

Developing Communicative Competences in Japanese Learners

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The Problem

“At present...the English-speaking ability of a large percentage of the population is inadequate.” (MEXT: Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology ~ July 2002 press release)

The Goal

For all Japanese nationals, “On graduation from senior high school, the ability to be able to hold normal conversations on everyday topics.” (MEXT ~ July 2002 press release)

An Outline

- What does it mean to be communicatively competent? ~ a working model.
- How communicatively competent are Japanese learners?
- How can we encourage development of communicative competence in the classroom?

Communicative competence is...

Linguistic competence

Sociopragmatic competence

Pragmalinguistic competence

Strategic competence

Discourse competence

(Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995)

Linguistic competence

A speaker's lexical, morphological, orthographical, syntactical and phonological knowledge of a language: how to build up morphemes into words and words into clauses and sentences, how to spell them in their written form and pronounce them in their spoken form.

Linguistic failure

- 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)

Pragmalinguistic competence

A speaker's ability to understand or convey meaning appropriately in a given context based on a knowledge of phrases used to express speech acts such as apologies, requests, refusals, etc.

Pragmalinguistic failure

A non-native speaker 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)

Pragmalinguistic failure

<M> We will go to cave the cave by foot
(Author's data, 2002)

Sociopragmatic competence

A speaker's knowledge of what is socially or culturally appropriate in a particular speech community, verbally or non-verbally. For example, what topics can be introduced into a conversation in a specific context, how to take turns, how close to stand to others & how much or when to look at them or touch them.

Sociopragmatic competence

What I wish I were like in relationships~

- I try to be as polite as possible
- I don't say all of what I think
- I try to keep the conversation pleasant
- I try to behave smoothly
- I try not to disagree

(Barnlund, 1974: 56)

Sociopragmatic competence

“Casual conversation thrives on confrontation, and wilts in the face of support.”

(Eggins & Slade, 1997: 224)

Japanese conversation is like bowling~

- You wait for your turn.
- You know your place in the line (depending on age, status, sex etc.).
- When you ‘bowl’, everyone stands back and watches, murmuring encouragement to you.
- Everyone waits to see how many pins you knock down & there is a pause while your score is calculated.
- When everyone is sure your turn is over, the next speaker lines up to take a turn but with a DIFFERENT BALL.

(Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982)

Anglo-American conversation is like tennis~

- When I introduce a topic, I expect you to hit it back, to add something of yourself & to carry the idea further.
- The more lively the match gets, the more interesting it is.
- As long as what we attack is other's opinions rather than them personally, nobody gets hurt.
- Whoever is nearest & quickest hits the ball.
- Nobody stops the game to give you a turn, you are responsible for yourself.
- Everyone does their best to keep the game going & nobody has the ball for very long.

Sociopragmatic failure

“No wonder everyone looked startled when I took part in Japanese conversations. I paid no attention to whose turn it was, and I kept snatching the ball halfway down the alley and throwing it back to the bowler. Of course the conversation died. I was playing the wrong game.”

(Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982)

Strategic competence

A speaker's ability to exploit verbal or non-verbal communication strategies when problems arise & to compensate for deficiencies in the other types of competence. Includes 4 common types:

- 'Avoidance or reduction strategies'
- 'Compensatory strategies'
- 'Stalling strategies'
- 'Interactional strategies'

Strategic failure

1<S1> You you are good at pia playing piano?

2<S2> Yes (laughs) er can you cook?

3<S1> Er I'm good at peeling the apple skin

4<S2> Really? (laughs) aah I can't do that

5<S1> Eh? You can?

6<S2> I can't

7<S1> You can't?

8<S2> Can't

9<S1> You can't? eh?

10<S2> Canto

11<S1> Canto canto (both laugh)

(Author's data, 2002)

Discourse competence

A speaker's ability to produce cohesive and coherent spoken or written discourse of different genres, for example ~

- (in writing) how to structure a paragraph using a topic sentence & supporting sentences or how to use anaphoric reference.
- (in speaking) how to develop a conversation naturally through 'topic shading' or knowledge of generic structures for narratives, gossip, jokes, etc.

