RESEARCH TRENDS IN COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RELATED CONTEXTS: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW

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Abstract. *This study presents a focused bibliometric review of research trends in the development of communicative competence in English language teaching and related educational contexts. The data were retrieved from the Scopus database and covered English-language journal articles published between 2016 and 2025 in the Social Sciences subject area. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 33 articles were retained for the final analysis. Microsoft Excel was used for data screening and descriptive bibliometric analysis, while VOSviewer was employed to visualise keyword co-occurrence patterns and identify the conceptual structure of the field. The findings show that research on communicative competence development has remained active during the analysed period, with publication output fluctuating across years and reaching its highest point in 2025. The results also indicate that the field is not limited to EFL contexts, but includes studies related to ESP, CLIL, Business English, professional communication, intercultural communication, and technology-enhanced language learning. Keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals that the main thematic directions are connected with English language teaching, foreign language learning, students, communicative language teaching, curricula, e-learning, and professional communication. The study concludes that communicative competence development is a multidimensional and practice-oriented research area. However, the field remains relatively fragmented in terms of contexts, methods, and research focus. Future studies should develop more systematic models for teaching, assessing, and integrating communicative competence across English language teaching and applied educational settings.*

Keywords. *communicative competence development; English language teaching; communicative language teaching; bibliometric review; foreign language education; professional communication; digital language learning*

1.Introduction

Communicative competence has remained one of the central constructs in language education, applied linguistics, and English language teaching. The concept originally emerged as a response to narrow views of linguistic competence that treated language knowledge mainly as mastery of grammatical rules. Hymes argued that knowing a language involves not only the ability to produce grammatically correct forms, but also the ability to use language appropriately in specific social and cultural contexts [1]. This idea later became a foundation for communicative approaches to language teaching, where successful language learning is understood as the ability to communicate meaningfully, appropriately, and strategically in real-life situations.

The theoretical development of communicative competence was further expanded by Canale and Swain, who proposed that communicative competence consists of several interrelated components, including grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence [2]. Canale later refined this model by giving clearer

attention to discourse competence as a distinct dimension of communication [3]. Bachman also contributed to the field by conceptualising communicative language ability as a complex interaction of language competence, strategic competence, and contextual factors [4]. These models show that communicative competence is not a single skill, but a multidimensional construct involving linguistic knowledge, pragmatic appropriateness, discourse organisation, interactional ability, and compensatory strategies.

In English language teaching, communicative competence has become closely associated with communicative language teaching, learner-centred pedagogy, authentic interaction, task-based learning, and the development of practical language use. Richards emphasises that communicative language teaching aims to enable learners to use language for meaningful communication rather than only to practise isolated grammatical structures [5]. Similarly, Celce-Murcia argues that communicative competence should be understood through an integrated pedagogical model that includes linguistic, sociocultural, actional, discourse, formulaic, interactional, and strategic dimensions [6]. This broader understanding is particularly important in contemporary English language teaching, where learners are expected to communicate not only in classroom activities, but also in academic, professional, intercultural, and digital environments.

Recent changes in education have made the development of communicative competence even more significant. Globalisation, international academic mobility, digital communication, and labour-market demands have increased the need for learners who can use English effectively across different contexts. As a result, communicative competence is now studied not only in general English language teaching, but also in English as a foreign language, English for specific purposes, CLIL, Business English, professional discourse, intercultural communication, and technology-enhanced language learning. This expansion shows that communicative competence has moved beyond a traditional classroom-based concept and has become a key educational outcome in diverse learning and professional settings.

Despite the importance of communicative competence, the existing literature is highly dispersed. Studies examine different learner groups, educational contexts, teaching methods, assessment practices, and digital tools. Some research focuses on EFL learners and speaking development, while other studies examine professional communication, ESP contexts, curriculum design, multimodal learning, or digital platforms. This diversity is valuable, but it also creates a fragmented research landscape. Without a systematic bibliometric overview, it is difficult to identify how the field has developed, which countries and institutions contribute most actively, which authors are visible, and what research themes dominate the literature.

