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Developing Communicative Competences in Learners

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This paper traces the development of the notion of communicative competence from its origins to the present day. Our understanding of what ‘being communicatively competent’ actually entails has deepened greatly over the last thirty years and teachers might find it beneficial to now re-evaluate the extent to which their classroom materials and methodology help or hinder learners’ development of communicative competence. Increasing use of authentic materials is suggested as one way in which learners might be encouraged to become more balanced in terms of their communicative skills.

The evolution of communicative competence

In 1965, Noam Chomsky threw down the gauntlet to the linguistics community with his transformational-generative grammar theory in which he tried to show the knowledge native speakers possess and exploit to form grammatical sentences. He termed this knowledge ‘competence’ and what was particularly provocative about his position was that it valued the internal grammatical knowledge of an ‘ideal speaker-listener’ in a perfect world above any ability to communicate in real contexts:

‘Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.’ (Chomsky, 1965: 3)

For sociolinguists like Dell Hymes, dealing with language use as it actually occurs (Hymes was working on language problems of disadvantaged children at the time), this

trivialization of ‘performance’ in favour of an abstract model was seen as misleading and unrealistic:

‘It is, if I may say so, rather a Garden of Eden view. Human life seems divided between grammatical competence, an ideal innately-derived sort of power, and performance, an exigency rather like the eating of the apple, thrusting the perfect speaker-hearer out into a fallen world. Of this world, where meaning may be won by the sweat of the brow, and communication is achieved in labor...little is said. The controlling image is of an abstract, isolated individual, almost an unmotivated cognitive mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in a social world.’ (Hymes, 1972: 272)

Hymes proposed that any theory of language competence had to account for a speaker’s *knowledge* of the language itself and his or her ability to *use* the language in a social context:

‘We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner.’ (ibid: 277)

Since then, the model of communicative competence has been refined further, notably by Canale & Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and, more recently, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell (1995) and is now seen as being composed of five elements: linguistic competence, sociopragmatic competence, pragmalinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence. These are outlined in more detail below and an example of failure in each is given to illustrate how they affect communication.

1. *Linguistic competence* refers to a speaker’s lexical, morphological, orthographical, syntactical and phonological knowledge of the language. In other words, how to build up morphemes into words and words into clauses and sentences, how to spell them in the written form and pronounce them in the spoken form. It only deals with the literal, decontextualised meaning (or locutionary force) of utterances.

Example of linguistic failure:

(from a Japanese university role play activity: six students are discussing where to go on a week-end trip by the sea)

- 1<F> Which hotel will we stay? (laughs)
2<M> Mm (incomp.) er how about staying beach Beachton beach?
3<F> Beachton only? (laughs)
4<M> (incomp.)
5<M> No way no way
6<F> I I wanna do I wanna go clive (laughs)
7<M> Eh? Cave.

(Author's data, 2002)

In lines 1 and 2, the preposition *at* is omitted. In line 3, there is a word order mistake while line 7 shows a pronunciation problem. All of these are examples of sentence level, linguistic failure.

2. *Sociopragmatic competence* refers to a speaker's knowledge of what is socially or culturally appropriate in a particular speech community. This might include verbal knowledge, for example, what topics can be introduced into a conversation and appropriate turn-taking behaviour or non-verbal knowledge such as interpersonal distance or frequency of eye contact with interlocutors.

Example of sociopragmatic failure: a little girl complements a stranger on her dress in the train.

Native speakers have to learn the sociopragmatic norms of their own culture as they develop their communicative competence. Children often extend speech acts which are appropriate within their own family to new, inappropriate, contexts (such as in this case, talking to a stranger).

3. *Pragmalinguistic competence* refers to a speaker's ability to understand or convey meaning appropriately in a given context based on a knowledge of phrases belonging to speech act sets and includes an appreciation of the illocutionary force of utterances (the effect the speaker wants to have on the listener).

Example of pragmalinguistic failure: Mother (a non-native speaker) making a suggestion to her son:

‘So after supper, you will do your homework’;

and later to her husband:

‘Tomorrow, we will go to see the movie alright?’

(Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 150)

Although grammatically these comments are acceptable, the woman intended to make suggestions rather than to issue orders and so failed pragmalinguistically by using an inappropriate speech act and by not appreciating the modal overtones of *will*.

4. *Strategic competence* refers to a speaker’s ability to exploit verbal or non-verbal communication strategies when there is a breakdown in communication due to deficiencies in other areas and includes four common types; avoidance, compensatory, stalling and interactional strategies.

Example of strategic failure: Transcript from a pair work activity in a Japanese university class. The students are interviewing each other about their hobbies (<S1> female, <S2> male).

1<S2> You you are good at pia playing piano?

2<S1> Yes (laughs) er can you cook?

3<S2> Er I’m good at peeling the apple skin

4<S1> Really? (laughs) Aah I can’t do that

5<S2> Eh? You can?

6<S1> I can’t

7<S2> You can’t?

8<S1> Can’t

9<S2> You can’t? eh?

10<S1> Canto

11<S2> Canto canto (both laugh)

(Author’s data, 2002).

Lines 4 to 11 involve the resolution of a breakdown in communication which could have been achieved much faster with gestures (for example crossing the arms to indicate the negative) or circumlocution strategies (for example by saying ‘I am not able to do

that’).

5. *Discourse competence* refers to a speaker’s ability to produce cohesive and coherent spoken or written texts of different genres. In writing, this might include the correct layout for a letter or appropriate use of anaphoric reference. In speech, it might include how to develop a conversation naturally through ‘topic shading’ (where a sub-topic from preceding talk is taken up and expanded into the main topic) or how to construct the generic structure of stories, gossip or jokes appropriately (see McCarthy & Carter, 1994 or Eggins & Slade, 1997).

Example of discourse failure:

(1st sentence from a Japanese university student’s essay entitled ‘The Average Japanese Family’.

‘In Japan, some families live in a detached house and others live in an apartment house and many of them dwell in their houses which are made of reinforced concrete now although most people used to live in the traditional Japanese housings which are made of wood.’

(Author’s data, 2002)

The first paragraph of an essay of this kind would more appropriately begin with an introduction of the theme and an outline of the main areas to be covered. By plunging straight into details of housing in Japan, this learner demonstrates a lack of discourse competence.

Although there is no space to go into great detail here, it seems apparent from the research that these competencies are sufficiently distinct from each other to justify separate categorization (see for example Canale, 1983; Tarone & Yule, 1987; Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998 and Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Learners seem able to develop one competence at the expense of others (a notion which will seem intuitively plausible to most practicing teachers) and yet they are also inextricably bound together, one type of competence supporting another.

If we accept that our principle goal in the EFL or ESL classroom is to develop our learners’ communicative competence and we also agree that the ‘working model’ presented above is

valid, we can begin to see ways in which we might want to adapt some of our current materials or practices. Firstly, it would be useful for teachers to have a clear idea what kind of balance of the competencies is best for their learners. This will probably vary from context to context depending on the nationality and proficiency level of the students and their communicative goals. Once this has been established, we need assessment methods which will allow us to measure learners' current levels of communicative competence in each area. Assessment of linguistic competence is already well established in the form of grammar and vocabulary tests and pragmatic competence has been measured in a variety of ways in the research literature including through discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role play or natural speech (see Green, 1995 for a useful overview). Measurement of strategic or discourse competence is shakier territory, however, and very little work seems to have been done in this area (although see Belton, 1990 and Trickey, 1990 for some ideas). Since evidence of strategic competence comes from observing language in action and evidence of discourse competence is derived from seeing how whole texts are constructed by learners, recording, transcribing and analyzing natural conversation would seem to be the best way to access this kind of data. The hope would be that by measuring the different components of communicative competence separately, we can attain a fairer overview of our learners' proficiency. By way of an analogy, imagine a visitor to Britain who wants to understand the people there. The British clearly form an identifiable group when contrasted with other nationalities but they cannot be understood by just visiting London. To get a balanced view, the visitor would have to 'sample' life in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and from there try to reconcile the differences between them. Granted, staying in London might be more convenient for the visitor but they need to decide what is more important, an accurate impression or an easy measuring yardstick. The tendency in the past has been to metaphorically stay in London and measure both what is most obviously measurable and what we feel we understand (essentially lexicogrammatical features). This kind of testing is likely to give us a skewed view of our learners as Cohen (1997) attests for his performance on an accelerated Japanese course.

