

Theoretical Foundation Study on the Effects of the Communicative Competence Approach on EFL Learners' and Instructors' Roles in Communicative Activities

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Abstract

The sharing of thoughts, feelings, information, ideas, and opinions among individuals is known as communication. Since language is a tool for communication, people always express their feelings about each other's facts as well as the facts themselves (Revell, 1979). In this study, several aspects of communicative competence theory are explored, such as its definitions, framework, and factors that are related to it. Additionally, consequences for teaching and learning second languages of the usage of communicative competency are addressed. Finally, the article discussed some roles that both teachers and students should play when adopting communicative language teaching and learning.

Keywords: *communication, communicative competence, pragmatics, discourse analysis, non-verbal communication.*

Introduction

Communicative competence theory is one of the most popular theories in the field of linguistics. It has received attention from both linguists and educators and has been adopted in the second language community. Communicative language teaching has been embraced by teachers in the hopes that it will help students learn the skills they need to communicate with people who speak the target language. So, communicative language teaching focuses on not only the functions of language learning but also on the structural aspects of language and combines these two aspects into a fully communicative view (Littlewood, 1984). Some components of communicative competence theory, such as its definitions, framework, and associated parts, will be examined in this study. Furthermore, the consequences of using communicative competency for second language teaching and learning will be discussed in some detail.

Definition of the communicative approach

The ability to communicate, understand, and negotiate meaning in interpersonal interactions is known as communicative competence. Savignon (1983) mentioned that "communicative competence is relative, not absolute, and depends on the cooperation of all the participants involved." Hymes (1972) defines communicative competence as the knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language and also the knowledge of how to use them appropriately for the activities in which the speakers wish to take part. For him, the ability to use grammatically correct sentences is not enough, since the most important

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thing is to know where, when, and with whom the sentences should be used. Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence came as a reaction against Chomsky's limited competence concept. Chomsky says that grammatical competence allows people to generate an infinite number of correct utterances in the language and thus be able to communicate with the speakers. Hymes (1972) believes that Chomsky's idea of grammatical competence is too limited since it does not account for a person's ability to convey and interpret messages and negotiate meanings within specific contexts. This means that a person's mere knowledge of grammar is insufficient. For example, there is a difference when one tries to apologize to one's boss as opposed to one's brother. There is a need to know the rules that allow people to achieve these tasks. These rules are not purely linguistic. It is crucial to acknowledge that during the 1970s, scholarly investigations on communicative competence made an obvious difference between linguistic competence and communicative competence. This distinction was made to emphasize the disparity between knowledge pertaining to language structures and knowledge that empowers individuals to engage in functional and interactive communication. According to Littlewood (1984), the communicative method favors communication above structure. For instance, using the rule *can + infinitive* allows learners to use different communicative functions.

Framework for the communicative competence approach

The majority of the work on defining communication competence was done by Canale and Swain (1980), who developed an innovative structure for communicative competence. The four components of this framework are grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. The first two refer to the use of the linguistic system itself, while the other two are concerned with practical aspects of communication. The first element, grammatical competence, relates to the aspect of communicative competence that includes "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology" (p. 29). Sentence structure is the focus of this component. The second component pertains to discourse competence, which refers to the user's understanding and application of the norms governing dialogue. It encompasses all communication styles, from casual conversations to extensive written works (books, essays, etc.). While grammatical competence focuses on sentences, discourse competence is concerned with the relationships between sentences.

A sociolinguistic competence is the ability to recognize the sociocultural rules that govern language and discourse. This particular form of competence refers to the comprehension of the society in which language is utilized, the purpose of the communication employed by the students, and the knowledge that they exchange. According to Savignon (1983: 37), a whole context is necessary in order to assess the suitability of a certain statement. Strategic competence is defined as "the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980:30). Savignon (1983) paraphrases this as "the competence to sustain communication through paraphrase, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, and guessing, as well as shifts in register and style" (pp. 40–41). This method works for persuasion. Individuals are interested in general communication problem-solving techniques that they can apply when real issues emerge and performance is needed.

Bachman (1990) has developed the Canale and Swain strategy further. Bachman (1990) looked at communicative competence and came up with yet another model. He labeled communicative competence as language competence. His model has two parts: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The former includes all the rules and systems that indicate what people can do with forms of the language at the sentence level (grammar) and how people string sentences together (the discourse level). The latter is pragmatic competence. In this category, functional aspects of the language (illocutionary competence or pertaining to sending and receiving intended meanings) and

sociolinguistic aspects of language (politeness, formality, metaphor, register, and culturally related aspects of language) are considered. Organizational competence is then subdivided into linguistic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980) and textual competence. Thus, Canale and Swain's discourse competence has been moved (and renamed) to come closer to that of linguistic competence. Pragmatic competence (i.e., the relationship between language and context) is then concerned with areas such as illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, and lexical competence. The developments proposed by Bachman (1990) constitute a more organized and differentiated account of the underlying and basic competencies concerned. Bachman's model is similar to the earlier formulation by Canale and Swain in a general sense, but not in detail.