Bibliometric analysis offers a useful approach for addressing this gap. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, bibliometric studies use publication metadata to examine the structure, development, and intellectual patterns of a research field. Donthu et al. describe bibliometric analysis as a rigorous method for exploring large bodies of scientific literature and identifying publication trends, influential contributors, and emerging themes [7]. Zupic and Čater also note that bibliometric methods can reveal the intellectual structure of a field by analysing relationships among publications, authors, keywords, and citations [8]. In addition, visualisation tools such as VOSviewer make it possible to map keyword co-occurrence networks and identify conceptual clusters within a dataset [9].

Although communicative competence has been widely discussed from theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, there is still a need for bibliometric evidence showing how research on its development has evolved in recent years. Existing studies often focus on specific methods,

learner groups, or local educational contexts, but they rarely provide a broader overview of publication trends and thematic directions. Therefore, a bibliometric review can help clarify the current state of research and identify both dominant and underexplored areas within the field.

The present study aims to analyse research trends in the development of communicative competence in English language teaching and related educational contexts. The review is based on Scopus-indexed English-language journal articles published in the Social Sciences subject area between 2016 and 2025. The study does not limit the scope only to EFL; rather, it examines communicative competence development across English language teaching and adjacent applied contexts, including EFL, ESP, CLIL, Business English, professional communication, intercultural communication, and technology-enhanced language learning.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the annual publication trends in research on the development of communicative competence?
2. Who are the most productive authors in this research area?
3. Which institutions and countries contribute most actively to the field?
4. What are the dominant research themes based on keyword co-occurrence analysis?
5. What does the bibliometric structure of the field suggest about current directions and future research needs?

By answering these questions, the study provides a systematic overview of recent research trends in communicative competence development. The findings are expected to contribute to English language teaching research by identifying publication patterns, major contributors, thematic clusters, and potential gaps in the field. The review may also be useful for researchers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and language teaching practitioners who seek to understand how communicative competence is being conceptualised and investigated in contemporary educational research.

2. Methodology

This study employed a bibliometric review design to examine research trends in the development of communicative competence in English language teaching and related educational contexts. The data were retrieved from the Scopus database, which was selected because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed publications in education, social sciences, linguistics, and applied language studies.

The search was conducted using the query **“communicative competence” AND “development” AND “English language teaching”**. The search was limited to publications indexed in the **Social Sciences** subject area and published between **2016 and 2025**. Only **English-language journal articles** were included. Conference papers, book chapters, reviews, non-English publications, and documents outside the selected time period were excluded.

The initial exported CSV file contained **51 records**. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, **33 English-language journal articles** were retained for the final analysis. The final dataset was screened for publication year, document type, language, author information, institutional affiliation, source title, citation count, abstract, and keywords.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive bibliometric analysis was performed to identify annual publication trends, productive authors, leading institutions, country-level scientific production, and citation patterns. Second, keyword co-occurrence analysis was carried out using **VOSviewer** in order to identify the conceptual structure and dominant themes of

the research field. Microsoft Excel was used for data cleaning, filtering, and descriptive statistics, while VOSviewer was used to visualise keyword relationships and thematic clusters.

The scope of the review was not limited only to EFL. Although several articles focused directly on EFL learners, EFL students, and pre-service EFL teachers, the final dataset also included studies related to ESP, CLIL, Business English, professional communication, intercultural communication, and technology-enhanced language learning. Therefore, the study examines communicative competence development within English language teaching and its related applied contexts.

