

**COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:
ITS MEANING AND THE PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS FOR ITS
DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is an attempt to explore the term communicative competence in foreign language. It goes through the various definitions and models of the communicative competence and shows how the term ‘communicative competence’ has become a major aim for teaching English as a foreign or second language in many countries. It concludes with presenting some activities that may help English as foreign language students to develop their communicative competence in English.*

KEYWORDS: Communicative competence, English as a foreign language

INTRODUCTION

The field of second and foreign language teaching and learning has been an issue of debate since long time. Various theories and various methods of language learning have been introduced. Grammar translation method occupied the field of foreign and second language teaching for many decades and is still of use today. The field has also been dominated by the behaviorist theory and the idea that language is nothing but a social behavior that can be learned as any behavior through the process of habit formation. Many language drills have been designed for the purpose. Students may share the same aim of being able to use language as native like users; but which ability is required for that? and how to achieve it? has been a question for both linguists and methodologists!!

With the later changes in language teaching approaches and methodology and the rise of CLT in 1970s, communicative competence has become a main aim for second and foreign language teaching and learning. Such competence should be reflected in syllabuses and teachers’ trainings. Many courses have been changed to employ these new trends in teaching to fulfill the learners’ needs in learning language.

Communicative competence means having ‘a competence to communicate’. This competence can be oral, written or even non verbal. It is an inclusive term that refers to possessing the knowledge of the language as well as the skill to use the language in real life situations for fulfilling communicative needs. Language as many linguists defined it, is a means of communication, and it comprises four main skills vis, listening, speaking, reading and writing. To acquire these language skills one needs not only to learn grammatical rules but to practise such skills till he gets used to all of them. Whenever s/he acquires the skills of the language and manages to use them effectively and appropriately according to the context in which s/he is involved, we can say that s/he acquires the required level of the communicative competence.

In the following sections, I will shed the light on the theoretical background of communicative competence in English. I will try to show what do we mean by communicative competence? What are its main components?

Defining Communicative Competence

To define the notion ‘communicative competence’ we can refer to the two words that constitute it, of which the word ‘competence’ is the main word. Competence can be described as the knowledge, ability or capability. So we can say that communicative competence can be defined as ‘competence to communicate’ that is, having the ability that allow the person to communicate in real life situations in order to fulfill communicative purpose. In the following paragraphs, I will survey the various definitions of the communicative competence given by various linguists to get into the details of this term that became a major aim for language teaching and learning in the field of second and foreign language.

The term ‘communicative competence’ was first used by Dell Hymes in 1966 in his lecture that was delivered in a conference on Developing the language of the disadvantaged children, then it was published as a paper bears the title ‘On Communicative Competence in 1972. Hymes has introduced his notion of ‘communicative competence’ in contrast to Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance. For Chomsky (1965), competence is ‘the ideal speaker listener knowledge of his language. He argued that the focus of the linguistic theory is to characterize the abstract abilities of the speaker listener which enable him to produce grammatically correct sentences (P 3). Hymes (1972) points out that communicative competence doesn’t only represent the grammatical competence but also the sociolinguistic competence and the discourse competence. He says ‘there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless’ (p 60) and defines Communicative competence as ‘the tacit knowledge’ of the language and ‘the ability to use it’ for the communication. (P 16)

From the discussion above, we can see that that the grammatical competence or linguistic competence by Chomsky equals the grammatical competence in Hymes’ model which represents only one part of the communicative competence.

Savignon (1972) defined communicative competence as ‘the ability to function in a truly communicative setting’. (P 8) This means that communicative competence for her is close to Hymes’ view (1972). She considers communicative competence as an ability for functioning in communicative settings and this is something totally different from the linguistic competence by Chomsky 1965 as no one can function in real life situation with only grammatical competence. For Savignon (1983), competence is ‘what one knows’ and performance is ‘what one does’ (P 94)

Terrel and Krahen (1983) have defined communicative competence as the use of language in social communications without grammatical analysis. They related communicative competence to the communication and doesn’t give a focus for the grammatical competence. This means that communicative competence is manifested in the communication and it is all the abilities that we need to use for communication. They also argued that the primary goal of language learning should be the development of the communicative skills. They arrived at a principle that language is best taught when it is used to transmit messages, not when it is taught for conscious learning.

