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COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ADOLESCENTS

Hazratova Shahzoda Najmiddin qizi
Samarkand state institute of foreign languages. MA Program (XTA)
shahzodauktamova0905@gmail.com
+998957273009

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ABSTRACT:

The ability of adolescents to communicate appropriately in different situations, referred to as Communication competence, is shaped under the influence of various social and cognitive factors. Multiple scholars like J. Piaget, Canale & Swain, Vygotsky and others studied those factors and proposed theories explaining the connection between the phenomena. Piaget's cognitive development theory puts forward 4 stages of cognitive development of children. Adolescents' cognitive skills are studied in the formal operational stage, which includes abstract thought and reasoning. Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development, on the other hand, asserts that social setting and communication play no less essential role in the formation of communicative competence in adolescents. Today, Digital technology also has a considerable share in the formation of both social and cognitive competence as teens acquire new knowledge and skills such as using shortenings, emojis, hiding true feelings and intentions. This research paper discussed the theoretical data on the

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given topic, and conducted systematic analysis based on the existing studies.

Introduction

According to Dell Hymes, communicative competence is not just the ability to use a language to convey one's message but also a skill that enables individuals to communicate effectively in various social contexts. This skill encompasses not only the mechanics of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, but also the ability to use language appropriately in diverse interactions (Hazratova, 2025). As social situations differ, speakers should be capable of expressing themselves appropriately in both formal and informal settings, while also adhering to cultural norms.

Communicative competence, as defined by Canale & Swain (1980), consists of four key components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. While linguistic competence focuses on grammar and vocabulary, sociolinguistic competence involves using language appropriately in different social settings. Discourse competence ensures coherence in speech and writing, while strategic competence enables individuals to navigate communication breakdowns. Together, these components shape an individual's ability to communicate effectively across contexts.

Adolescents communicative competence is influenced by both cognitive and social development. J. Piaget in his theory of cognitive development (1958) proposed four stages through which children shape their thinking skills. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction, peer pressure and scaffolding in the formation of social competence from the early ages. Communicative skills are essential for academic success, social interaction, and future career readiness. In secondary education, students undergo a critical developmental transition from basic language acquisition to effective, real-world communication. Strong communicative competence enhances fundamental skills such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking, which are essential across all subjects. Students with well-developed oral and written communication skills are more likely to excel in presentations, essays, and other academic or vocational tasks.

Furthermore, adolescence is a period of intense socialization, where peer communication plays a crucial role in the formation of interpersonal skills and self-confidence. Adolescence is a period of development and consolidation of the social self, of one's identity and

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understanding of the self in relation to the social world (Coleman and Hendry, 1990). Students with strong social competence can build relationships effortlessly, participate actively in group discussions, and collaborate effectively. Moreover, developing these soft skills provides an advantage in teamwork and leadership roles, preparing students for future academic and professional success. This paper explores the cognitive and social aspects of communicative competence in adolescents, drawing on Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (1958) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978). Additionally, it examines the role of external influences, such as peer pressure and digital communication, in shaping language development. By analyzing these factors, this study aims to provide an understanding of how adolescents refine their communicative competence in academic, social, and digital contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks on Cognitive and Social Development

Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (1958) is a fundamental framework in developmental psychology that explains how children and adolescents acquire, construct, and apply knowledge as they grow. Piaget proposed that cognitive development occurs in four distinct stages, each characterized by different abilities and ways of thinking. His theory suggests that individuals progress through these stages in a fixed sequence, developing more complex cognitive functions at each level. Sensorimotor Stage (0-2 years): Infants learn through sensory experiences and motor actions since they lack developed language skills. Initially, they rely on reflexes, but as they grow, they develop intentional behaviors like smiling when others smile. Around 8–12 months, they achieve object permanence, understanding that objects exist even when not visible, and start problem-solving through trial and error. Preoperational Stage (2-7 years): Children develop symbolic thinking, using words, images, and gestures to represent objects. However, their thinking is still egocentric, meaning they struggle to see other perspectives. Other cognitive limitations include animism (believing inanimate objects have feelings) and centration (focusing on only one aspect of a situation). Concrete Operational Stage (7-11 years): They start thinking logically, for example, classify objects based on characteristics such as shape, color, or material. They overcome egocentrism, gaining a better understanding of different perspectives. Formal Operational Stage (12+ years): Adolescents develop abstract thinking, logical reasoning, and hypothetical problem-solving skills. They can understand abstract

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concepts like justice, morality, and freedom and engage in critical thinking and argumentation.