3. Results

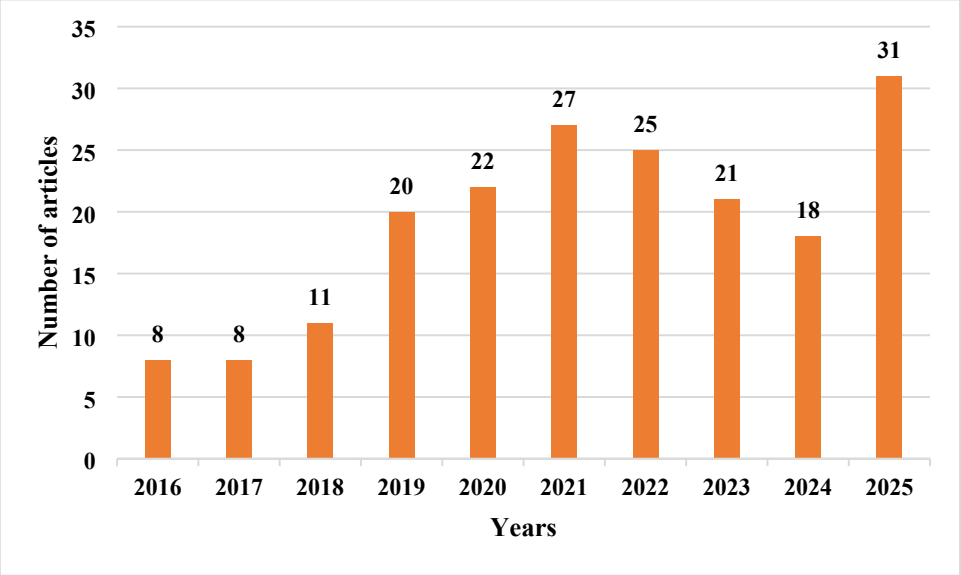


Figure 3.1. Annual publication trend

Figure 1 presents the annual distribution of publications on the development of communicative competence from 2016 to 2025. Overall, the dataset includes **191 articles** published during this period. The results indicate a generally upward trend, although the growth pattern is not completely linear. In 2016 and 2017, the number of publications remained stable, with **8 articles** recorded in each year. A slight increase was observed in 2018, when the number of publications reached **11 articles**.

A more noticeable rise began in 2019, with **20 articles**, followed by **22 articles** in 2020 and **27 articles** in 2021. This suggests that scholarly interest in communicative competence development became more visible during the later stages of the analysed period. After reaching 27 publications in 2021, the number of articles decreased slightly to **25 in 2022**, **21 in 2023**, and **18 in 2024**. However, the highest publication output was recorded in **2025**, with **31 articles**. This final increase indicates that the topic remains highly relevant in recent educational and applied linguistic research.

Importantly, the trend shows that communicative competence has moved from being a relatively limited research focus in 2016–2018 to a more established area of inquiry after 2019. The increase in publications may reflect growing academic attention to learner-centred language teaching, competence-based education, and the need to prepare learners for authentic communication in English.

