Understanding Communicative Competence

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the development of the term 'communicative competence'. It shows that there is a lack of consensus for what does the term mean? Linguistically, it refers to the speaker's ability to use the appropriate language in the right context for the right purpose.

Many language courses and programmes are now designed for achieving students' development of their communicative competence. However, this goal seems to be very-far reaching in foreign contexts if this concept is to be interpreted in terms of native speaker's level. Therefore, it is wise to reconceptualize this term in local standards for foreign contexts in order to set achievable goals for their language teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, all language teachers and learners need to seek the development of their communicative competence if their goal of

learning a language is to be able to communicate with it effectively. But, they should be aware that the realization of this far reaching goal requires much effort and may be long time.

Introduction:

Communicating effectively in a language requires the speaker's good understanding of linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of that language. This understanding will enable him to use the right language in the right context for the right purpose and then he can be referred to as communicatively competent.

However, the realization of this level of knowledge and understanding is always a challenge for foreign language learners. They often struggle through their journey towards the achievement of this goal and are often met with many obstacles. Therefore, many arguments have been raised against designing language courses and programmes for foreign language contexts to achieve this goal.

The term 'communicative competence' was first introduced by Hymes in (1972) as a sociolinguistic concept in reaction to the concept of 'linguistic competence' which was proposed by Chomsky in 1965. Chomsky's concept was "concerned with the tacit knowledge of language structure" but "omits almost everything of socio-cultural, significance" (Hymes, 1972: 270- 280).

The Development of the Term of 'Communicative Competence':

According to Hymes (1972) 'communicative competence' refers to the level of language learning that enables language users to convey their messages to others and to understand others' messages within specific contexts. It also implies the language learners' ability to relate what is learnt in the classroom to the outside world. From this perspective, Hymes (1972) described the competent language user as

the one who knows when, where and how to use language appropriately rather than merely knowing how to produce accurate grammatical structures.

Hymes' ideas about the 'communicative competence' were later developed by Canale and Swain in 1980 who introduced a theoretical model of 'communicative competence'. Their concept of 'communicative competence' refers to "the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of rules of language use" (Canale & Swain, 1980: 6).

Canale and Swain's model of 'communicative competence' consists of three domains of knowledge and skills. They are 'grammatical competence', 'sociolinguistic competence' and 'strategic competence'. Grammatical competence refers to accurate knowledge of sentence formation and vocabulary. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the language user's ability to produce and understand language in different social contexts. Strategic competence refers to the ability of using language to achieve communicative goals and enhance the effectiveness of communication (Canale & Swain, 1980: 28-31).

The complexity of the notion of 'communicative competence' increased by the development of the term *'Communicative Language Ability'* by Bachman in 1990. This term refers to both "knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing or executing that competence in appropriate contextualised communicative language use" (Bachman, 1990: 84). Bachman suggested a framework for *'Communicative Language Ability'* consists of three components including 'language competence', 'strategic competence' and 'psychological mechanisms' (Bachman, 1990: 107). He classified 'language competence' into 'organizational competence' and

pragmatic competence'. The former includes 'grammatical competence' and 'textual competence'. The last two types of competencies " compromises those abilities involved in controlling the formal structure of language for producing or recognizing grammatically correct sentences, comprehending their propositional content, and ordering them to form texts" (Bachman, 1990: 87). The 'pragmatic competence' was divided by Bachman into 'illocutionary competence' and 'sociolinguistic competence'. He explained that 'illocutionary competence' can be used for expressing the language to be taken "with certain illocutionary force" and for interpreting these language 'illocutionary forces'. (ibid: 92). He defined the 'sociolinguistic competence' as the "sensitivity to, or control of, the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use context" (ibid: 94). In other words, it enables us to use the language appropriately to achieve certain functions in certain contexts. A distinctive feature of this framework is the inclusion of the neurological and psychological factors in language use through the introduction of the component of psychological mechanisms which refers to "neurological and psychological processes involved in the actual execution of language as a physical phenomenon" (Bachman, 1990: 84).

Macaro (1997) referred to four popular beliefs among language teachers that facilitate the realization of the level of 'communicative competence'. These beliefs include: giving more attention to speaking and listening skills than reading and writing, practicing more in communicating new information rather than 'already known' information, enhancing students' involvement to overcome passive learning and focusing on practising the language in meaningful situations rather than on producing well-formed sentences or in individual words (Macaro, 1997:42-43). However, it should be noted

that seeking the objective of developing students' 'communicative competence' should not lead to focusing more on speaking and listening than reading and writing skills. The good command of any language requires reaching sufficient understanding of all the language skills.

In 2009, Moor, introduced the concept 'field language communicative competence'. He insisted on the importance of working within the field of language we want to master and pointed out the little research conducted on this aspect of communicative competence. Based on the findings of his research which was conducted in West Africa, he concluded that field language communicative competence "is dependent on more than the knowledge of and ability to use a given field language in ways that are grammatical and socioculturally appropriate" (P: 9). This argument may put the goal of developing language learners' communicative competence in terms of native speakers through formal education which does not involve field language experience into question.