Bachman wants to make a bigger change to the role of strategic ability. No longer is it seen as something that can be used to make up for other skills that are missing. Instead, it's at the heart of all communication. This is what it does: it acts as a go-between for meaningful intentions (the message that needs to be sent), underlying competencies (the ones we just quickly looked at), background knowledge, and the situation itself. This is what it does: it sets communicative goals, evaluates communicative resources, plans communication, and then acts out the plan. According to Bachman (1990), these abilities are thinking skills.

Six elements that are connected to the communicative competence approach

In his discussion of communicative competence, Brown (1994) analyzes six elements that are closely connected to communicative competence. The first element is pragmatics. It refers to the social rules underlying language usage. Brown believes that pragmatic considerations allow participants in a speech situation to interpret what would otherwise be ambiguous sentences. The second element is language function. It refers to the purposeful nature of communication. Second language learners need to understand the purpose of communicative acts and be able to achieve the purposes through linguistic forms. The third is discourse analysis, which captures the notion that language is more than a sentence-level phenomenon. Without discourse analysis and the inter-sentential relationships of discourse, it would be difficult to communicate unambiguously with one another. Through discourse, we greet, request, agree, persuade, question, command, and criticize. The fourth element is style and registers, which ensures students are aware of the fact that communicative competence should prepare them to be aware that language is used in various styles. This awareness encompasses the consideration of contextual factors such as the audience, occasion, shared experience, and purpose of a communicative act.

For example, talking informally with a friend is different in style from an interview for a job with a prospective employer. The fifth is language and gender. Second-language learners should be aware that gender differences have their own effect on language production and reception. The sixth element is non-verbal communication. Second language learners should be aware that gestures and body language, eye contact, artifacts, and kin esthetics take part in communicative competence (pp. 230–241).

In spite of its popularity, the communicative competence approach has some weaknesses. Some educators believe that the definitions of communicative competence presented above and other components of the theory as discussed by other researchers are somewhat overwhelming for teachers. The definitions are difficult to synthesize. Furthermore, they might also be difficult to measure and evaluate. Personally, I believe that the communicative competence approach has somewhat clarified the nature of human communication and has allowed us as teachers to know some of the factors that contribute to second language learning. This leads me to discuss the implications of communicative competence theory for second language teaching.

Implications for teaching

For communicative activities, language learners should adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses both the structural aspects of a language, such as grammar and vocabulary, as well as the pragmatic aspects that govern how these structures are employed in interpersonal communication. This is because the point of learning a foreign language is to be able to interact with others. Saying something like "Why don't you close the door?" can be used for many purposes, like suggesting something, telling someone what to do, or even asking a question (Littlewood, 1984). Therefore, teachers should give up the structuralist idea that grammar is the most important part of learning a language. Grammar should not be the focus of the curriculum. Instead of focusing on the rules of grammar, teachers should give students activities and exercises that help them communicate in a variety of important situations. This cannot be achieved if the teacher dominates the class discussion. In fact, there must be a distribution of roles within the class. Students should spend most of the time talking with each other, and the teacher's role is to monitor. To be successful in this new role, the teacher should be able to ask students open-ended questions that allow students to use their background knowledge and become active learners. Questions that require one right answer should be avoided because they do not stimulate the students' minds and curiosity and thus limit their motivation. In doing so, the teacher is no longer the only source of knowledge. The burden of learning is then placed on students' shoulders, and that will make them better learners. It is also important to emphasize the fact that the teacher's role as a monitor should not be perceived as giving him or her the option of interrupting students when he or she detects a mistake, thinking the interruption will help students reach fluency. Brown (1994) says: "The search for fluency should not be done at the expense of communication" (p. 245). This indicates that as long as the message is explicit, teachers should allow students to communicate. Many speakers of a second language with an excellent understanding of grammar often encounter difficulties in effectively communicating with native speakers of the target language. This can be attributed to their lack of training in real-life communication scenarios, resulting in limited exposure to realistic language usage. Another implication is the use of authentic materials that are effective in teaching the target culture. According to the Standards of Foreign Language Teaching, culture is part and parcel of teaching a language.

Littlewood (1984) discussed how communicative activities may facilitate language acquisition. He said communicative activities offer whole-task-based practice. People can practice them fully instead of learning things partially. Swimming requires part-skills and whole-tasks, encompassing the ability to swim varying distances, whether short or long. EFL Students should receive whole-task practice in the classroom through various communicative tasks. Littlewood also noted that communicative activities might motivate students because they understand their goal is to communicate with classmates. When classroom learning is linked to goals, they'll be more motivated to learn. Communicative activities happen naturally inside and outside the classroom when people use language for communication. Communicative exercises can also foster healthy relationships between students and teachers (Littlewood, 1984).

Some roles employed by both teachers and students when adopting communicative language teaching and learning

Teachers' goals are to prepare students for the communicative activity by giving them the linguistic forms that they may need and also explaining meanings that they may not know. So, teachers should focus on the linguistic forms that the learners need and ask them to get the meaning during their communicative activities.

