Transitioning from Communicative Competence to Multimodal and Intercultural Competencies: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: The formulation of the construct of communicative competence (CC) was the consequence of the perceived "inappropriateness" of the theory of linguistic competence and performance. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of second language (L2) CC, a systematic review of 85 studies was conducted to assess how empirical studies have defined and operationalized the construct in the context of L2 learning and assessment. Four main themes emerged from the papers: (1) beliefs and perceptions about CC, (2) expansion of CC, (3) mixed specifications of CC, and (4) tests and measures of CC and communicative language ability (CLA). The analysis of these themes foregrounded several significant findings. First, the construct of L2 CC was significantly more prevalent in the body of research compared to L2 CLA. Second, CC has been perceived as a multifarious construct that has been researched from varied perspectives. It was found that older studies were more consistent with traditional approaches to defining CC and CLA, while the construct shifted focus to technology and self-appraisals in more recent studies. Third, there is no consensus amongst the reviewed studies about tests and methods of operationalization of CC, suggesting that the evidence provided is sample-specific and non-replicable. Importantly, it was found that over the years, CC has undergone a gradual evolution. With the multimodal and intercultural turn, CC has branched into new concepts namely intercultural and multimodal communicative competencies. Pertaining to these concepts, new notions such as telecollaboration, digital literacies, and multiliteracies have emerged. CC has also been, for long, analogous to performance, proficiency, social rules of language use, rules of appropriateness, willingness to communicate, self-perceptions of CC, and the goal of being a native speaker, which can add to the confusion surrounding the construct. The implications of the present research synthesis are two-fold. It becomes imperative to adapt world language classrooms to the rising trend in intercultural and multimodal communicative competencies. In addition, further replicable investigations should focus on developing optimal methods of operationalization that are in line with the new contemporary theoretical frameworks of language in the age of digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: communicative competence; communicative language ability; intercultural competence; multiliteracies; multimodal competence; systematic review; telecollaboration

1. Introduction

Over the years, researchers have investigated and assigned multiple meanings to the construct of communicative competence, e.g., [1–8]. In her study, Savignon [9] rejected the distinction between performance and competence by asserting that the only way of ascertaining the level of speakers' communicative competence is through performance. Further, as an extension from the works of Hymes [10,11], a number of researchers [1,3–5,9,12] have developed models of communicative competence (CC), not as models describing the constituents of actual communication, but rather as a way of encapsulating psycholinguistic features of CC with the objective of second language pedagogy, assessment, and curriculum development [13]. While Canale and Swain [4] and Canale [3] developed a descriptive

framework for teaching, Bachman (1990) adopted this model to devise his model within the context of language assessment. Celce-Murcia et al. [5], on the other hand, developed their model of CC which is pedagogically motivated. These models of CC will be further reviewed and discussed in the following sections.

However, despite their well-established stand in the scholarly literature, the above-mentioned models have been criticized in more recent literature [14–16] for not being reflective of the implications of the current era, which is largely influenced by globalisation. Thus, some authors such as Chun [17] and Hult [18] have vehemently argued that the aforementioned CC frameworks should be inclusive of particular aspects of language and communication such as cultural diversity and awareness of socially situated symbolic resources whereby "language users develop the communicative skills not only to respond to social situations but to shape the very interactional contexts in which they engage with other interlocutors" [18] (p. 63). The rationale behind this argument stems from the belief that the scope of language learning is also being extended beyond the traditional and conventional forms of communicative competence as it has been explicated since its formulation by the end of the 1960s. Rather, second language acquisition (SLA) and assessment research, it has been argued, should examine not only the traditional aspects of competence, such as linguistic or communicative, but also newer forms like symbolic competence [15], intercultural communicative competence [14], multimodal communicative competence [19], and even multimedia learning, which are altogether integrative of general digital literacies or multiliteracies [17].

In this context, the current study has two main objectives. In particular, this review will first examine the ways the construct of CC has been defined and explicated in the body of scholarly articles. At the outset, the study sets out to present a synthesis of empirical studies examining the construct of communicative competence as well as communicative language ability (CLA), though to a lesser extent given the dearth of empirical research found on CLA. Through this research synthesis [20,21], the primary focus is to provide an understanding of CC. Altogether, the study aims at unearthing the ways competencies have been investigated in the research on CC. In the fields of SLA and assessment research, investigating how language competencies are acquired remains a crucial objective. As such, following Aryadoust and Luo [22], the first research question, supporting the initial main objective, has been formulated as follows:

In what ways has the construct of communicative competence been defined in the dataset of published empirical studies?

The subsequent research objective aims at shedding light on the methods of operationalization of the constructs. As no previous reviews of empirical studies about CC and CLA have been conducted, the present study aims at synthetising studies that could provide further evidence about the characteristics, features, and methods or indicators used for measuring and analysing CC. Hence, the second research question, motivating the subsequent objective, has been formulated as follows:

What are the methods and features of operationalization of communicative competence in the body of research?

In particular, the surveyed studies will shed additional light on those elements and features that have been characterising the methods of operationalization such as language skills, components of CC, and tests as well as data-gathering methods. The results would help in making suitable methodological recommendations in regard to future research [21] in language assessment, learning, and teaching.

2. Rationale of the Study

Since the emergence of the term communicative competence (CC), to our knowledge, no systematic review or close analysis of empirical studies has been conducted on this notion. Specifically, no review on the definition and operationalization of CC has been carried out in order to explicate the notion further. This excludes the systematic review about intercultural communicative competence (ICC) [23], reviewing online intercultural exchanges

and ICC development in regard to the modality employed for each exchange, and relatively sparse qualitative and quantitative studies investigating the relationships between the constituents and validity of the key concept of communicative competence [2,7,8,24]. Therefore, additional research needs to be carried out to examine the multifaceted nature of CC and gain empirical evidence about the potential manifestations of CC within empirical studies. By reviewing the aforementioned major models of CC and CLA in the literature along with the ensuing empirical research, it can be said that despite some minor terminological modifications, the models share similar general concepts and with time, researchers and theorists endeavoured to improve and develop the models proposed by previous scholars. Demonstrably, three constituents are included in the models of CC: grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence, whilst the two other components, discourse and pragmatic competencies, are represented in a disparate manner. Therefore, it will also be important to ascertain the manner in which the features, characteristics, and components of CC have been defined and investigated. This endeavour would provide a clear portrayal of the mixed specifications of CC.

3. Methods

3.1. Procedures

The Web of Science database was utilized as the primary search engine to effectuate the literature search. The Web of Science is commonly accepted as an impartial data source that selects its journals based on their fulfilment of high scientific impact and editorial standards [25]. In this context, in order to generate a list of studies relevant to the construct under review, it was deemed appropriate to utilize the following terms "communicative competence" and "communicative language ability" as the choice for the search keywords. The aforementioned keywords stem from the seminal works of Hymes [11], Canale and Swain [4], and Bachman [1] and were combined in order to generate more generic and inclusive results.

The PRISMA flowchart [26] in Figure 1 details and exemplifies the course taken during the data search and screening. The journal search was not limited to any time range as it was crucial to appraise all relevant studies since the formulation of the concept of communicative competence since the late 1960s [10,11]. It was also important to refine the search further by limiting the journals to the domains of "linguistics" and "language linguistics" in the selection of peer-reviewed articles. Finally, the search was additionally refined to a list of selected 20 peer-reviewed journals (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of 20 peer-reviewed journals.