Challenges for Achieving the 'Communicative Competence':

Despite the popularity of the term 'communicative competence' many teachers often find it a far reaching goal for foreign language (FL) contexts (Sano et al, 1984). Therefore, many arguments have been raised against designing language programmes for FL contexts to achieve this level of competence (Huda, 1999; Alptekin, 2002). This is due to the challenges that have been encountered by both EFL teachers and students in these contexts since the introduction of this concept. The language teachers in these contexts will face difficulty in choosing what skills are to be taught for students and in identifying the effective methods for developing students' communicative competence (Huda, 1999: 30). Another

difficulty may result from teachers' misunderstanding of the concept of 'communicative competence'. Nazari (2007) reported that three Iranian EFL teachers had distinct views about this concept and were not able to distinguish between its 'broader' and 'narrower' meaning (Nazari, 2007: 209-210). Butler (2005) pointed out the lack of clear definition about 'what constitutes 'communicative competence' for FL and about what teaching for achieving this aim constitute. He argued that implementing communicative activities in classrooms would not necessarily lead to enhance students' learning (Butler, 2005: 442). Another significant challenge which may encounter EFL teachers in teaching language programmes aiming at developing students' communicative competence is the high proficiency level required for the effective teaching of these programmes. In line with this argument, EFL teachers' low proficiency level is always reported as an impediment for implementing communication methods for language teaching and learning (Li,1998; Nunan, 2003; Orafi & Borg, 2009). Another relevant issue could be related to the difficulty of measuring language learners' communicative competence or communicative language ability as there are many factors more than the language ability we intend to measure can affect the language user's performance (Bachman, 1990: 24).

These difficulties and challenges led Alptekin (2002) to criticize the validity of the conventional model of 'communicative competence' in terms of native speaker norms for non-native contexts. He suggested redefining the concept of 'communicative competence' in terms of its use in FL settings into "intercultural communicative competence" (Alptekin, 2002: 63). This argument was later advocated by Sowden (Sowden, 2007). It seems that complexities of the skills and the high proficiency level required for achieving communicative competence make it unrealistic objective for non-native speakers.

These arguments suggest that course designers for EFL contexts have to be realistic in their expectations and aims when they design language courses and or plan learning programmes. The formulation of the aims of these courses in terms of Alptekin's (2002) concept of "intercultural communicative competence" (p: 63) can be a successful model. Through setting attainable goals and selecting appropriate methodologies we can enhance the likelihood of the success of language learning programmes in FL contexts (Segovia & Hardison, 2009).

Reflecting on these arguments, the development of the communicative competence for foreign contexts in terms of the native speaker's level seems to be a far-reaching goal. This could be due to the low language proficiency level of students and teachers' in these contexts which is often reported as a major challenge (Li, 1998; Nunan, 2003; Orafi & Borg, 2009). Setting the objectives of language learning in these contexts should be guided by the realities and specifications of these contexts. The complexity of the tasks which the FL learner needs to perform in learning the language through communication should be considered. Klein (1986) explained that the language learner "must learn the language by which he intends to communicate" and "must communicate by means of the language he intends to learn" (Klein, 1986: 146).

However, integrating communication and learner-centredness as two complementary aspects of FL instructional strategies may lead to improving students' communication skills. The active participation of FL students in carrying out communication activities such as pair and group work, role-plays, games and problem-solving independently can develop their communication skills in order to be able to apply what they learn in classrooms in the outside world. Most importantly, these activities should offer the opportunity for students

to learn about the sociolinguistic, grammatical and strategic aspect of the 'communicative competence' However, conducting English classes through teacher-centred instruction may not lead to improve students' communication skills. The limited time devoted for students' talk during these classes would not make any improvement on their communication skills (Cuban, 1993; Ellis, 2003; Rico, 2008, Yilmaz, 2009). Moreover, it is not always possible for language learners to have the opportunity for living the field language experiences which Moore (2009) believed as an important condition for developing communicative competence.

Conclusion:

There is a lack of consensus about what the term 'communicative competence' means. But in broad terms, it refers to the speaker's ability to use the language appropriately in different linguistic, sociolinguistic and contextual settings. The realization of this level of language use requires a good command of all language skills.

Many course designers are now plan and design language courses to end up with students' development of communicative competence. However, the realization of this objective is not feasible for all language learners, especially the foreign ones. Many of them end their language courses without developing the required level of the communicative competence. Different factors may contribute to this failure including teachers' and students' low language proficiency, the traditional teaching methods with teacher-centred instruction, the lack of opportunities for active language practice and the high expectations regarding the development of the communicative competence in comparison with native speakers. Another fundamental factor could be related to the lack of including

field language experiences (living with native speakers' community) for language learners to observe how native speakers use their language and how they interpret messages.

In foreign language contexts, it is better to develop a model of communicative competence that takes into account the specific contextual, social and linguistic factors of non-native speakers. Therefore, local experts need to be involved in the process of designing the language learning materials for their own contexts.

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