted in this study as an integrated professional-communicative capacity enabling prospective English language teachers to recognize sociocultural variables, interpret the social meaning of linguistic choices, and select language forms appropriate to communicative context and professional purpose.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that sociolinguistic competence should be considered an essential professional requirement rather than an additional language skill for prospective English teachers. An English language teacher constantly operates at the intersection of language and culture. Classroom communication itself involves social relationships, roles, politeness strategies, instructions, requests, explanations, feedback, encouragement, disagreement, and evaluation. Teachers who lack sociolinguistic awareness may unintentionally provide learners with grammatically accurate but socially inappropriate models of communication.

Professional sociolinguistic competence may be represented through four interrelated components. The cognitive component comprises knowledge of sociolinguistic norms, registers, varieties of English, cultural conventions, forms of address, politeness strategies, and relationships between linguistic choices and social variables. The functional-communicative component refers to

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the ability to select and employ appropriate linguistic resources according to communicative purpose, social relationship, setting, and degree of formality. The intercultural component involves awareness of cultural differences, tolerance toward linguistic variation, avoidance of stereotypes, and the ability to interpret communication from multiple cultural perspectives. The reflective-pedagogical component concerns the ability to analyze sociolinguistic phenomena and transform them into meaningful teaching content, tasks, examples, and classroom activities.

One of the central pedagogical problems identified through the analysis is the gap between formal language proficiency and the ability to participate successfully in authentic communication. Traditional approaches frequently organize language learning around grammatical structures and vocabulary. Although linguistic accuracy remains indispensable, an excessive focus on grammatical correctness can create learners who know language rules but cannot adequately adapt those rules to social circumstances.

Authentic materials provide an important pedagogical resource for reducing the gap between classroom English and naturally occurring communication. For prospective teachers, authentic materials may include interviews, podcasts, television programs, films, news reports, public speeches, workplace communication, academic discussions, social media interactions, advertisements, emails, and naturally occurring conversations. Exposure alone is insufficient; materials should be accompanied by analytical tasks directing students' attention to the relationship between interlocutors, level of formality, politeness markers, social distance, forms of address, regional variation, and alternative expressions suitable for different contexts.

Independent learning offers particularly significant opportunities for developing sociolinguistic competence because classroom time alone cannot provide sufficient exposure to the diversity of real-life English. Through systematically organized independent learning, prospective teachers can observe authentic language use across multiple contexts, compare linguistic forms, maintain sociolinguistic reflection journals, conduct small-scale observations, analyze media discourse, and investigate differences between formal and informal communication.

A productive independent-learning sequence may follow five stages: Exposure → Observation → Analysis → Application → Reflection. During exposure, students encounter authentic English through digital or printed resources. During observation, they identify socially significant linguistic features. During analysis, they determine how context influences language choice. During application, they reproduce or adapt these patterns in simulated communicative situations. Finally, during reflection, they evaluate their decisions and compare them with alternative forms.

Effective sociolinguistic development requires several pedagogical conditions. Sociolinguistic objectives should be explicitly represented in teacher education curricula; sociolinguistic content should be integrated across practical language, speaking, listening, intercultural communication, methodology, and independent-learning modules; students should regularly encounter authentic and diverse models of English; activities should require active sociolinguistic decision-making; assessment

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should measure not only grammatical correctness but also appropriateness; and reflection should become a systematic element of sociolinguistic learning.

Based on the analysis, the following conceptual framework can guide sociolinguistic competence development among prospective English teachers: Sociolinguistic knowledge → Contextual awareness → Sociolinguistic analysis → Communicative practice → Independent application → Reflection → Professional transfer. The distinctive value of this framework is the connection between sociolinguistic competence as a language-user competence and sociolinguistic competence as a professional teacher competence.

5. Pedagogical Implications

Teacher-training programs should reconsider the assumption that sociolinguistic competence develops automatically as students' general English proficiency increases. Linguistic proficiency creates an important foundation, but sociolinguistic sensitivity requires systematic exposure, explicit analysis, practice, and reflection. Course designers should therefore incorporate sociolinguistic learning outcomes into syllabi. These outcomes may include the ability to distinguish registers, interpret politeness strategies, recognize sociocultural implications of language choices, adapt speech to different audiences, identify varieties of English, and mediate intercultural misunderstandings.

Digital technologies can substantially expand these opportunities. Online videos, podcasts, virtual exchanges, digital corpora, discussion platforms, and multimedia resources enable prospective teachers to encounter linguistic practices that may not be available in the immediate EFL environment. Nevertheless, technology should serve pedagogically defined objectives rather than become an end in itself.

Furthermore, sociolinguistic competence should be connected to future classroom practice. Prospective teachers may design sociolinguistic tasks, evaluate textbook dialogues for authenticity, adapt materials, construct contextualized role plays, and develop assessment criteria for sociolinguistic appropriateness. Such activities transform theoretical understanding into professional pedagogical competence.

6. Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that the development of sociolinguistic competence constitutes a pedagogical necessity in the professional preparation of prospective English language teachers. Contemporary communication requires more than mastery of grammar and vocabulary. It requires the ability to interpret social meanings, recognize contextual variables, understand cultural conventions, and select linguistic resources appropriate to particular communicative circumstances.

For prospective English teachers, sociolinguistic competence has a dual function. It enables them to become effective intercultural communicators and prepares them to develop communicative competence in their future learners. Consequently, sociolinguistic competence should be systematically integrated into teacher education rather than treated as a secondary or incidental outcome of language study.

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The analysis indicates that authentic materials, contextualized communicative tasks, intercultural comparison, digital resources, independent learning, and reflective activities constitute important mechanisms for its development. Particularly significant is the organization of independent learning according to the sequence of exposure, observation, analysis, application, and reflection.

Further empirical research should investigate the effectiveness of specific independent-learning strategies for developing sociolinguistic competence among prospective English language teachers. Experimental studies may also establish assessment criteria and indicators for measuring changes in students' sociolinguistic awareness and performance at different stages of professional preparation.

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