List of 20 Journals
Annual Review of Applied Linguistics
Applied Linguistics
Applied Linguistics Review
Assessing Writing
Computer Assisted Language Learning
English for Specific Purposes
Foreign Language Annals
International Multilingual Research Journal
Journal of Second Language Writing
Language and Education
Language Assessment Quarterly
Language Learning
Language Learning & Technology
Language Teaching Research
Language Testing
Modern Language Journal
RECALL
Studies in Second Language Acquisition
System
TESOL Quarterly
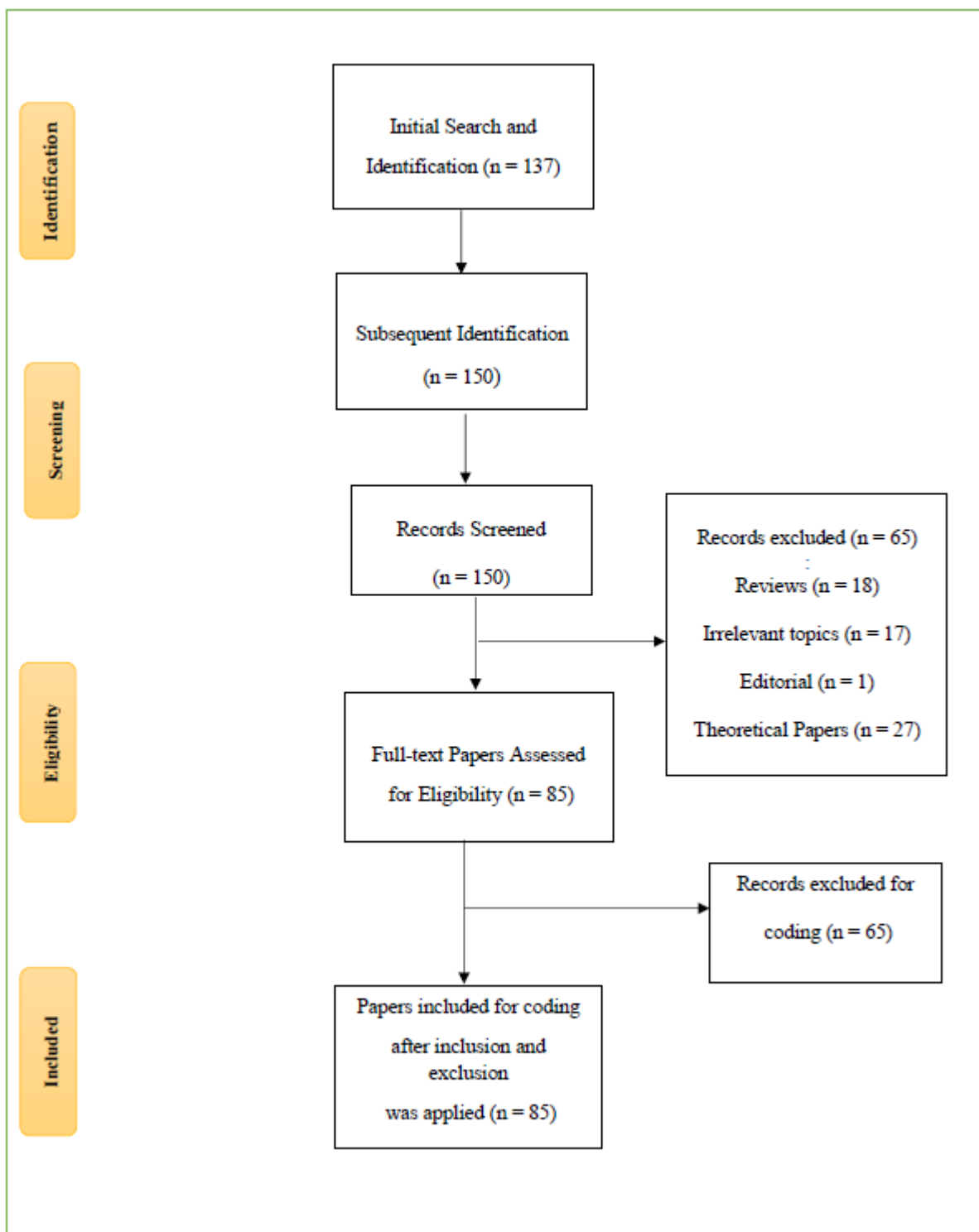
Figure 1. Prisma flowchart of data screening.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the list of journals included in the dataset mostly encompass studies regarding linguistics and applied linguistics in general. The selected and eligible articles were carefully chosen from these journals so that the dataset would not extend beyond linguistic domains; hence, the papers pertain to second language acquisition, foreign language learning, in-service and pre-service teacher education and training, language and technology, as well as language assessment.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

There were five inclusion criteria (see Table 2). The first criterion applied to studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Second, the studies were empirical and characterized by qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research approaches. The rationale occasioned by this decision was based on Riazi and colleagues [27], who argued that empirical studies assemble and analyse qualitative or quantitative data of varied nature like experiments, corpus-based studies, or cross-sectional studies. But most importantly, empirical papers, perceived presently as observed data from a source [28], have the advantage of providing substantive information from primary research that has existed so far. Therefore, reviews, plenary speeches, and introductory theoretical papers were discarded during the screening process as these papers did not fulfil the principal criteria of primary research. Third, the articles should either mention or investigate communicative competence or communicative language ability. Fourth, the selected studies should consider at least one of the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, or listening, even though models of communicative competence aim to articulate and examine the four language skills simultaneously. Fifth, articles investigating intercultural competence and multimodal communicative competence were also inserted in the dataset as they were considered extensions of Hymes' [11] model of communicative competence whereby these concepts were globally concerned with the ability to see relationships between cultures [15] and the capacity to negotiate meaning through the utilization of semiotic resources [29,30].

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria: The Paper...	Exclusion Criteria: The Paper...
1. was published in peer-reviewed articles.	1. was a review, a theoretical paper, a conference paper.
2. either mentioned or investigated communicative competence or communicative language ability	2. was an editorial, a plenary speech, a commentary.
3. investigated at least one of the language skills: reading, writing, listening or speaking.	3. was about collocational or legislative competence.
4. examined intercultural or multimodal competence.	4. did not mention communicative competence or communicative language ability.
5. was an empirical study adopting a quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approach.	5. was about literature and literary analysis.

Papers in the exclusion criteria consisted of reviews of the notion of communicative competence or communicative language ability; those which were plenary speeches, editorials, and theoretical in nature, as well as papers that did not mention the keywords "communicative competence" and "communicative language ability". In addition, unlike Purpura [31], who described research into CLA broadly and included a wide range of publications that had aimed at operationalizing or conceptualizing different language abilities, e.g., [32], we excluded such publications from the study, as the authors of the studies did not make any claims about the link between their constructs and CC/CLA. For example, the fact that a study measures grammar or vocabulary would not automatically make it fit for inclusion in the current study, since these components are also included in many other models of language ability such as elements and skills or peripheral-core model [33], which, despite some superficial similarities, are not the same as CC and CLA.

After applying the above-mentioned screening procedure, 85 papers were identified. (see Table 3). These eligible papers were published in 16 journals, and they were considered suitable according to the inclusion criteria and were consequently coded. It is noteworthy to point out that a single study appeared twice in the dataset and was therefore excluded once.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the source journals.

Journal	No. of Papers	%
System	12	14.11%
TESOL Quarterly	11	12.94%
Language Learning & Technology	10	11.76%
Foreign Language Annals	9	10.59%
Computer Assisted Language Learning	9	10.59%
Applied Linguistics	8	9.41%
Modern Language Journal	6	7.05%
Language Learning	5	5.88%
RECALL	3	3.53%
Language Assessment Quarterly	3	3.53%
English for specific purposes	3	3.53%
Language and Education	2	2.35%
Language Testing	1	1.18%
Studies in Second Language Acquisition	1	1.77%
Assessing Writing	1	1.77%
Language Teaching Research	1	1.77%
Total	85	100%

3.3. Coding Scheme

The coding scheme developed for this specific database was in line with the purpose as well as the research questions of the study. The objectives of the present research synthesis were (1) to synthetise the existing theory, hypotheses, and research findings [28] emanating from published papers by ascertaining the manner in which the studies included in the body of research have first defined the construct of CC; (2) to determine the way the construct of CC has been operationalized in the dataset; and (3) by extension, to determine the scope of validation research on the constructs of communicative competence and communicative language ability in the published studies. The coding scheme, thus, was intended to address these research aims.