Assuming we succeed in finding methods to accurately assess our learners' communicative competence, what are we likely to find in the EFL classroom? I would suggest that, at least

in Japan, we will see students who have developed their linguistic competence at the expense of the other types. This is because the input Japanese learners tend to receive has been biased towards a knowledge of grammar, syntax and lexis and not enough attention has been paid to how this is applied in different contexts to create natural, culturally appropriate, coherent discourse. Furthermore, more attention has been given to abstract knowledge itself than the ability to use it for communicative purposes. The reasons for this are well documented and, in part, relate to the dominance of linguistic theories in English language teaching:

‘Until recently, theories of second language learning have followed, rather narrowly, models developed in linguistic theory. Thus it was widely assumed that transformational-generative grammar could serve both as a general model for language and as an explanatory model for second language learning. Within much L2 theory and research the primacy of syntax has been taken for granted and the syntactic paradigm has been dominant. While phonology and other areas have not been ignored, second language learning has largely been described as a continuum of gradually complexifying syntactic systems.’ (Schmidt & Richards, 1980: 142)

This approach to teaching has, in some parts of the world at least, out-lived the theories which underpin it and the reasons for this probably have more to do with satisfying teacher and institutional needs than meeting the learners’ needs as Canale (1983: 14) points out:

Perhaps knowledge-oriented approaches, with their emphasis on controlled drills and explanation of rules, are practical for dealing with problems such as large groups of learners, short class periods, lack of teachers who are communicatively competent in the second language, and classroom discipline.’

To give an example of the kind of unsatisfactory input that learners are still receiving, let us examine one activity from a course book still currently used in Japanese universities. Modern English Cycle One (1985) claims in the preface to offer ‘a wealth of communicative exercises, each proceeded by the necessary fluency training’ but what

learners are actually exposed to is a series of grammar points presented in contrived and unlikely scenarios, followed by what are essentially form manipulation exercises. For example, in lesson ten, *must have* and *would have* are presented together. The presentation of the structures centres around a cartoon of two women chatting together, possibly in an office corridor:

A: The salary raise must have been encouraging.

B: It was. You would have been encouraged too.

A: I'm sure I would have been *very* encouraged.

We never discover anything more about the context however: Who are these women? What is their relationship to each other? Are they old friends or recent acquaintances? Which country are they working in? Where exactly are they working? Why was the 'salary raise' encouraging and how does A deduce this? Why does B say 'you would have been encouraged too'? Didn't A get a raise? Why not? What prompted this topic to be initiated in the first place? How did the conversation begin and end? Without this sort of contextualization, learners are unlikely to get the rich input they need to develop true communicative competence.

Modern, internationally produced textbooks are generally much better this but even so, for many researchers they still fail to provide adequate input. The following two quotes are representative:

'Despite the fact that more than two decades have passed since Henry Widdowson pointed out that 'there is a need to take discourse into account in our teaching of language' ...there continues to be a substantial mismatch between what tends to be presented to learners as classroom experiences of the target language and the actual use of the language as discourse outside the classroom.' (Yule, 1995: 185)

'...dialogues used in the EFL/ESL classroom should reflect more accurately the kinds of exchanges that naturally occur among native speakers of English.' Myers Scotten & Bernsten, 1988: 373)

So how could this situation be improved? One possible solution would be for materials writers to try to incorporate more natural features of language into their contrived models and there is some evidence that this is beginning to happen (Gilmore, forthcoming publication). Another possibility is to encourage the use of authentic discourse in the classroom instead. This approach brings with it a whole new set of problems of course; an increased level of complexity, less control over vocabulary and grammar forms, target structures more dispersed across texts and so on. However, if these difficulties can be overcome I believe authentic materials have the potential to provide learners with the rich input they need to develop communicative competence in a more balanced way. This claim is to date largely unsubstantiated in the literature and I hope to address this issue in a longitudinal classroom research study next year.

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