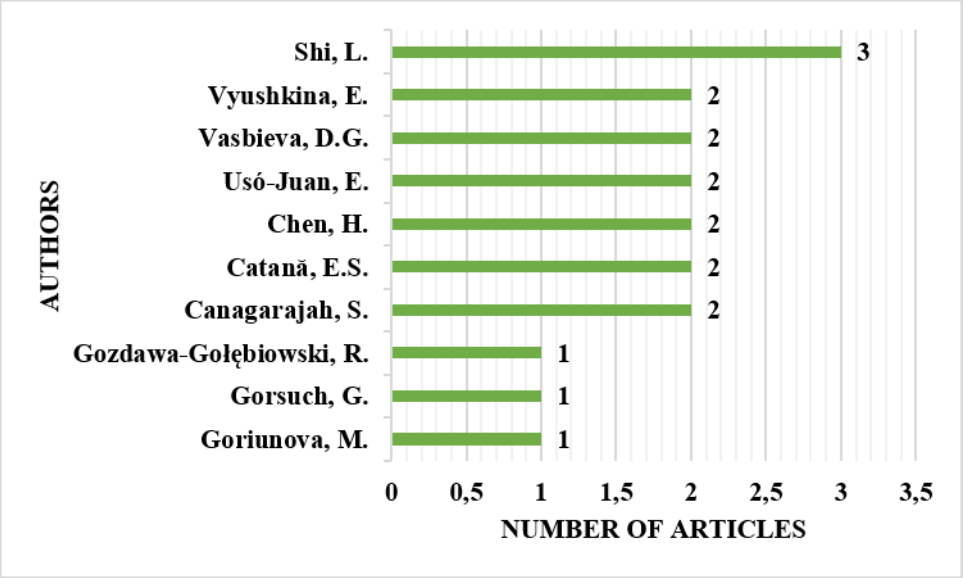


Figure 3.2. Most productive authors

Figure 2 shows the most productive authors in the analysed dataset. The results demonstrate that publication output is relatively dispersed among individual researchers. **Shi, L.** appears as the most productive author, with **3 articles**. Several authors, including **Vyushkina, E., Vasbieva, D.G., Usó-Juan, E., Chen, H., Catană, E.S., and Canagarajah, S.**, contributed **2 articles** each. Other authors, such as **Gozdawa-Gołębiowski, R., Gorsuch, G., and Goriunova, M.**, are represented by **1 article** each.

This distribution indicates that no single author dominates the field. Instead, the research landscape is characterised by contributions from multiple scholars working across different areas of language education, communicative competence, English as a foreign language, and professional communication. The relatively low number of publications per author also suggests that the topic is interdisciplinary and has attracted researchers from different academic traditions rather than being concentrated within one narrow research group.

The presence of authors such as **Canagarajah, S.** and **Usó-Juan, E.** is particularly notable because their work is associated with communicative competence, language use, and applied linguistics. However, the overall author productivity pattern shows that the field still lacks a small group of highly dominant authors, which may indicate that research on communicative competence development remains broad and methodologically diverse.

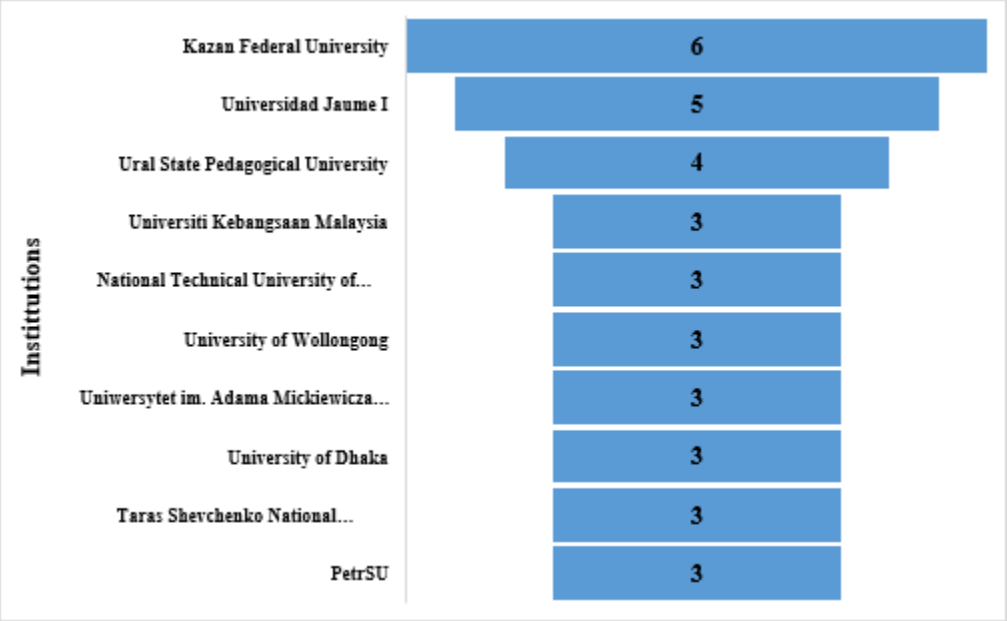


Figure 3.3. Institutional contribution

Figure 3 presents the most productive institutions contributing to research on communicative competence development. **Kazan Federal University** ranks first, with **6 articles**, followed by **Universidad Jaume I** with **5 articles** and **Ural State Pedagogical University** with **4 articles**. Several institutions produced **3 articles** each, including **Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia**, **University of Wollongong**, **University of Dhaka**, and other universities shown in the figure.