Multiple variables were generated and regrouped into four main categories, namely study identification, construct definition ($n = 5$), construct operationalization ($n = 4$), and results ($n = 1$). The study identification variable ($n = 4$), derived from Plonsky and Gass [34], constituted of authors, title, year, and journal. Second, another category was formed to ascertain the manner CC was represented and defined in the body of research, which consisted of two variables: research themes and study design. The variables for this category are presented as follows: research theme adapted from Baker and MacIntyre [35], Byram [14] and Gardner [36] to denote the main themes that emerged from the dataset which were largely characterised by linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. In addition, to provide further explication about the definition of CC, we adopted another variable study design ($n = 3$), which incorporated the methodology (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) utilized in the dataset from Mackey and Gass [37] (see Table 4 for details).

The other aim of the present research synthesis involved identifying the manner CC has been operationalized in the body of research. Consequently, to fulfil this aim, variables from both models of communicative language ability and CLA were added to the coding scheme. As such, the variable named components of CC ($n = 4$) referred to the different features of CC and CLA models which involved grammatical/linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and pragmatic competence. The aforementioned variable was used as an indication of the features and methods of operationalization. Kanwit and Solon [6] highlighted that grammatical competence, long a focal point in SLA theories, includes knowledge of lexicon, morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics. Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding language use and discourse rules to interpret social meanings, while strategic competence encompasses verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to address communication breakdowns [4–6,38]. Discourse competence involves the sequencing and arrangement of language elements to create coherent messages [5,6,12,38],

and pragmatic competence relates to expressing and understanding communicative intent through an inventory of verbal schemata [5]. Thus, these components of CC sought to identify the number of studies and, by extension, the manner in which the studies explored CC or CLA.

Table 4. Variables identified in the coding scheme.

Variables	Definition	References	Research Aims
Study Identification		[34]	To ascertain the eligibility of the research papers that demonstrate a clear link to CC
Authors	Researchers who undertook the study		
Title	The title of the research paper		
Year	The year in which the scholarly papers were published		
Journal	The journals in which the scholarly papers were published		
Construct definition			
Research theme	Identification of the themes present in the dataset which were largely defined by linguistic outcomes and non-linguistic outcomes	[36]	To ascertain construct definition
Study design			
Methodology	Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodology		To ascertain construct definition
Research techniques	Instruments and techniques employed in the dataset to collect data	[37]	
Study context	ESL, EFL, or combined		
Operationalization of CC			
Components of CC	Whether the articles report linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, or pragmatic competence	[1,3–5]	To ascertain construct operationalization
Instrumentation of tests & measures	Self-report questionnaires, likert scale type, elicitation tasks, assessment tasks are employed		To ascertain construct operationalization
Language skills	Whether the articles report a language skill, namely reading, writing, listening, or speaking, or a combination of skills		To ascertain construct operationalization
Theoretical frameworks	Whether studies report or employ theoretical frameworks related to CC		To ascertain construct operationalization
Results	Findings from the articles		

The coding process also recorded and assembled the papers in terms of being longitudinal cross-sectional [28]. We recorded the instruments used for the tests and measures used in the various articles employing tests and assessment tasks such as questionnaires, rating scales, or multiple-choice question (MCQ), amongst others. Further, the papers were coded for language skills (*n* = 4), such as speaking, writing, listening, and reading, and whether or not the studies reported theoretical frameworks of CC/CLA. Finally, the last category entitled results was included in the coding scheme to systematically identify the important findings that could shed light on the construct definition and operationalization of communicative competence.

3.4. Coding Reliability

To support the reliability of the coding scheme, the included articles in the dataset were coded twice by the first researcher in order to control for bias and maximize the consistency of the coding procedure. The same score was assigned once more to the previously coded data, thus demonstrating the reliability of the results emanating from the two coding exercises. In three consecutive meetings, the coding results were further checked with the second investigator who has expertise in language assessment and research methodology.

4. Results

4.1. Research Question 1

Research question 1 (i.e., In what ways has the construct of communicative competence been defined in the dataset of empirical studies?) aimed at identifying systematically emerging themes emanating from the dataset in order to gauge the definition of CC. It seemed imperative and plausible to cluster the information together to identify patterns that could help provide a critical assessment and analysis of the number of studies [23] related to CC. In addition, this process, which involves the adoption of a thematic-narrative approach, was pursued in order to present the results in an accessible and reader-friendly manner [39] and seemed suitable as it has helped researchers understand the research topic under study [28].

As discussed later, the following themes and sub-themes have been identified in the body of empirical studies supporting the construct of CC and CLA. It is clear, however, that CC is not a unitary concept as posited by the different models of communicative competence. Although numerous papers have stipulated that they are, in fact, investigating the construct of CC or its components, the results demonstrated that the studies report the components of CC very dissimilarly.

Figure 2 and Table 5 display the different constituents of CC that have been reported in the different themes in the empirical studies. For example, the first theme, "beliefs and perceptions of CC", consists of three sub-themes, namely "willingness to communicate (WTC)", "perceived CC", and "Native Speaker and Non-Native Speaker Beliefs about CC". A second theme, "expansion of CC", comprises of two sub-themes entitled "intercultural communicative competence" and "multimodal communicative competence". A third theme denotes "mixed specifications about CC". In addition, another theme was seen to relate to the different studies concerned with "tests and measures of CC and CLA". The aforementioned themes have been assembled with the aim of understanding the definitions attributed to CC in the surveyed studies. As shown in Figure 2, there are multiple themes, sub-themes, and topics linked to CC research.

The following themes and sub-themes have been identified in the body of empirical studies supporting the construct of CC and CLA. We present these themes according to their scope to illustrate the gradual evolution of the concept of CC, which initially focused on self-perceptions, tests, and beliefs and was later broadened to include intercultural and multimodal communicative competence.

Table 5. Themes and sub-themes identified in the dataset.

Themes and Sub-Themes	# of Studies	Percentage %
Construct Definition		
1. Beliefs and perceptions about CC	18	21.18
1.1 Willingness to communicate	6	7.06
1.2 Perceived CC	7	8.24
1.3 Beliefs about NS and NNS	5	5.88
2. Expansion of CC	27	31.76
2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence	24	28.24
2.2 Multimodal Communicative Competence	3	3.53
3. Mixed Specifications about CC	22	25.88
Construct Operationalization		
4. Test and Measures of CC and CLA	18	21.18
Total	85	100