Piaget's theory (1958) provides insights into how cognitive growth influences communication. The transition from concrete to abstract thinking between the concrete operational (7–11 years) and formal operational stages (11+ years) profoundly affects how individuals process, interpret, and express ideas. At the concrete operational stage, communication relies on literal meanings and explicit statements. Understanding metaphors, sarcasm, and figurative language is challenging, as children interpret expressions literally. For example, when hearing "a heart of stone," a child may struggle to grasp its metaphorical meaning. As individuals enter the formal operational stage, their communication expands to include abstract thought and inferential reasoning. They can understand figurative language and construct logical arguments. Adolescents also become more aware of different perspectives, improving their ability to engage in sophisticated discussions and debates.

Although, Piaget's theory gained popularity and acknowledgment in the field of science, it is not free of shortcomings. One major critique is its rigid stage-based approach, as cognitive growth does not always follow a strict timeline. Research indicates that while some individuals develop abstract reasoning earlier than expected, others may never fully reach the stage of formal operational thought (Moshman, 1998). Due to genetic, social and other hidden factors children may travel through stages in completely different pace. For example, when encouraged and helped regularly, babies can start copying and imitating adults' words or actions, including laughing, opening mouth wide, mumbling, drooling and other mouth actions. Furthermore, his model fails to account for individual differences and genetic traits, such as learning disabilities and variations in intelligence, all of which significantly influence cognitive and communicative development. Sound processing and distinguishing, understanding connotative meaning of words might be challenging for children with disorders like dyslexia, autism and syndromes like Down's. Another limitation is Piaget's underestimation of social and linguistic influences. His theory primarily focuses on individual learning, overlooking the crucial role of language exposure and social interaction in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Studies suggest that children raised in linguistically rich environments tend to develop communication skills more rapidly than Piaget's model predicts. Babies are more likely to start speaking, and making sounds earlier when adults talk to them more often, read them and try to engage them in the conversations by giving turns.

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In contrast, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development, particularly in language acquisition. According to Vygotsky, learning is inherently a social process, where individuals construct knowledge through collaborative interactions within their cultural context. This perspective contrasts with theories that view learning as a solitary activity, highlighting instead the importance of community and communication in cognitive growth. A central concept in Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the range of tasks that a learner can perform with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other (MKO) but cannot yet accomplish independently. The ZPD underscores the potential for cognitive development through guided participation and is pivotal in understanding how social interactions facilitate learning. For instance, in language learning, an MKO—such as a teacher, parent, or more proficient peer—can provide support that enables the learner to grasp linguistic concepts that would be unattainable alone. The mechanism through which MKOs assist learners within the ZPD is known as scaffolding. Scaffolding involves providing temporary support structures to aid the learner's development, which are gradually removed as the learner becomes more competent. In the context of language acquisition, scaffolding can take various forms, including modeling correct language use, providing prompts or cues, and offering feedback. This process allows learners to internalize new linguistic structures and functions, thereby advancing their communicative abilities. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of scaffolding in language learning. For example, a study highlighted in the American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research discusses how scaffolding within the ZPD can enhance second language acquisition by encouraging learners to engage in tasks that promote language development without causing frustration. The study emphasizes that scaffolding techniques, such as modeling and providing feedback, are instrumental in helping learners progress beyond their current abilities.

In summary, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between social interaction and cognitive development in language learning. The concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding highlight the importance of collaborative learning environments, where guidance from more knowledgeable individuals facilitates the acquisition of new linguistic competencies.

2.2 Existing Research on Communicative Competence in Adolescents

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The study of communicative competence in adolescents has been shaped by various theoretical models that examine the interplay between linguistic knowledge, social appropriateness, discourse coherence, and strategic communication. Scholars have sought to define the essential components of effective communication and understand how adolescents develop these skills over time. One of the most influential models is Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence, which identifies four interrelated components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This model was a response to earlier linguistic theories that focused solely on grammatical accuracy, arguing instead that successful communication requires both structural knowledge and the ability to navigate social and contextual aspects of language. Their work emphasized that adolescents must not only understand syntax and vocabulary but also be able to use language appropriately in different social settings, make coherent and logical sentences, and use strategies to overcome communication challenges. Later expansions of this model have been used in second language acquisition research, but its principles are equally relevant for understanding adolescent communicative development in general (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Building upon this foundation, Bachman's (1990) Model of Communicative Language Ability refined the understanding of communicative competence by introducing pragmatic competence as a crucial element. Unlike Canale and Swain's framework, which primarily focused on contextual appropriateness, Bachman's model integrated the functional aspects of language—how individuals use communication to achieve specific goals. His work highlighted that communicative ability is not static but involves strategic decision-making, where adolescents learn to adapt their language depending on the listener, situation, and purpose. This perspective is particularly relevant in adolescence, a period when individuals refine their ability to express abstract ideas, engage in persuasion, and interpret nuanced social cues (Bachman, 1990).