The institutional distribution demonstrates that research activity is concentrated in a limited number of universities, although the leading institutions are geographically diverse. The presence of universities from Russia, Spain, Malaysia, Australia, Bangladesh, Ukraine, Poland, and other countries suggests that communicative competence development is not restricted to one national or regional academic context.

At the same time, the relatively small difference between the leading institutions indicates that institutional dominance is moderate. Kazan Federal University leads the dataset, but the gap between the first and second institutions is only one article. This means that institutional productivity is distributed across several academic centres rather than being monopolised by a single university. Such a pattern reflects the global relevance of communicative competence in English language teaching, teacher education, and professional communication studies.

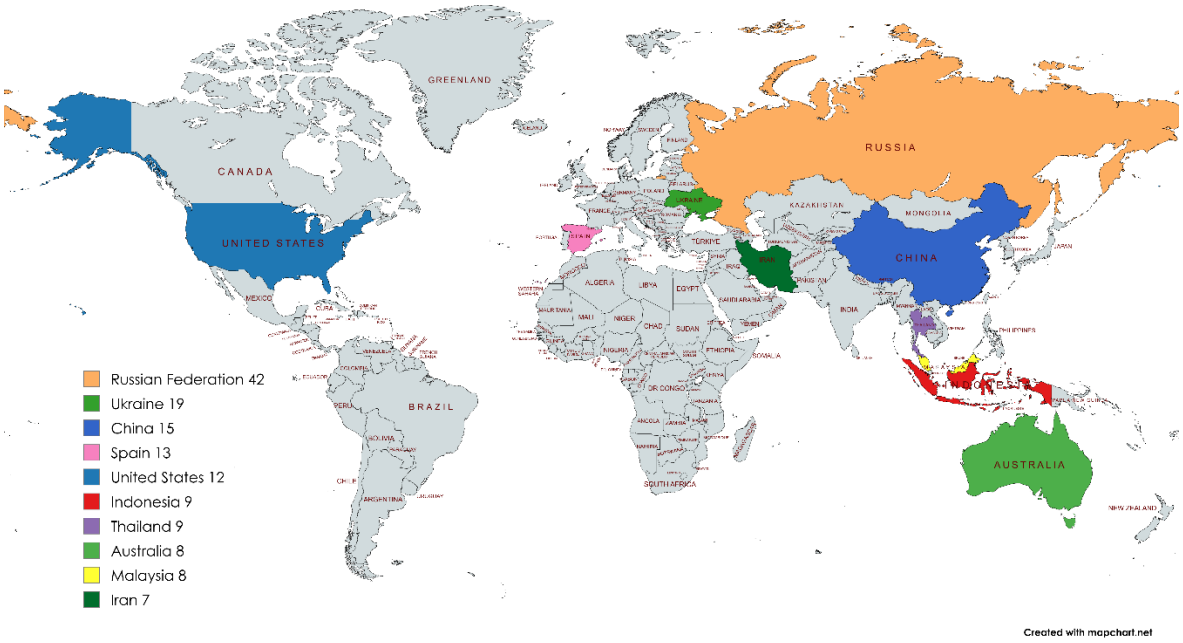


Figure 3.4. Country-level scientific production

Figure 4 illustrates the geographical distribution of publications by country. The results show that the **Russian Federation** is the leading country, with **42 articles**, followed by **Ukraine** with **19 articles** and **China** with **15 articles**. Other productive countries include **Spain** with **13 articles**, the **United States** with **12 articles**, **Indonesia** and **Thailand** with **9 articles** each, **Australia** and **Malaysia** with **8 articles** each, and **Iran** with **7 articles**.

The country-level analysis indicates that research on communicative competence development has a broad international distribution, but the output is uneven. The dominance of the Russian Federation suggests strong academic interest in communicative competence, language education, and professional communication within that context. Ukraine's position as the second most productive country also shows that Eastern European scholarship plays an important role in this research area.