Discourse failure

- 1st sentence in a 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.'
- Transcript from a pair-work activity:
1<S1> You you are good at pia playing piano?
2<S2> Yes (laughs) er can you cook?
(Author's data, 2002)

Communicative competence

- Linguistic competence
- Pragmalinguistic competence
- Sociopragmatic competence
- Strategic competence
- Discourse competence

Unbalanced communicative competence

“...a learner in a traditional foreign language classroom may be quite proficient in terms of grammatical competence, being able to achieve high scores on standard language tests (e.g. TOEFL), while at the same time remaining relatively ignorant of speech-act conventions in the target language, or relatively unable to use the language with ease or appropriateness in social interaction.” (Tarone & Yule, 1987: 49)

- How communicatively competent are our learners in terms of the 5 areas?
- If there is an imbalance, what is the cause?
- What changes can we make in the classroom to encourage a balanced development of communicative competence?

My university students:

- Linguistic competence ****
- Pragmalinguistic competence **
- Sociopragmatic competence *
- Strategic competence *
- Discourse competence *

A 16 year-old Japanese student revising for her exam on the train:

- The human suffering which smoking causes is far more serious than the economic (...) which society has to pay.
1. danger 2. price 3. attention 4. disadvantage
- No-one can tell another person in any definite way how he should spend his free time, (...) how he ought to breathe.
1. much less 2. no more than
3. any better than 4. any more than

Pragmalinguistic competence **

Can your students perform the following speech acts in a variety of registers (formal-informal)?

- Requests
- Suggestions
- Invitations
- Refusals
- Apologies
- Complaints
- Compliments
- Thanks

What would you say if...

- Somebody saved you from drowning?
- Somebody gave you a birthday present?

Pragmalinguistic competence **

“...when I asked Japanese students and English native informants in a questionnaire (1) What would you say to someone who saved you from drowning? and (2) What would you say to someone who gave you a birthday present? the majority of Japanese used the same formula for both while...the English informants gave many individualized answers...thereby illustrating their need for a more personalized reaction.”

(Loveday, 1982: 7)

Sociopragmatic competence *

Do your students know how to use/do the following in a culturally appropriate way:

- Eye contact?
- Pausing?
- Gestures?
- Select appropriate topics for conversation?
- Initiate a conversation with a stranger?
- 'Take the floor' in a conversation?

Eye contact in conversation:

	Listener to speaker	Speaker to listener
Japanese group	38%	46.6%
English group	50.25%	91.75%

(Gilmore, 1998: 48)

Gestures in conversation:

	Number of 'gesture clusters' per minute
Japanese group	2.83
English group	8.92

(Gilmore, 1998: 51)

Typical questions asked to foreigners by Japanese students at the first meeting:

- How long have you been in Japan?
- What do you think of Japan?
- Do you eat natto/sushi?
- Can you use chopsticks?

Strategic competence *

A 'Subway' sandwich shop in Tokyo, 1996:

Shop assistant: Shio wa irimasuka?

Me: Sumimasen, mou ikkai
onegaishimas.

(Shop assistant panicks & runs off to fetch the manager who speaks English).

Discourse competence *

Do your students know how to do the following in an appropriate way?

- Organize their ideas coherently in an essay & support them with examples, quotes, numerical information.
- Join ideas together with conjunctions.
- Relate an oral narrative.
- End a conversation.

How can we encourage development of communicative competencies in the classroom?