Note: No theoretical papers (*n* = 24) and review papers (*n* = 18) were included in the themes as they are not empirical studies and therefore were excluded from Results.
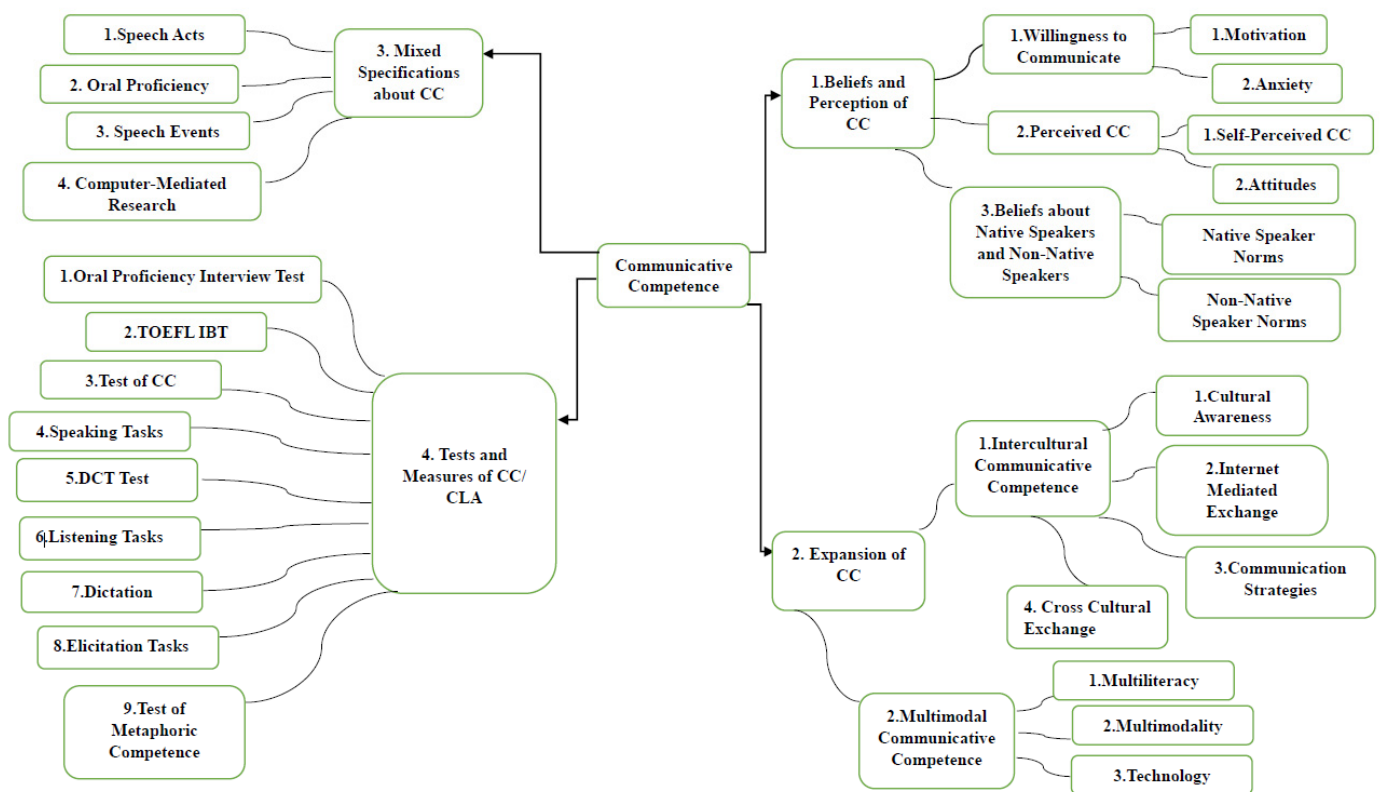
Figure 2. Themes, sub-themes, and topics in CC research. Note. CC = communicative competence, NS = native speaker, NNS = non-native speaker, DCT = discourse completion task, TOEFL ibt = The Internet-based Test of English as a Foreign language, WTC = willingness to communicate.

4.2. Beliefs and Perceptions about CC

This theme comprises of three main sub-themes which will be discussed next.

4.2.1. Willingness to Communicate

Under "beliefs and perceptions about CC", the first subtheme comprised of empirical studies (*n* = 18, 21.18%) which encompassed, first, willingness to communicate (*n* = 6, 7.06%). The articles included closely discussed willingness to communicate (WTC) [40] in relation to CC to the extent of equating the two constructs. Nonetheless, it is necessary

to point out that the WTC construct evolved from the work of Burgoon [41] and was further substantiated by McCroskey and Richmond [42], who argued that willingness to communicate is concerned with the fact that individuals' perceptions about communication are considerably influenced by an individual's personality. In other words, as Baker and McIntyre [35] (p. 68) indicated, "a person makes a cognitively processed, volitional choice whether or not to communicate. The personality of the individual, then, will play a major role in the kind of choice that is made". Likewise, other researchers have perceived WTC to be a facilitating factor in second language acquisition which is significantly influenced by non-linguistic features such as motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and self-perception of communicative competence [43–47].

In sum, while the scope of WTC ($n = 6$, 7.06%), research seems to be different from the traditional conceptualization of CC [4,48], many researchers [42,43,46] have subsumed WTC under CC or established a connection between the two constructs. This connection has often been examined through using self-report or self-appraisal instruments such as questionnaires ($n = 4$) and/or interviews ($n = 2$) applied to measure WTC and self-reports of CC. As such, the conceptualization of CC in this stream of research is largely divergent and varied, thus inviting the inevitable question as to what CC is and how it should be measured.

4.2.2. Perceived Communicative Competence

As an extension and continuation of the characteristics evoked in the body of research referring to WTC another cluster of studies was found to be focused on the concept of perceived communicative competence (PCC) [35]. Beliefs and perceptions about CC were further divided into two sub-themes, which entailed perceived CC ($n = 7$, 8.24%) and beliefs about NS and NNS ($n = 5$, 5.88%). These two categories consisted of the three aforementioned study designs, i.e., qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The latter cluster of studies mainly explored the perceptions around teaching assistants' communicative competence and the norms and values that underscore this paradigm. The rationale behind this form of categorization stems from the fact that Gardner [36] debated two possible outcomes that are the consequences of language learning situations namely, linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. As such, the first theme, beliefs and perceptions about CC, along with the three delineated sub-themes, involved non-linguistic outcomes that discussed the relationships between attitudes [49,50], motivation [51], and language anxiety [52,53], as well as perceptions and attitudes towards language performance and language competence [35,54,55] with the depiction of CC.

In sum, the studies [35,49,51–55] examining perceived CC have reported both converging and diverging findings with regards to the relationship between self-perceived CC, motivation, attitude, and language anxiety. The self-image of language learners is no doubt a covariate of their perceived CC, while the cause–effect relationship between these factors remains unknown in this line of research. There is certainly a heightened need to replicate the preceding studies in other contexts to ensure their temporal and inter-contextual validity.

4.2.3. Beliefs about Native Speakers and Non-Native Speakers

Beliefs about native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) ($n = 5$, 5.88%) constitute the other sub-theme. The current cluster of studies adopted the terms native speakers also considered first language learners, and non-native also were perceived as second language learners. The terms are also used to denote people growing up with one or more languages from birth or people obtaining a language subsequent to that point in life [56]. Altogether, the cluster of papers mainly explored the perceptions of teaching assistants' communicative competence as well as the rules of appropriateness [57] of what seems to appear to be the prerequisites of CC for this specific group of participants. In general, these elements underscore the dichotomy of native speakerism and non-native speakerism [58–62]. It was found that the five articles were concerned with the exploration

of the oral performance of international teaching assistants in terms of their pronunciation, intonation, interactional competence, and intelligibility of the participants who are speakers of English as a foreign language and second language.

Overall, the articles included in this theme reveal important trends in the literature englobing CC. The papers evidently depict, through their objectives and findings, a distinct and additional understanding of communicative competence that goes beyond the traditional [11], operationalized [1], and descriptive models [3–5] of the construct of CC. These findings offer an intricate picture of the notion of CC wherein the notion of native-speakerism is a factor of perceived pronunciation and is hardly concerned with writing, reading, and listening skills. In addition, "native speakers" are perceived by language learners to have a high language competency, with language competency being construed primarily as analogous to whether the speaker sounds like a native speaker.

4.3. Expansion of Communicative Competence

The third theme, "expansion of CC" (n = 27, 31.76%), found in the dataset involved studies which included the concept of intercultural communicative competence (n = 24, 28.24%) with the sub-theme of multimodal communicative competence (n = 3, 3.53%). As mentioned previously, the notion of ICC is a natural extension [63] of communicative competence [4,11], as it incorporates critical cultural awareness. It has an intentional contrast with native speakerism, which happens to be the goal of more traditional communicative approaches [14].

4.3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

In terms of the studies covering ICC, it has to be highlighted that the majority of articles (n = 22, 25.88%) surveyed are underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of the model proposed by Byram [14]. The main objective of the model and the studies adopting it is providing important insights into the trends shaping the nature of language learning and teaching as characterized within the ESL and EFL contexts during the past 20 years. Byram's [14] model of ICC is employed by most studies within the context of interaction-mediated research, most specifically computer-mediated research, to devise a series of tasks to act like a springboard for interaction and discussion through technology and the Internet. The converging point of these studies, as expected, is the finding that information technology has served the growth of (self-perceived) intercultural competency and mutual understanding of language learners from diverse backgrounds. However, the manifestation of ICC is domain-specific is very much dependent on the topic being discussed [64,65]. A couple of studies [66,67] also employed Martin and Rose's [68] and Gardner's [36] motivation theory, respectively. There are three target groups in this stream of research, based on which the results will be presented below: language learners, teachers, and exchange programs.