Beyond these structural models, research on cognitive development and language use in adolescents has explored how formal reasoning skills contribute to communicative competence. Keating (1980) argued that as adolescents transition into Piaget's formal operational stage (from 12 years old on), their ability to engage in abstract thought and hypothetical reasoning enhances their capacity for complex communication. They become more adept at understanding figurative language, constructing logical arguments, and engaging in structured debate. Similarly, Moshman (1998) emphasized the role of

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metacognitive growth, suggesting that adolescents' increasing ability to monitor, evaluate, and adjust their communication strategies plays a crucial role in language mastery. This aligns with the concept of strategic competence, where individuals compensate for linguistic gaps or adjust speech patterns based on audience feedback.

Additionally, research has shown that adolescents' social environment plays a crucial role in communicative development. Recent evidence has shown that the brain goes through a remodelling process during adolescence. It is possible that neural plasticity facilitates the development of social cognitive skills required during the period of adolescence (Suparna Choudhury, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, and Tony Charman, 2006). Peer interactions, school-based discussions, and exposure to digital communication platforms influence how they navigate different communicative contexts. In general, peer relationships have paramount importance during adolescence, and adolescence is often referred to as a period of "social reorientation" (Nelson et al., 2005). While traditional models like Canale and Swain's or Bachman's emphasize structural and functional competence, modern studies recognize that communication is a socially embedded skill, where cultural exposure, technological advancements, and real-world interactions shape language proficiency.

2.3 Social Influences on Adolescent Communication

David Elkind's (1967) concept of adolescent egocentrism highlights how teenagers often believe they are the center of others' attention, a phenomenon he termed the "imaginary audience." This heightened self-consciousness leads adolescents to be acutely aware of peer perceptions, significantly influencing their language use as they strive to fit in and establish their identities. They may adapt specific slang, speech patterns, or jargon prevalent within their peer groups to signal belonging and differentiate themselves from others. Peers become extremely important for identity, self-concept, and self-worth (Harter et al., 1996). This peer-driven linguistic adaptation is a crucial aspect of identity formation during adolescence.

Over the past 15 years, the advent and rapid growth of social media has transformed the ways in which adolescents interact with peers and the world around them (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Additionally, social media platforms have enriched informal communication by introducing the language of the internet, which comprises abbreviations, contractions, and shortenings, making digital interaction more efficient and dynamic. It should be pointed out that informal communication setting boosts confidence, and encourages to reveal potentials (Hazratova, 2025). While these platforms encourage

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creativity and brevity, they often promote informal language characterized by abbreviations, emojis, and non-standard grammar, introducing new linguistics norms. Research indicates that frequent use of such informal language in digital contexts can negatively impact adolescents' formal writing skills, leading to challenges in academic and professional communication. Also, the constant access to the internet might hinder teens' memory abilities or the ability to engage in effortful thinking (Nasi & Koivusilta, 2012). Thus, teenagers may get used to simple short chats and informal context which makes it difficult for them to excel at academic settings. Moreover, scrolling the net, teenagers effortlessly get dophamine. This, in the long run, makes them lazy both physically and mentally hindering from active cognitive performance. Short memory and focus spans are the long-term effects of using social media for extensive period of time. On the other hand, they develop code-switching skills which enables to switch between formal and informal language in respective situations. Adolescents, today, are capable of changing tone and language according to the group of people they converse with. Also, it is worth-mentioning that social media platforms are fostering open-mindedness, global awareness, sympathy and tolerance concerning social phenomena.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, using a systematic literature review to analyze the relationship between cognitive and social development and adolescent communicative competence. A descriptive approach was chosen to explore how well-established theories—such as Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory—explain the way adolescents develop linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. By synthesizing findings from previous studies, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how cognitive maturity and social interactions shape communication skills in secondary school students.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study is based on a review of published research, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and educational reports. Academic databases used include: Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed. Terms such as "Cognitive development and adolescent communication", "Peer influence on communicative competence", "Piaget and language development", "Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in adolescent learning",

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"Impact of digital communication on adolescent discourse competence" were used to collect data.