The presence of China, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Iran confirms that Asian countries are actively engaged in research related to communicative competence, particularly in English as a foreign language contexts. Meanwhile, contributions from Spain, the United States, and Australia show that the topic is also significant in Western and international applied linguistics research. Overall, the geographical distribution suggests that communicative competence development is a globally relevant topic, although research productivity remains concentrated in a relatively small number of countries.

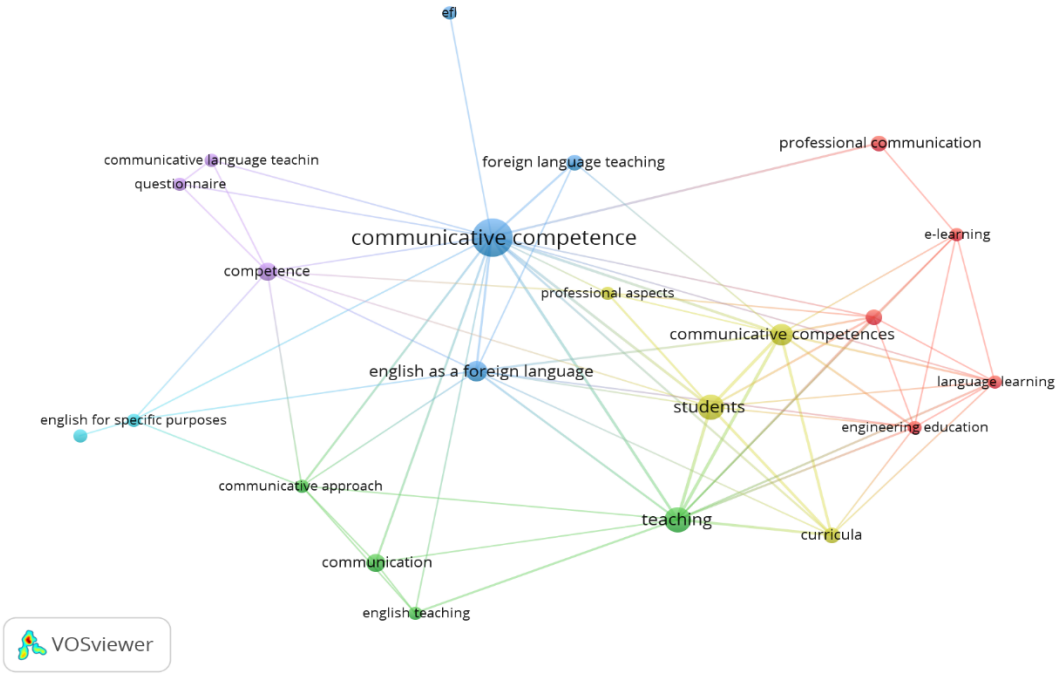


Figure 3.5. Keyword co-occurrence analysis

Figure 5 presents the keyword co-occurrence network generated through VOSviewer. The network reveals the main conceptual structure of the research field. The most central keyword is **"communicative competence"**, which has strong links with **"foreign language teaching," "English as a foreign language," "teaching," "students," "communication,"** and **"communicative approach."** This confirms that communicative competence functions as the core concept around which the field is organised.

The keyword network consists of several interconnected clusters. One cluster is centred on **communicative competence**, **foreign language teaching**, and **English as a foreign language**, showing the close relationship between communicative competence and EFL pedagogy. Another cluster includes terms such as **teaching**, **communication**, **English teaching**, and **communicative approach**, indicating the methodological orientation of the field. These terms suggest that researchers commonly examine communicative competence in relation to classroom practice, teaching strategies, and communicative language teaching.

A further cluster includes **students**, **curricula**, **professional aspects**, and **communicative competences**, which reflects the connection between communicative competence and curriculum design, learner development, and educational outcomes. Another visible thematic direction is associated with **e-learning**, **language learning**, **professional communication**, and **engineering education**. This shows that communicative competence is increasingly studied not only in general language learning contexts, but also in professional and technology-supported learning environments.