4.3.2. Multimodal Communicative Competence

Three studies (n = 3, 3.45%) [29,69,70] were found to illustrate and research the concept of multimodal communicative competence in the dataset. It is pertinent to underscore that multimodal competence or multimodality [71] is a new type of literacy which is defined as a set of skills and abilities where, visual, aural, and digital literacies intersect. It also incorporates the capacity to comprehend and make use of the power of images and sounds, to change and manipulate digital media, to dispense them extensively, and finally to easily adjust them to new forms [70]. The best way to understand its positioning within the construct of CC is that it is conceptualized in a similar as ICC. That is, multimodal communicative competence could be equally perceived as an evolution of the traditional forms of CC that emerged owing to the rapid technological advances in education, most importantly in language learning and teaching.

Traditional CC models by Canale and Swain [4] or CLA [72] have no component that could be mapped on the analysis of multimodality and the role of body language. The

conclusions drawn for this section of the surveyed studies are quite similar as those drawn in regard to ICC. Multimodal communicative competence is a natural expansion of CC, and this transformation engenders promising prospects for the construct under study, in particular, in regard to its pedagogical application in world language classes.

4.3.3. Mixed Specifications of CC

Another theme identified is "mixed specifications", which refers to the diverse manifestations of the construct being studied. This theme constitutes a significant part of the research synthesis, offering insights into the definition, operationalization, and implications of CC for SLA. Altogether, it has to be noted that there is no consistency with the findings amongst the studies that claim to be mentioning and using qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods to analyse the construct of CC. The results generated for the theme "Mixed Specifications about CC" are primarily sample-specific and do not follow a similar line of investigation; hence, the difficulty in clustering together the articles subsumed in this theme to examine their replicability.

### 4.4. Components of Communicative Competence

In terms of the investigation of the different components of the main models of CC, namely linguistic or grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and pragmatic competencies, the results were disparate and incongruent. Figure 3 demonstrates the results per the identified themes ($n = 3$); it can be seen that the surveyed studies have not covered and reported the different constituents of CC in accordance with the established and traditional models and theoretical frameworks [1,3–5]. Rather, "beliefs and perceptions about CC", which subsumes "WTC", "Perceived CC", and "Beliefs about NS and NNS", show that most studies ($n = 11$, 12.94%) in this cluster did not investigate any of the traditional components of CC. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the other theme "mixed specifications about CC" ($n = 10$, 11.76%). The component that has been the most reported at varying degrees remains linguistic competence under "beliefs and perceptions about CC" ($n = 6$, 7.05%) and "tests and measures of CC" ($n = 9$, 10.59%), followed by sociolinguistic competence being the most covered in the theme "mixed specifications about CC" ($n = 6$, 7.05%). The component that appears to be systematically less investigated is pragmatic competence in the three themes (beliefs and perceptions about CC, tests and measures of CC, mixed specifications about CC) listed below with zero, one, and one studies, respectively.
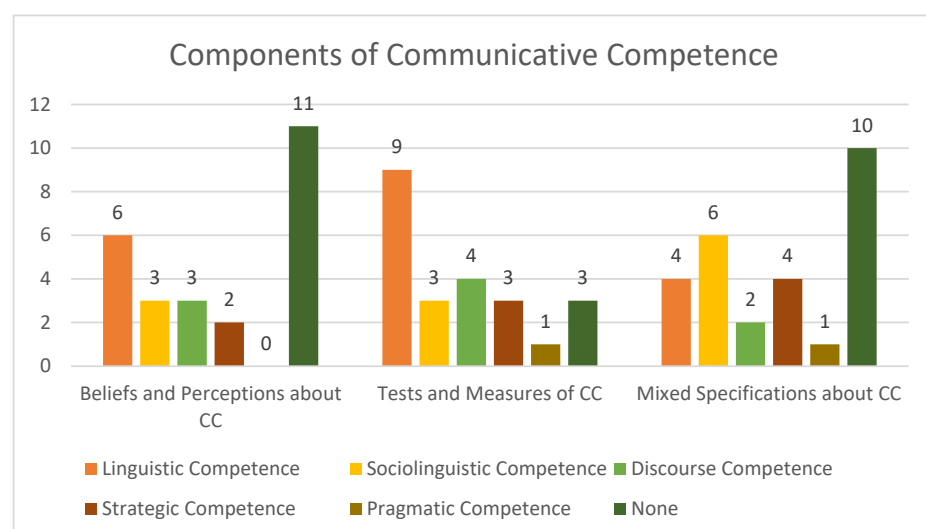
Figure 3. Themes reporting the different components of CC models. Note: Results for the theme "expansion of CC" are not presented here because the concept of ICC and MCC diverge from traditional components of CC and investigate different features altogether. None refers to studies that do not mention any of the components of CC.

*4.5. Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Skills*

As demonstrated in Figure 4, the linguistic skills that have been most prominently reported in the themes and their respective studies are speaking as a language skill with "beliefs and perceptions about CC" (*n* = 12, 14.12%), "tests and measures of CC" (*n* = 9, 10.58%), and "mixed specifications about CC" (*n* = 12, 14.12%). This result could be explained by the common belief that communicative competence has been initially and primarily associated with the development of oral proficiency analogous to the speaker's appropriate language use and pronunciation, along with native speakerism as a benchmark [9,11,60,73], especially in the context of second and foreign language learning and assessment. Interestingly though, "expansion of CC" (*n* = 4, 4.71%) also referred to speaking in regard to linguistic skills covered. Nevertheless, for the aforementioned theme, it is also necessary to note that non-linguistic skills were the principal object of study.
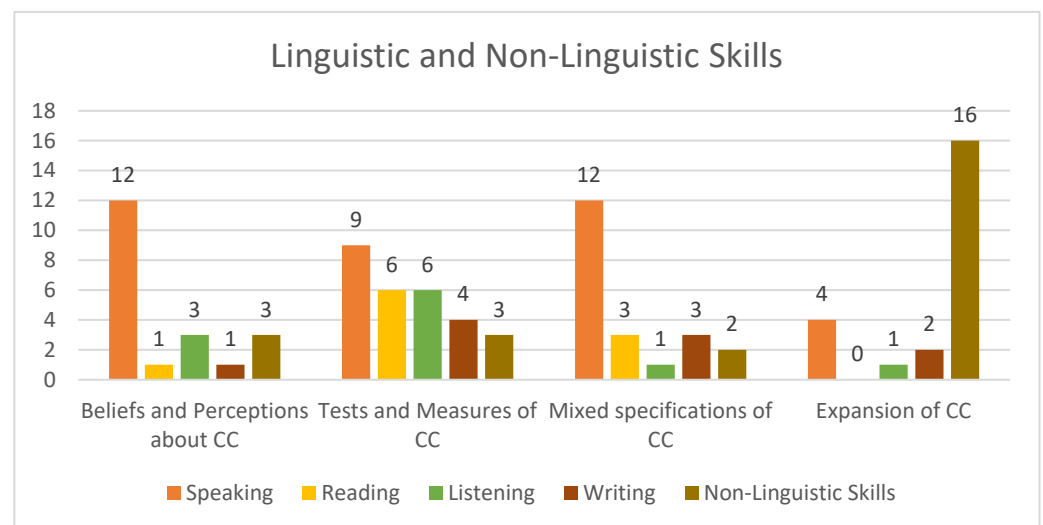
Figure 4. Themes reporting linguistic and non-linguistic skills. Note: Non-linguistic skills refer to features like ideologies, perceptions, and self-perception about CC, teacher and learner cognition, attitudes, motivation, curiosity, anxiety, and motivation.