Communication does not occur in a quiet classroom. A communicative exercise often involves learners getting up from their chairs to finish a job, and most of the speaking takes place among students. In general, students may become more confident in using the

target language as a result of the increased responsibility for participation. It is easier for students to manage their own learning when they are responsible for it. When teachers work in communicative classrooms, they talk less and listen more, and they become more involved in helping their students learn. Because the instructor sets up the activity, they must take a step back and watch, occasionally acting as referees or monitors (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

In alignment with Freeman's observations on the responsibilities of teachers in the context of communicative language education, Littlewood (1984) has expounded upon the many tasks that teachers assume as follows:

1. The instructor is in charge of overseeing the learning process overall, so it is his responsibility to plan and direct the activities to ensure that the students complete their assignments clearly and efficiently.
2. The teacher is in charge of the classroom, so he should assign his students to groups and ensure that the activities are coherent and well-organized.
3. The teacher has the authority to provide new vocabulary and evaluate students' performance.
4. The instructor can assist and counsel his students, as well as talk about their strengths and shortcomings.
5. The instructor occasionally assumes the role of a co-communicator, engaging in the activity with the students. In this position, the teacher facilitates the learning process by introducing and encouraging the use of a new language, but not necessarily taking on the primary role of initiating the activity.

Most teachers today assert that the communicative approach has had a significant influence on their teaching methods. In reality, a good number of educators are still using old methods of teaching, mostly audio-lingual. One of the main reasons for this discrepancy between what these teachers believe in and what they actually do is related to a misunderstanding of the teaching guidelines that work in parallel with the communicative competence approach. The majority of teachers think that the fact that they provide some visual aids or authentic materials to the class means they are actually applying the communicative approach. I personally had the chance to observe many teachers, and their main focus is on grammar, even though their textbooks are supposed to help them use the communicative competence approach. I think that applying the communicative competence theory involves a major change in teaching habits. Teachers should give up their old beliefs about how a second language is learned and be open to adopting new ways of teaching. This is, of course, hard to achieve, but it is inevitable if we would like to see our students become successful language learners who are able to communicate in a second language.

Many students find that having the instructor there during a communicative activity provides them with psychological support since they view the instructor as a source of direction and assistance. For instance, if they are unable to meet the requirements of a scenario, the instructor can supply them with the essential linguistic items. Similarly, if they are unable to come to an agreement with one another, he should find a way to settle their dispute. (1984, Littlewood).

In the context of second language learning, Revell (1979) examined what the teacher should do to deal with students' faults. He focuses on not interfering with their communication or interrupting their attention. In this situation, the teacher may document any errors detected during the task and subsequently review them with each student once the assignment is finished. Using video or a recorder to capture the exercise and repeatedly play it back to the class is another approach the teacher might use to address a group of students' mistakes.

Engaging in play not only provides individuals with pleasure but also fosters extensive discourse. The teacher has the option to address problems with the students individually or instruct them to engage in group or pair discussions in order to discuss any issues.

On the other hand, Littlewood (1984) stated that there are four primary areas of second language abilities that contribute to a person's ability to communicate effectively, and they are as follows:

- 1- In order for the student to effectively convey his or her message, the learner needs to acquire a wide variety of linguistic competence in a spontaneous and adaptable manner.
- 2- The student may need to differentiate between the structure and the function that is required for language competency. The student should be able to communicate effectively and deliver the message using the form that is required for the function.
- 3- The learner should be able to advance and develop a variety of linguistic techniques and abilities in order to successfully communicate and transmit meanings. In addition, he ought to occasionally solve and cure the failure by employing a new language.
- 4- The student needs to be recognized for the many social connotations of different kinds of language to utilize forms that are usually acceptable and to avoid using forms that could be offensive.

Conclusion

The communicative competence approach has been an interesting theory because it has revolutionized the way we look at language learning. Even though the definitions of communicative competence have somewhat confused some educators, their implications for second language teaching are very important to consider and adopt. Although it cannot possibly be claimed that the communicative competence theory is the best approach for language learning, it is safe to say that it has given educators a deep insight into the nature of second language learning and allowed us to explore the myriad functions of language that learners must be able to achieve.

Moreover, the implementation of communicative activities in second language instruction facilitates the acquisition of essential communication skills among second language learners, enabling them to effectively engage in interactions with native speakers of the target language. This is against what is called "traditional curricula," which never address children as creative beings and may result in the child feeling incompetent. This still happens in the educational systems in use in many countries, such as Saudi Arabia. Traditional schools are situations where children spend all their school days in a chair, supposedly focusing all their senses on the teacher, in a classroom format that does not allow any group interaction. Because of children's natural settings, traditional situations should not be adopted.

Applying communicative activities involves a major change in teaching habits. Teachers should give up their old beliefs about how a second language is learned and be open to adopting new ways of teaching. In this regard, communication doesn't mean the proficiency of the student to speak, write, read, listen, and understand in English. It means the ability of the student to use English as a survival language.

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