The presence of terms such as **questionnaire**, **competence**, and **communicative language teaching** also indicates that empirical studies frequently rely on survey-based methods and classroom-oriented research designs. Overall, the keyword co-occurrence analysis demonstrates that the field is structured around three major dimensions: communicative language teaching, EFL learner development, and professional or technology-mediated communication.

Taken together, the bibliometric results reveal several important patterns. First, research on communicative competence development has increased considerably between 2016 and 2025, with the highest number of publications recorded in 2025. Second, author productivity is relatively dispersed, suggesting that the field is broad and not dominated by a small number of scholars. Third, institutional contributions are distributed across universities from different regions, although Kazan Federal University, Universidad Jaume I, and Ural State Pedagogical University are among the most productive institutions.

Fourth, country-level analysis shows that the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and China are the leading contributors to the dataset. Finally, keyword co-occurrence analysis confirms that communicative competence is strongly connected with foreign language teaching, English as a foreign language, teaching methodology, students, curricula, e-learning, and professional communication. These findings indicate that communicative competence development has become a multidimensional research area located at the intersection of language pedagogy, teacher education, curriculum studies, and digital learning.

4. Discussion

This bibliometric review examined research trends in the development of communicative competence in English language teaching and related educational contexts based on 33 English-language articles indexed in Scopus between 2016 and 2025. The findings show that the field has developed steadily, although it remains relatively small in terms of publication volume. Rather than forming a highly saturated research area, the development of communicative competence appears as an emerging and expanding topic within English language teaching, foreign language education, ESP, CLIL, professional communication, and technology-enhanced learning.

The annual publication trend indicates that scholarly interest in communicative competence development has been sustained throughout the analysed period. Although the number of publications fluctuated from year to year, the highest output was recorded in 2025. This suggests that the topic continues to attract academic attention, particularly in relation to contemporary educational priorities such as learner-centred instruction, digital learning, intercultural communication, and professional language use. However, the total number of articles remains modest, which means that the field should not be overrepresented as a fully mature or extensively consolidated research domain. A more accurate interpretation is that communicative competence development is a growing research direction with increasing relevance but still limited bibliometric density.

One important finding is that communicative competence is no longer treated only as a theoretical construct in language education. Earlier conceptualisations of communicative competence emphasised the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, including grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions. The articles in the present dataset show that this concept has increasingly been translated into practical pedagogical concerns, including speaking tasks, textbook evaluation, task-based learning, scaffolding, role-playing games, curriculum design, and assessment criteria. This shift is significant because it demonstrates that current research is less concerned with defining communicative competence in abstract terms and more concerned with how it can be developed, taught, observed, and assessed in real educational settings.

The thematic structure of the dataset also shows that English language teaching is the central context of the field, but it is not the only one. Several studies focus directly on EFL learners,

EFL students, or pre-service EFL teachers. However, other studies examine ESP, Business English, occupational English, professional discourse, CLIL classrooms, academic leadership, and intercultural communication. This broader distribution is important. It shows that communicative competence is understood not merely as general English proficiency, but as the ability to use English for specific academic, professional, intercultural, and workplace-related purposes. Therefore, limiting the interpretation of the dataset only to EFL would be too narrow. The more accurate conclusion is that the field is organised around English language teaching and its applied subfields.

A strong tendency in the dataset is the growing role of digital and multimodal learning environments. Studies on multimedia-assisted language learning, Skype technology, social media, WhatsApp-integrated STAD, ICT-enabled teaching methods, media education, and multimodal communicative competence indicate that researchers increasingly connect communicative competence with technology-supported interaction. This reflects a broader transformation in language education: communication is no longer limited to face-to-face classroom interaction, but also takes place through digital, visual, multimodal, and socially mediated channels. The implication is that communicative competence in contemporary English language teaching should include not only oral and written interaction, but also the ability to communicate effectively through digital tools, multimodal texts, and online collaborative environments.