4.6. Study Context

In addition, Figure 5 demonstrates additional features of operationalization in the setting where the studies have been conducted in the context of English as a second language, English as a foreign language, and studies where the two contexts have been combined. On the one hand, for "beliefs and perceptions about CC" (*n* = 8, 9.41%) studies were mostly situated within ESL contexts. On the other hand, the other themes "tests and measures of CC" (*n* = 6, 7.06%), mixed specifications about CC" (*n* = 9, 10.59%), as well as "expansion of CC" (*n* = 13, 15.29%), were concerned mostly about other contexts whereby other languages were investigated. This indicates that a considerable part of the research has been conducted on languages other than English. For studies included in the other themes, languages like Spanish (*n* = 7), Japanese (*n* = 3), Chinese (*n* = 2), Italian (*n* = 1), Dutch (*n* = 1), German (*n* = 1), Korean (*n* = 1), Arabic (*n* = 1), and Welsh (*n* = 1) have been examined as a second language. Nevertheless, for "expansion of CC" (*n* = 10, 11.76%), studies within EFL context dominate compared to the other types of study setting. Similarly, in the reviewed altogether, it has been noted that the EFL context has the lion's share (*n* = 22) compared to the ESL context (*n* = 19).
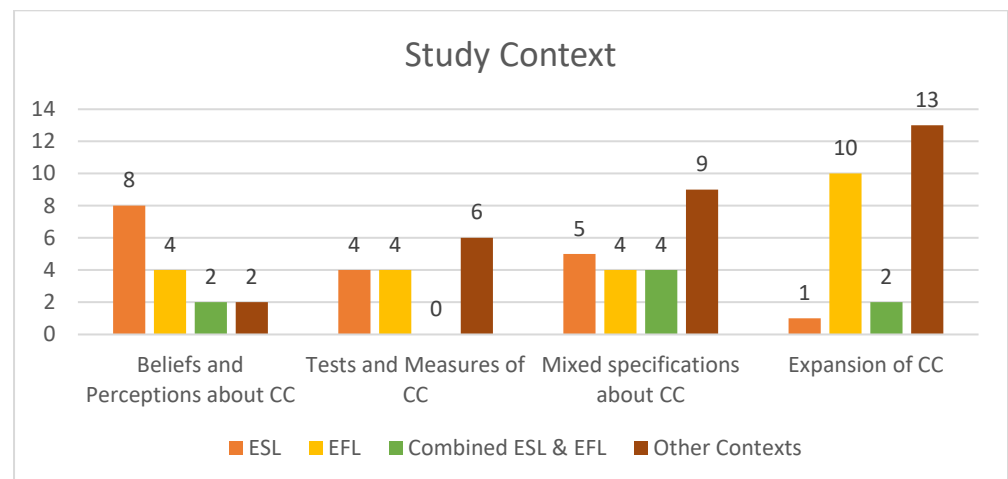
Figure 5. Themes illustrated in their study context. Note: Other contexts refer to instances where the surveyed studies have been conducted by investigating other languages and different contexts.

4.7. Research Question 2

To answer research question 2 (i.e., *What are the methods and features of operationalization of communicative competence in the body of research?*), it was considered appropriate to evaluate the manner the theme "tests and measures of CC and CLA" was actualized and the manner in which the multiple components of CC and CLA, such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and pragmatic competence, were reported [1,3–5].

Several articles, mainly in the fourth theme, discussed CC (*n* = 15, 17.64%) and CLA (*n* = 3, 3.53%) in regard to tests and tasks utilized in the various studies set to investigate the construct under study. The term "measure" could be defined as the type of quantification that must be done as per explicit procedures and rules [1]; the test, for the purpose of this review, is defined as "a measurement instrument designed to elicit a specific sample of an individual's behaviour" [1] (p. 20).

Table 6 provides a summary of the measures, tests, and sample studies used to investigate CC/CLA and/or its components. Overall, 28 test types were identified in the studies. In addition, there were five main methods of construct operationalization consisting of multiple-choice questions (MCQs), interviews, questionnaires, and rating scales, amongst others.

Altogether, it should be noted that in the context of the current research synthesis, the cluster of studies organized under this theme involved chiefly educational/commercial tests assessing language proficiency. For instance, the speaking test batteries like Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT) [74,75] the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) [73,76], The Plaister Aural Comprehension Test (PACT), also the Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language (CELT), as well as parallel versions of a communicative competence test. It can be argued that an emphasis is put on particular forms of measurement and test [1] of the construct under study. Consequently, it is noteworthy to underscore the fact that all the studies reported adopted mainly quantitative methods of data collection with tests scores, rating scores, and surveys, as well as quantitative analyses. Altogether, it has to be noted that there is no consistency with the findings amongst the studies that claim to be mentioning and analysing, qualitatively and quantitatively, the construct of CC. Accordingly, the dataset does not follow a general trend of investigation, in terms of testing and measuring, when it comes to CC in regard to educational measurement and tests.

Table 6. List of Tests and their Methods of Operationalization.

Test Types of CC/ CLA	Instrumentation	Example
OPI	Discrete point test	[73]
Speaking Test of TOEFL	MCQ items Speaking tasks (spoken stimulus); Reading passage	[74]
Japanese OPI	Structured face to face interview	[76]
PACT CELT Parallel versions of CC test	MCQ test (oral stimulus) Written MCQ test Responses elicited by pictures Behaviour questionnaires Global rating scales	[77]
Listening comprehension test Oral production test Assessment of CC	MCQ (Standardized Test) Visual stimulus Rating scale	[78]
Test of CLA	15 min oral interview	[79]
Assessment tasks	Individual presentation Group oral discussion	[80]
Listening test Pronunciation test C-test Grammar test Vocabulary test Discourse completion test oral interview Oral interview Student role-play	IELTS practice test referring to syllable stress, weak forms, individual sound recognition similar to a traditional cloze test MCQ items Schmitt's vocabulary levels test (version 1) use eight different request speech acts with audio visual prompts Interview, a version of the IELTS speaking test A chance meeting with a friend in the street	[81]
Communicative competence	Dictation as a measure of CC	[82]
Written communicative competence	Rating Scale described as Pertinence, Clarity, Structural Accuracy	[83]
Sociolinguistic test	MCQ test IELTS as pre-test	[84]
ACTFL OPI ITA test	Rating score of proficiency 10 min mock teaching test, Rating Scale	[85]
Written discourse competence task	Description of 12 request situations	[86]
Knowledge Test Proficiency in oral English communication Satisfaction and usability questionnaire	MCQ Auditory discrimination and verbal production Questionnaire using 5-point Likert scale	[87]

5. Discussion

The present research synthesis has been primarily set out to identify the way the construct of CC [3–5,11,48], as well as that of CLA [1], though to a lesser extent, have been defined and operationalized in the dataset of empirical studies that emanated from the Web of Science database. Demonstrably, in the dataset of 85 surveyed studies, it is the term communicative competence (n = 82, 96.47%) that predominates empirical research at the expense of communicative language ability (n = 3, 3.53%). Henceforth, in this context, the

discussion will be mostly anchored around the construct of CC rather than CLA given the higher occurrence of the notion in the Section 4 and in the scholarly literature in general.

5.1. Construct Definition in CC Research

In terms of research question 1, the findings have been mainly presented in terms of "beliefs and perceptions about CC", which subsumed 3 additional sub-themes, namely "willingness to communicate", "perceived communicative competence", and "beliefs about native speakers and non-native speakers". A subsequent theme, "expansion of CC", encompassing "intercultural communicative competence" and "multimodal communicative competence", was found to outweigh other representations of CC in the surveyed empirical research. Finally, a last theme, "mixed specifications about CC", was also delineated according to the research methodologies of each article. Due to space constraints, these themes and sub-themes are discussed in the Supplemental Text S1.

Based on the discussion presented in Supplemental Text S1, it might be said that the articles included in the three themes reveal important trends in the literature on CC. The papers evidently depict through their objectives and findings a distinct and additional understanding of communicative competence that goes beyond the traditional [11], operationalized [1], and descriptive models [3–5] of the construct of CC. These findings offer an intricate picture of the notion of CC. As such, the conceptualization of CC in this stream of research is largely divergent and varied. As such, the question as to what communicative competence accounts for has been resolved in the current research synthesis. The conclusions drawn from this study have several implications for the teaching, learning, and assessment of second and foreign languages on a global scale, which will be discussed below.

5.2. Construct Operationalization in CC Research

5.2.1. Features of Operationalization in CC Research

Before proceeding to discuss research question 2, it seems pertinent to discuss the principal findings of the study regarding the features of operationalization. Three main features of operationalization of CC, namely components of CC, linguistics, and non-linguistic skills, as well as study context, were highlighted. The results were generated according to the four themes identified from the dataset of empirical research: "beliefs and perceptions about CC", "expansion of CC", "mixed specifications about CC", and "tests and measures of CC". In this context, the first feature, components of CC, entailed the constituents of the major models of CC and CLA [1,3–5], namely linguistic/grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and pragmatic competencies.