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication. This view agreed with Hymes and others that communicative competence includes various competences. Knowledge here refers one's knowledge of language and about the various aspects of language use, whereas skill refers to how one can use the knowledge in actual communication.

Widdowson (1978) defined communicative competence in terms of Usage and Use; where 'Usage' refers to one's knowledge of the linguistic rules, and 'Use' refers to one's ability to use his knowledge of the linguistic rules for effective communication.

From the discussion above, I can define the linguistic term 'communicative competence' as both the knowledge of the linguistic and sociocultural rules and the skill to use such knowledge effectively and appropriately in real life situations for the purpose of fulfilling communicative goals.

Models of communicative competence

Dell Hymes' Model of Communicative Competence:

In his contribution to the Research Planning Conference on Language Development Among Disadvantaged Children in 1966, Hymes introduced the term 'Communicative Competence' in his lecture that was later on published as a paper entitled 'On Communicative Competence' in 1972 to become a prominent term and an issue of debate in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning. Hymes (1972) introduced the concept 'Communicative Competence' in contrast to Chomsky's distinction between 'competence' and 'performance'. Chomsky argued that the focus of linguistic theory is to characterize the abstract abilities of a speaker which enable him to produce grammatically correct sentences, whereas Hymes reacted that linguistic theory with its primary focus on linguistic abilities should be viewed as a part of a more general theory that incorporating communication with sociocultural settings. He adds that coping with the realities of the children as communicating beings requires a theory within which sociocultural factors have explicit and constitutive role. (P. 53 - 54)

Hymes mentioned that Linguistic theory, from the perspective associated with transformational generative grammar has two parts: Linguistic Competence (the tacit knowledge of language structure) and Linguistic Performance (the process of applying the underlying knowledge to the actual language use, that is, encoding and decoding. As performance can't reflect competence except under the ideal speaker listener knowledge and use of the language, performance cannot be relevant to linguistic theory. Such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in abstraction from sociocultural features that are considered to be a major part of their description, and performance is viewed as just a selection among the various options the one that is easiest to be produced and understood. He emphasized Chomsky's words that his position is also the position of the founders of general linguistics, particularly those as de Saussure in his distinction between *la langue* (language structures) and *Parole* (individual speech). (1972, pp. 55-56).

Hymes believes that knowledge of language structure and sociocultural rules and the ability to use such knowledge in real life situation are both important in language acquisition. The learner acquires knowledge of language not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. 'He

or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when no, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. (Hymes, 1972, P. 60) By this discussion, Hymes shows that grammatical knowledge or linguistic knowledge in Chomsky's linguistic theory is not sufficient to explain the child's competence to accomplish communicative needs. He continues that 'there are rules without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (P. 60). Here, we can understand the importance of sociocultural knowledge as a controlling factor for linguistic form and their role in conducting and interpreting social life.

Based on his above mentioned discussion, Hymes reaches a point that for the theory of language users and language use to be developed, the judgments and abilities must be recognized not only in grammaticality and acceptability as in Chomskyan model of competence and performance, but in four levels. He suggests this framework for integrating linguistic theory with theory of communication and culture; and raised these four questions on which his framework based on:

- 1- Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
- 2- Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of means of implementation available;
- 3- Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated; and
- 4- Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (1972: P. 63)

Canale and Swain Model of Communicative Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) introduced their model of communicative competence. The model was not a contrast to Hymes' one but it is rather a further development for it. This development in the field of communicative competence is continuing till today. Canale and Swain believe in the importance of the sociolinguistic work that Hymes emphasized in his model of communicative competence. Their work focuses on the interaction of grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence and they maintain that 'there are rules of language use which would be useless without the rules of grammar'. For example, one may have an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence in Canadian French just from having developed such competence in Canadian English; but without some minimal level of grammatical competence in French, it is unlikely that one could communicate effectively with a monolingual speaker of Canadian French (1980: P. 5). Here we can say that they highlights the importance of grammatical competence and try to show that without grammar there will be no effective communication. This seems to be in contrast with Hymes' 1972 phrase that without the rules of language use, the rules of grammar would be useless; anyway both models emphasized the interaction of both grammar and social context in any communicative events. Canale and Swain view that "the study of sociolinguistic competence is essential to the study of communicative competence as is the study of grammatical competence" (P. 6).