- Changes in materials
- Changes in methods
- Changes in evaluation

Episode 3 ~ An Old Friend

(New Headway Video (Elementary): OUP)

Changes in materials

New Headway Video (Beginner)
Episode 5: A Night to Remember
(Oxford University Press, 2001)

- Linguistic competence: “What is it tonight then? Cinema? Theatre? The opera?”
- Pragmalinguistic competence:
“Thanks David” “Don’t mention it.”
- Sociopragmatic competence:
 - a) Young friends living together
 - b) Touching or kissing friends
 - c) Lack of listener interest (eye contact, back-channels, changing the topic)
- Strategic competence:
“erm” “Sorry, can you speak more slowly please?”
- Discourse competence:
Restaurant discourse

Changes in classroom methods

- Richer input which models features of all 5 types of communicative competence.
- Activities which encourage learners to ‘notice’ these features (see Schmidt, 1990).
- Opportunities for learners to use these features in their own conversations (a greater emphasis on pair & group work; acting out scripted plays, role play, improvisation, etc.)
- Feedback from teachers ~ how close does the students’ performance approximate native speaker norms?

Changes in classroom methods

“Hall (1995a) examined how topic development and management were interactively constructed in teacher-fronted speaking practice...In the teacher-controlled IRF exchange structure, students were not provided opportunities for developing the interactional, linguistic and cognitive knowledge of a complexity required in ordinary conversation.”

(Kasper, 2001)

IRF

- Initiation: Teacher initiates a question to check student's knowledge
- Response: Student answers
- Feedback: Teacher evaluates the student's answer

Changes in evaluation methods

- Linguistic competence: the ability to understand & produce accurate sentences in spoken & written form.
- Pragmalinguistic competence: the ability to express speech acts (requests, complaints, refusals, etc.) appropriately in different contexts.
- Sociopragmatic competence: the ability to express messages in a culturally appropriate way (both verbally & non-verbally).
- Strategic competence: the ability to cope with a breakdown in communication.
- Discourse competence: the ability to achieve unified spoken or written texts.

Discourse completion task (DCT)

- You're at a meeting and you say something that one of the participants interprets as a personal insult to him.

He: "I feel that your last remark was directed at me and I take offense."

You:

- You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him to apologize. This is already the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks you over the phone:

Friend: "What happened?"

You:

(Cohen & Olshtain, 1981: 132)

The ‘wash-back’ effect

- Evaluation methods affect classroom events.

Communicative competence is...

“... a person’s internalized grammar of a language, their ability to create and understand an infinite number of grammatical sentences.”

(Noam Chomsky, 1965).

- “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 grammatical 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)

“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, unmotivated cognitive mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in a social world.” (Hymes, 1972: 272)

Communicative competence is...

...“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.”

(Hymes, 1972: 277)

Communicative competence is...

Linguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence

Strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980)

Linguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence

Strategic competence

Discourse competence (Canale, 1983)

“Because of the overdifferentiated importance of collective affinity in interaction...it is understandable that Japanese rarely express disagreement in conversation. These norms can lead to Japanese performance in English seeming dull and dissatisfying. The Westerner is frustrated by the polite but, to him, incomplete response while the Japanese is frustrated, and more often than not, offended by the open expression of dissent which he interprets as aggression and by the constant demand for negative/positive judgement to be made.”

(Loveday, 1982: 5)

Resisting L2 sociopragmatic norms

Siegal (1994 & 1996)~ studied the pragmatic development of four “white western upper-middle-class women between the ages of 21 and 45...studying Japanese.” (Siegal, 1996: 359)

-> As the learners gained the proficiency needed to approximate the Japanese used by Japanese women, they consciously chose to resist what, for them, was an unacceptable self-image.

Changes in materials

“Until recently, theories of second language learning have followed, rather narrowly, models developed in linguistic theory... 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)

Presentation of ‘must have’ & ‘would have’ in a Japanese textbook:

Two women, 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.

(Modern English, Cycle One 5: 134)

Changes in classroom methods

“...communicative competence refers to both knowledge and skill in using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Knowledge refers here to what one knows (consciously and unconsciously) about the language and about other aspects of communicative use; skill refers to how well one can perform this knowledge in actual communication.”

(Canale, 1983: 5)

Learning a language is like
building a wall...



Learning a language is like
growing a garden...



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