The theme "expansion of CC" was not included in this feature of operationalization as the studies present in this cluster diverge from traditional models of CC thereby excluding the aforementioned components of CC. In "beliefs and perceptions of CC" and "tests and measures of CC", it is linguistic competence that has been reported the most. The least-reported competence in the cluster of studies is demonstrably pragmatic competence, with only one study [81] investigating the concept in "tests and measures of CC" and "mixed specifications about CC" [86]. In the themes, "beliefs and perceptions about CC", the results demonstrate that no investigation of the components of CC has been undertaken. This outcome indicates that most of the surveyed research [61] considers linguistic competence to be fundamental in the development of the communicative competence of language learners. This is because linguistic competence subsumes key features like knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and syntax. This finding is contradictory to the traditional models of CC which posit that there is more to CC than simply linguistic competence. This argument could also provide an explanation for the dearth of investigation in terms of pragmatic competence. After all, pragmatic competence was only subsequently incorporated in the theoretical framework as part of Bachman's [1] and Bachman and Palmer's [72] models of CLA. As demonstrated earlier, CLA is sparsely mentioned in the dataset of studies.

Altogether, this finding could be explained by the fact that despite theoretical models of CC helping in the formulation of target goals for language learning and teaching [88]; in practice, neither the CC models nor proficiency address the generally accepted constituents of CC to the same degree [89]. Hence, the empirical research [59,74,77,78,81–84,90] conducted over the past five decades diverges in the level of importance attributed to each of the different components of CC.

The second feature, labelled linguistic and non-linguistic skills, referred, on the one hand, to the four language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. On the other hand, the non-linguistic skills reported in the empirical studies [44–47,50–52] were chiefly concerned with notions like teacher and learner cognitions, attitudes, ideologies, perceptions, and self-perceptions of CC, anxiety, and motivation. Notably, the theme "expansion of CC" was chiefly concerned with the non-linguistic aspect of language learning as it subsumed studies regarding "intercultural communicative competence" and "multimodal communicative competence". Again, these notions are not analogous to traditional models of communicative competence that, to some extent, take into consideration the oral proficiency of language learners [11]. Rather, they extend the established models to incorporate concepts like critical cultural awareness and curiosity for intercultural competence [14], as well as multimodality, defined as other modes of communication [19,91], for multimodal communicative competence. The rationale behind this evolution is substantiated by the changes in the modes of communication systems in current times. Unmistakably, there is proclivity towards technologies and multiliteracies in second language acquisition research, as it inevitably shapes today's language classrooms [17]. In the same way, it is "now impossible to make sense of texts, even of their linguistic parts alone, without having a clear idea of what these other features might be contributing to the meaning of a text" [91] (p. 337). Nonetheless, it is also important to note that the language skills that have been mostly investigated in the context of the different themes relate mostly to speaking as, since its inception, the term communicative competence has long been associated with the development of oral performance and proficiency mirroring the native speaker [4,11,13,89,92,93], although interpretation and perception tasks have also been used to tap into communicative/sociolinguistic competence.

Further, the third feature, study context, consisted of particular instances (ESL, EFL or combined ESL and EFL contexts) as well as other contexts where the studies were carried out. In terms of, "beliefs and perceptions about CC" studies have been mainly conducted within the ESL contexts. By contrast, "tests and measures of CC and CLA", "mixed specifications about CC", and "expansion of CC" were situated in different contexts. Arguably, most of the studies within the "beliefs and perceptions about CC", "mixed specifications about CC", and "tests and measures of CC and CLA" situate themselves before the intercultural and multimodal turn [91,94], hence being the focus of the themes in ESL contexts. After all, since its inception, CC has been, first and foremost, formulated to develop and facilitate the communicative abilities of bilingual learners [3,4,11]. This outcome also suggests that, for long, the English language has evidently possessed a powerful role in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts [95].

However, it should be noted that the "expansion of CC" related mostly to contexts that went beyond ESL and EFL. It has been argued in the present research synthesis that the notions of "intercultural communicative competence" and "multimodal communicative competence" which are encompassed in "expansion of CC" promulgate a shift from the conventional competence-oriented, native speaker objective of language learning to that of the intercultural speaker goal [96]. Most importantly, as observed by numerous recent studies [65,95,97–101], this outcome indicates that with the advent of the internet revolution and by the extension of online exchanges and online literacy, the nature and objective of communicative competence has evolved to embrace multilingual interactions in the context of telecollaborative computer-mediated communications. Hence, this finding has important implications for the development and future of CC. Second and foreign language classrooms should take note of this transformations and integrate them in their

teacher training programs as well as instructional and language assessment practices. The evaluation of communicative competence should move from the simple tests of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation that has been for long characteristic of traditional second and foreign language classrooms to incorporating the components of intercultural and multimodal competencies [14,19,29]. As shown by Lee and Song [99], ICC has become a necessary skill in the global era. This has further facilitated through telecollaboration and study abroad contexts [65,99,101]. Hence, it is imperative for students, teachers, and assessment stakeholders from all educational spheres to rise to this promising trend.

5.2.2. Tests and Methods of Operationalization in CC Research

The findings of research question 2 demonstrate that research has been carried out, to some extent, by incongruently examining the different components of CC (e.g., linguistic/grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and pragmatic competencies). These constituents were mainly adapted from the established models of Bachman [1], Canale [3], and Canale and Swain [4]. Altogether, it should be noted that in the context of the current research synthesis, the cluster of studies organized under "tests and measures of CC and CLA" involved chiefly educational/commercial tests assessing language proficiency.

Overall, for the 18 studies that were principally concerned with assessing CC, 28 test types were employed (see Table 6). This outcome shows that the surveyed body of research utilized varied tests of language proficiency measuring different skills and competencies altogether. As a result, there was no consistency amongst the studies and the evidence provided about the tests of CC and methods of operationalization [73,74,76–87].

This lack of consensus is further substantiated by the array of test batteries utilized in the surveyed studies. For instance, speaking test batteries like the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT) [74,75], the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) [73,76], The Plaister Aural Comprehension Test (PACT), and the Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language (CELT), as well as parallel versions of a communicative competence test [77], have been employed.

Among these studies, despite explicitly designating the test as CC and asserting that the aim is to measure communicative competence, only one article [81] attempted to examine the components of traditional models of CC [1,3,4]. Interestingly, two studies [78,81] were able to demonstrate that CC components are not considered as one single entity. As Weyers [78] proposed, the term communicative competence usually "appears to be used as a catch-all phrase referring to an assumed single, indivisible skill that all people can acquire if exposed to the same situations" (p. 347). Rather, both studies demonstrated that this general belief to be inaccurate. This evidence has to some extent shown that "the components used by theorists to describe language are psychologically distinct, suggesting that a learner can learn them separately or can learn more of one than another's [90] (p. 132). However, these findings are not recurrent in the synthesis of research, and they remain inconsistent with the other studies assembled in this theme.

Moreover, the findings point out to five main methods of construct operationalization entailing multiple-choice questions (MCQs), interviews, questionnaires, and rating scales, amongst others. Again, the findings underline the heterogenous and sample-specific methods of operationalization of CC, but the extent to which test methods affect the measurement of CC is unknown. For example, the utilization of methods like questionnaires and multiple-choice tests are limited [24] and thus not truly reflective of authentic language use.

The varied and divergent nature of the methods of operationalization also underscore the fact that the inevitable question of the optimal measurement and operationalization of communicative competence persist. As posited by Spolsky [102], one of the challenges faced while undertaking a language proficiency test is to determine which of the many functions of language should be included in an assessment. Consequently, there are persistent limitations in measuring and operationalizing language constructs. As demonstrated by the findings of this study, the various components of the models of CC are evaluated

separately and rarely as a whole. This issue can be attributed to the difficulty in conducting authentic language tests and creating contexts that accurately represent a learner's actual language use, as explained by Hymes [103]. One novel way of resolving this dilemma, according to Harding et al. [103] (p. 192), is to consider test-taking competence as a form of competence itself, suggesting that "taking part in a language exam is a kind of "staged" performance [104] (p. 535) which requires its own form of communicative competence".