In the following lines, the components of communicative competence in the framework introduced by Canale and Swain will be presented:

Grammatical competence: This competence includes knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, grammar and phonology. This knowledge is similar to Hymes' linguistic competence and considers as a part of the communicative competence as it represents the underlying system of how to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of the utterance.

Sociolinguistic competence: This component of the communicative competence is made up of sociocultural rules of language use. This knowledge is very important in interpreting and producing utterance in social context, particularly when there is a low level of transparency between literal meaning and of an utterance and the speaker's intention. The knowledge of social rules is essential for producing and understanding utterances that are appropriate to context in which language is used. It is similar to sociolinguistic competence in Hymes' model of communicative competence.

Strategic competence: This component is made up of the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication. This communication breakdowns may be due to insufficient grammatical or sociolinguistic competence. (Canale and Swain, 1980: P. 31)

Discourse competence: A component added by Canale (1983) that represents the ability to combine language structures and language functions into a coherent and cohesive text.

Based on this model proposed by Canale and Swain, these components of communicative competence should be reflected in syllabus design, teaching methodology, teacher training and materials development if we seek to equip our students with the communicative competence required for achieving communicative goals and accomplished communicative needs in real life situation.

Alcon's model of communicative competence

Though the previous models of the communicative competence have emphasized the importance of language for communication, they did not show clearly the position of the four language macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in their model. They just deal with the various components of the communicative competence related to various aspects of the language, stressing the sociolinguistic and cultural aspects of the language as well as the pragmatic meanings. What I am satisfied with as a model for communicative competence within the context of the foreign language is that one raised recently by Alco, though it is not been so common in literature.

According to Jordà (2005: 56), Alcon's model of communicative competence comprises three main components: Discourse competence, Psychomotors skills and competencies and strategic competence. The discourse competence comprises linguistic competence, textual competence and pragmatic competence. The psychomotors skills includes the language four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The last component which is pragmatic competence is similar to the pragmatic competence in Canale and Swain model (1980).

Developing EFL learners' Communicative Competence

Learning strategies are activities that are rationally selected by learners for enhancing their learning (Oxford, 1990). Communicative language teaching includes a set of activities that involve learners in communication and meaning negotiating. In the following, I will sum up

some of the activities that may help in developing students' communicative competence in English as a foreign language:

Oral conversation and dialogue: Teacher should encourage students in oral conversation in pairs and groups. These activities proved to be of high value in cultivation students' communicative competence as classroom is mostly the only place for students to practice English.

Teacher – student interaction: Teacher should play the role of a facilitator and assistant for the learning to take place. He should interact with his students. Studies have shown that teachers who spend long time lecturing their students while students listening and take notes often fail to cultivate the communicative competence of the students.

Using Literature: Literature, whatever the genre drama, short stories, novels..etc. is considered to be useful in developing EFL students' communicative competence as it provides students with authentic language as well as equip them with English culture. If movies acted by Native English actors are shown to the students, it will help them to understand English pronunciation. Such literary texts serve in developing linguistic text through offering students new vocabulary and grammatical rules. It also help the learners to understand English culture and which language is used in each context.

Simulation and role-playing activities: These activities are so useful for promoting students communicative competence. The most important condition here is that students should consider themselves as in a real situation.

English language teaching videos and records: Teachers should benefit from the English language teaching videos and records as such materials expose learners to authentic language by native speakers.

Reading English news and watching English news TVs: Another way to involve students in real life language situation that provide them with native language experiences outside classroom in foreign language context is motivating students to watch English news, films at TVs and to read English news through internet resources.

Investing social media as e-mail, what's up and facebook in promoting learning language: These social media tools are so important in developing communicative competence as it will provide them opportunities to use language and learn from each others as in group discussion. Students may feel shy to speak in face to face discussion but it will be easy for them to share voice records or a piece of writing via social media devices. It provides them opportunities to learn from their mistakes through their discussions. Such activities will increase the linguistic competence of students as well as the other competencies.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to define the term 'communicative competence'. It goes through the various definition of the term in order to highlight its meaning in foreign language learning and teaching. 'Communicative competence' is viewed as the knowledge of the rules of language and language use and the ability to use such knowledge effectively and appropriately in real life situations. Communicative competence has become a major aim for

second and foreign language teaching and learning. Linguists and methodologists suggest communicative language approach and its activities for the purpose of achieving the communicative competence in the target language.

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