In this research paper studies published between 2015 and 2024 were mostly used, the focus audience was secondary school students who are considered as adolescents (12-18 years old). Also, studies addressing cognitive development and its impact on communication as well as social influences on adolescents were reviewed.

3.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns in the selected studies. The findings were categorized into the following themes:

Selected study aspects	Key patterns
Cognitive Growth & Abstract Language Use	Studies based on Piaget's Formal Operational Stage were analyzed to determine how adolescents develop abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and logical argumentation, improving their ability to use complex sentence structures and discourse strategies
Peer Influence & Social Adaptation	Research focusing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and other scholars' works (Bachman, Canale and Swain, Keating, Elkind and other) was examined to understand how peer interactions and cultural exposure influence discourse competence, slang adoption, and pragmatic language use.
Digital Communication & Linguistic Shifts	Studies analyzing the impact of social media, texting, and digital discourse were reviewed to explore how adolescents code-switch between formal and informal language styles, affecting their written and spoken communication skills.

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3.4 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its reliance on existing literature rather than direct empirical data collection thus future research could include observational studies, student interviews, or teacher assessments to provide real-world validation of the findings. Additionally, while the study attempts to include diverse perspectives, most research analyzed is in English, potentially excluding findings from non-English-speaking regions where adolescent communication patterns may differ.

4. Results

As adolescents progress into Piaget's formal operational stage, they develop abstract reasoning abilities. This cognitive growth enables them to understand and use more complex language structures, facilitating improved communication skills. Moreover, the advancement of metacognitive abilities during adolescence allows individuals to better plan, monitor, and evaluate their communication strategies. This development leads to more effective and coherent discourse, as adolescents become good in adjusting their language use to suit various contexts and audiences.

Adolescents often modify their language to match peer group norms. While this adaptation fosters a sense of belonging, it may also limit exposure to diverse linguistic styles, potentially restricting the development of a broader communicative repertoire. Furthermore, consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, adolescents acquire new communication strategies through interactions with peers. These social exchanges provide opportunities for learning and adopting various linguistic expressions and styles, contributing to their overall communicative competence.

The wide-spread use of digital media, such as texting and social networking platforms, has led adolescents to incorporate informal language features—like abbreviations and emojis—into their daily communication. This shift reflects the influence of digital environments on language practices.

5. Discussion

The reviewed studies collectively highlight the connection between cognitive development, social interactions, and communication skills in adolescents. As adolescents mature cognitively, they develop advanced language abilities, enabling more abstract and complex communication. Peer interactions play a crucial role in shaping communication styles, and adolescents often modify their language to fit social contexts. The popular use of

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digital communication tools has introduced new linguistic norms, influencing how adolescents express themselves.

While this review provides valuable insights, it is limited by its reliance on existing literature and the exclusion of non-English studies. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to observe how cognitive and social factors influence communication over time. Moreover, more research should be conducted to examine how these dynamics vary in diverse cultural settings.

Conclusion

Adolescent communication develops through a mix of cognitive growth and social experiences. As Piaget's theory explains, teenagers enter the formal operational stage, where they begin thinking more abstractly. This shift allows them to use complex sentence structures, understand figurative language, and engage in meaningful discussions. However, cognitive development alone does not fully shape communication skills—social interactions play an equally significant role.

Vygotsky's theory highlights that communication is learned through interaction. Adolescents pick up language patterns from peers, parents, and teachers, adjusting their speech to fit different social groups. While this helps them form their identity, it may also limit their exposure to varied linguistic styles. Digital communication has added another layer to this process. Social media, texting, and online interactions have introduced informal language elements like abbreviations and emojis. While these tools make communication faster and more expressive, they also raise concerns about declining formal writing skills. However, many adolescents develop the ability to code-switch, adjusting their language depending on the context.

Schools play a vital role in refining adolescent communication. Classroom discussions, debates, and teacher feedback help students develop confidence in expressing themselves clearly in both academic and real-world settings. By balancing formal and informal communication skills, adolescents can navigate different social and professional situations effectively.

In conclusion, communicative competence in teenagers is shaped by cognitive development, social influences, and digital communication. While each factor presents challenges, they collectively contribute to a dynamic and adaptable communication style. The key is to support adolescents in strengthening both formal and informal language skills, ensuring they are well-prepared for academic, social, and professional interactions. Future

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research could explore how cultural differences influence adolescent communication and how digital language trends will continue shaping communication patterns in the years ahead.

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