Instead, as proposed by Chun [17] and Hult [18], some scholars have started to examine a more contemporary conceptualization of communicative competence that incorporates interaction, with cultural awareness and diversity. As such, language teaching, learning, and assessment should move from the older conceptualization of CC and embrace new concepts. The once-established model of Bachman [1], Canale and Swain [4], and Canale [3] appears to be inadequate and insufficient to support the new specificities of communicative competence, like multimodal communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence—even though it is well known that these models were conceived with the aim of curriculum design and assessment in second language programs [105]. Therefore, future research needs to be carried out with the aim of aligning forms of evaluation and assessment with the evolved forms of communicative competence. In this context, the authentic communicative abilities of language learners could be better understood, and this could, in turn, enrich the teaching and learning strategies happening in world language classrooms. Hence, the conclusions that could be drawn from this research synthesis point to an attempt to redefine CC.

As debated by Widdowson [106], the notion of CC has been subject to adaptations, exploitations, and interpretations that aligned itself with language teaching pedagogy and applied linguistics. While, at the outset, CC was merely constrained within models of second language learning, nowadays, the construct under study has evolved and is in the process of adapting itself with the requirements and demands of today's world. This new specification of CC that was unimaginable yesterday is inevitable today. Indeed, the main findings of this systematic review unanimously underscore that the development of intercultural communication could encourage students and teachers to work efficiently in the contemporary world [99]. Therefore, an important domain for future research in the forthcoming years would be to refine methods of operationalization of communicative competence frameworks to include the emerging trends of intercultural and multimodal communicative competence altogether.

The latest empirical research [29,63,99] has argued for a broadening of the understanding of language leaning and teaching to include a 'multiplicity of discourse' [19,71,107] as well as intercultural communication. As suggested by abovementioned studies [23,29,63,97,99,108], the forthcoming preoccupation of language learning and assessment should be the expansion of the scope of linguistic pedagogy to account for what pertains to be linguistically and culturally diverse in increasingly globalised societies [19].

In sum, it can be argued that the conceptualization of CC has not been regarded as a unified and constant concept whether it be in terms of its definition or operationalization. This lack of a universal agreement on the nature of CC and its validity may indicate that the constructs may continue to thrive by extending and reformulating competencies that would be different from previous and original conceptualizations. From this perspective, CC is considered within the limits of the traditional models with a focus on grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, pragmatic, and discourse competencies alone. Instead, it becomes imperative to include emerging trends such as interculturality and multimodality [19,23,29,70]. Indeed, the implications drawn from the findings of the present study follow the same principle that "all interpretation, after all is a matter of reformulating ideas so that the key is with one's own frame of reference" [106] (p. 129). This implies that even though the previous conceptualization of CC used to be considered as a desirable learning goal by theorists in second language teaching [109], nowadays, it is the intercultural speaker equipped with critical cultural awareness [95], and multimodal competencies [19,29,70] are the aim of foreign and second language classrooms [23]. To

overcome the limitations of previous conceptualizations of CC, emerging constructs in published work should be assessable and replicable across various languages. Additionally, the culture-specific aspects of the constructs should be meticulously tailored to reflect the unique characteristics of each language community.

6. Summary of Findings

This study conducted a systematic review of the constructs of communicative competence (CC) and communicative language ability (CLA) within existing research, identifying four main themes and five sub-themes that help clarify the conceptualization of CC. The themes included "Beliefs and perceptions about CC", "expansion of CC", "mixed specifications about CC", and "tests and measures of CC and CLA", each contributing to a nuanced understanding of how these constructs have been operationalized over the past five decades.

A close analysis of the cluster of studies generated four significant findings. Notably, CC is significantly more extensively researched, discussed, and analysed than the notion of CLA [1,12]. Even though the CLA construct has been developed for assessment purposes, it remains an underresearched domain whereby no substantive and replicated empirical evidence is provided to support the model designed by Bachman [1]. Indeed, CLA, in its *integral* form, is not utilized in the surveyed literature to support the learning, teaching, and assessment of the different competences in ESL/EFL contexts.

Second, the abovementioned themes and sub-themes attest to the fact that over the years, CC has been perceived as a multifaceted construct with various conceptualizations, with some of the findings portraying CC in terms of linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. The construct of CC also extends to cover other elements in communicative situations which could entail attributes of the individual user such as their personal attributes and affective schemata. As such, the findings have demonstrated that CC has been, for long, analogous to performance, proficiency, social rules of language use, rules of appropriateness, willingness to communicate, self-perceptions of CC, and the goal of being a native speaker.

Another key finding of this study is that CC has evolved significantly since the turn of the 21st century, influenced by research on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) [14,110] and multimodal communicative competence [19,91]. Traditional views of CC have expanded to include these dimensions, recognizing ICC as an extension of CC that emphasizes critical cultural awareness [4,11,23,63,81]. This shift positions ICC in deliberate contrast to traditional native speaker-oriented models [14], emphasizing the role of culture in language learning where the aim is for learners to become intercultural communicators [23] (p. 820). Similarly, multimodal communicative competence reevaluates previous linguistically focused CC, advocating for an understanding of diverse communicative modes [19,29]. This broader conceptualization of CC reflects its capacity to integrate various modalities and media for more effective communication and text construction [19] (p. 192).

Fourth, the theme "tests and measures of CC and CLA" has shed fresh light in terms of the features and methods of operationalization of CC. The findings point out that there have been 28 test batteries which have employed five main methods of operationalization, comprising mostly of MCQs, interviews, questionnaires, and rating scales in the context of the surveyed researched. Much like the conclusions drawn for the first research question, the tests and methods of operationalization are sample-specific. Further investigations need to be conducted in order to ascertain suitable replicable manners in developing tests and forms of measurement of CC and/or ICC. An area for future research could also be the investigation of the validity and reliability of those tests and the replicability of the results across different groups of language learners to determine whether those forms of measurement are indeed measuring what they intend to be measuring across different cultures and whether the results can be replicated in different settings. To ensure scientific rigor and validity for the construct of CC and its expansions, it is crucial to demonstrate a high degree of replicability across diverse contexts.

7. Conclusions

The shift in conceptualization of CC has been inevitably occasioned by the trends and aims of language learning and teaching. It is undeniable that the concept has undergone a visible transformation in the course of time, since its formulation in the midst of the 1960s. In this sense, our research has several implications for L2 teaching and learning. Specifically, we would like to highlight the need to reformulate and update goals for language learning, assessment, and teaching to align with the needs of the current era, which is increasingly characterized by technology-mediated communication, intercultural exchanges, and multiliteracies, as well as developing the ability to interpret multimodal resources.

It is also crucial for foreign language classes to recognize the deep nexus between language and culture. By developing pedagogies that integrate new forms of competencies and training teachers to use these methods, we can enhance communication effectiveness. As Savignon and Sysoyev [111] noted, world language education should merge language ability with cultural socialization. This approach allows the language classroom to become a place for expanding interactional abilities, adapting to the evolving realities of language teaching. As Solon and Kanwit [112] suggested, a critical re-examination of CC is necessary to align it with contemporary practices and include elements like intercultural and multimodal communicative competence.

In sum, reflecting on recent developments in digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI), we propose an updated definition of CC which entails intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and multimodal communicative competence. This expansion addresses the complexities of modern language learning and assessment while focusing on learners' ability to engage in computer-mediated communication with cultural awareness and interpret multimodal exchanges using multiliteracies. Moreover, the integration of AI technologies, like large language models with the capacity to perform text-to-speech and text-to-video conversions, as a game-changing tool, are essential in teaching and assessing these competencies, as their omission would significantly limit the scope of ICC in accurately representing language use in today's diverse educational contexts [113]. This broader conceptualization ensures a more comprehensive representation of language users' abilities and aligns with the demands of contemporary language education. Therein lies the future of human communication.

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