Another important pattern is the connection between communicative competence and professional communication. Several articles in the dataset address job interviews, occupational English, Business English, professional discourse, hospitality, health sciences, software engineering students, and academic leadership. This suggests that communicative competence is increasingly framed as a practical competence required for employability and professional performance. In this sense, the field moves beyond traditional classroom-based language learning and becomes connected with higher education, labour-market needs, and discipline-specific communication. This finding is particularly relevant for universities, where English language teaching is expected to prepare students not only for exams but also for authentic academic and professional communication.

The geographical distribution of the cleaned dataset shows contributions from a range of countries, including the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Malaysia, Indonesia, Colombia, Spain, China, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Lithuania, Switzerland, Pakistan, India, and Italy. However, the production is uneven, with several countries contributing only one article. This suggests that research on communicative competence development has international relevance, but the field is still fragmented. There is no clear evidence of a strongly integrated global research network based on this dataset. This fragmentation may limit theoretical consolidation and cross-contextual comparison. Future studies would benefit from stronger international collaboration, especially comparative research across EFL, ESP, CLIL, and professional English contexts.

The citation pattern also reveals that highly cited articles tend to focus on technology-enhanced learning, professional discourse, multimodality, and EFL-oriented communicative competence. This suggests that studies become more visible when they address concrete pedagogical problems or emerging educational needs. For example, research on multimedia-assisted language learning, professional discourse, ESP job interviews, social media, and role-playing games appears to attract more attention than purely conceptual discussions. This pattern supports the idea that the field is practice-oriented: scholars are interested not only in what

communicative competence is, but also in what methods, tools, and learning environments can effectively support its development.

The findings also point to a methodological issue. Many studies in the dataset appear to focus on local classroom contexts, specific groups of learners, or small-scale pedagogical interventions. This is useful for generating practical insights, but it also creates a limitation. If the field relies too heavily on isolated case studies, small samples, or context-specific interventions, it becomes difficult to generalise findings across educational systems. Future research should therefore place greater emphasis on larger empirical designs, longitudinal studies, mixed-methods research, and comparative studies across countries and institutional contexts. Without this, the development of communicative competence will remain a widely discussed but methodologically fragmented area.

For teacher education, the findings have direct implications. Since communicative competence is frequently linked with task-based learning, role play, scaffolding, speaking tasks, multimodal texts, ICT, and professional communication, future English teachers need more than theoretical knowledge of communicative language teaching. They need methodological preparation to design communicative tasks, manage classroom interaction, integrate digital tools, assess communicative performance, and adapt activities to learners' academic or professional needs. This is especially important for pre-service English teachers, who must learn not only to communicate in English themselves, but also to create conditions in which their future students can develop communicative competence through meaningful interaction.

Overall, the review demonstrates that research on communicative competence development has become a multidimensional field located at the intersection of English language teaching, applied linguistics, digital pedagogy, curriculum studies, professional communication, and intercultural education. The main strength of the field is its practical orientation: researchers increasingly examine how communicative competence can be developed through concrete teaching methods, tasks, technologies, and learning environments. Its main weakness is fragmentation: the literature is dispersed across contexts, countries, learner groups, and methodological approaches. Therefore, future research should move toward more systematic models of communicative competence development, stronger assessment frameworks, and greater integration between EFL, ESP, CLIL, and digital communication research.

4.1. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the dataset was limited to Scopus-indexed English-language articles in the Social Sciences subject area. Therefore, relevant studies published in other databases, languages, disciplines, or document types may not have been included. Second, conference papers, book chapters, and reviews were excluded in order to maintain a focused dataset of peer-reviewed articles. While this improved consistency, it may have reduced the breadth of the analysis. Third, the search query focused on "communicative competence," "development," and "English language teaching," which means that studies using related terms such as "interactional competence," "oral communication," "pragmatic competence," or "communicative language ability" may have been missed.

Future research should expand the search strategy by including related constructs and comparing results across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and other databases. Further bibliometric studies could also examine co-authorship networks, citation structures, thematic evolution, and methodological trends in more detail. In addition, future empirical research should investigate how communicative competence is developed in different educational contexts, especially in pre-

service teacher education, ESP programmes, digital classrooms, and intercultural communication settings.

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