

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Introduction

Japan has launched a major initiative to improve English language teaching in its education system. One of the main goals is to improve the communicative competence of its graduates. In the area of second language acquisition, communication, communicative competency and communicative language teaching are all key concepts. However, there is no uniform interpretation of the meanings of these concepts. Indeed, there is a great deal of confusion as to what they are all about. In this paper I would like to address some of the confusion by discussing several theoretical communicative concepts and their applications to language and methods of teaching language. In the first section I will discuss the notion of communicative competence with reference to Hymes' work. In the second section I will discuss Widdowson's work regarding communicative language teaching. In the third section I will address Canale and Swain's theoretical framework of communicative competence. Finally in the fourth section I will discuss the application of communicative competence to language teaching.

Hymes' concept of communicative competence

The idea of communicative competence is originally derived from Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. By competence, Chomsky means the shared knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener set in a completely homogeneous speech community. Such underlying knowledge enables a user of a language to produce and understand an infinite set of sentences out of a finite set of rules. The transformational grammar provides for an explicit account of this tacit knowledge of language structure, which is usually not conscious but is necessarily implicit. Hymes says that the transformational theory "carries to its perfection the desire to deal in practice only with what is internal to language, yet to find in that internality that in theory is of the widest or deepest human significance." (Hymes, 1972)

Performance, on the other hand, is concerned with the process of applying the underlying

knowledge to the actual language use, commonly stated as encoding and decoding (Hymes). But because performance can never directly reflect competence except under the ideal circumstances (the ideal speaker-listener know and use language perfectly without making any mistakes), performance cannot be relevant to a linguistic theory for descriptive linguists. It involves too many performance variables to use as linguistic data, such as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors. Therefore, according to Hymes, the most salient connotation of performance is “that of imperfect manifestation of underlying system.” (Hymes, 1972)

Hymes finds Chomsky’s distinction of competence and performance too narrow to describe language behavior as a whole. Hymes believes that Chomsky’s view of competence is too idealized to describe actual language behavior, and therefore his view of performance is an incomplete reflection of competence. For Hymes, Chomsky’s linguistic theory represents a “Garden of Eden” viewpoint that dismisses central questions of use in the area of performance. Hymes points out that the theory does not account for socio-cultural factors or differential competence in a heterogeneous speech community. He also points out, using Labov’s work, that linguistic competence co-varies with the speaker. Labov described dual competence in reception and single competence in production in lower-class African-American children who distinguish Standard English and the variant Black English in recognition, but use only Black English for production. Hymes maintains that social life affects not only outward performance, but also inner competence itself. He argues that social factors interfere with or restrict grammar use because the rules of use are dominant over the rules of grammar. Hymes further expands this to claim that rules of speech are controlling factors for the linguistic form as a whole.

Hymes concludes that a linguistic theory must be able to deal with a heterogeneous speech community, differential competence and the role of sociocultural features. He believes that we should be concerned with performance, which he defines as the actual use of language in a concrete situation, not an idealized speaker-listener situation in a completely homogeneous speech community. Hymes deems it necessary to distinguish two kinds of competence: linguistic competence that deals with producing and understanding grammatically correct sentences, and communicative competence that deals with producing and understanding sentences that are appropriate and acceptable to a particular situation. Thus Hymes coins a term “communicative competence” and defines it as “a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language.”

Widdowson's concept of communicative language teaching

Widdowson views language learning not merely as acquiring the knowledge of the rules of grammar, but also as acquiring the ability to use language to communicate. He says that knowing a language is more than how to understand, speak, read, and write sentences, but how sentences are used to communicate. "We do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; but also how to use sentences appropriately to achieve communicative purposes." (Widdowson, 1978)

According to Widdowson, the idea that once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself is false. (Widdowson, 1972) He states that six or more years of instruction in English does not guarantee normal language communication. (Widdowson, 1973) He suggests that communicative abilities have to be developed at the same time as the linguistic skills; otherwise the mere acquisition of the linguistic skills may inhibit the development of communicative abilities. Widdowson's idea seems to be influenced by Hymes' thought that children acquire not only the knowledge of grammar, but also the knowledge of appropriateness. Hymes points out that children acquire knowledge of sociocultural rules such as when to speak, when not to speak, what to talk about with whom and in what manner, at the same time as they acquire knowledge of grammatical rules. "Children develop a general theory of speaking appropriately in their community from a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features." (Hymes, 1972) Taking this into account, Widdowson strongly suggests that we need to teach communicative competence along with linguistic competence.

To make the discussion of teaching both linguistic and communicative competence clear, Widdowson distinguishes two aspects of performance: "usage" and "use." He explains that "usage" makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas "use" makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. (Widdowson, 1978) He also distinguishes two aspects of meaning: "significance" and "value." Significance is the meaning that sentences have in isolation from the particular situation in which the sentence is produced. Value is the meaning that sentences take on when they are used to communicate. (Widdowson, 1978)

Thus acquisition of linguistic competence is involved in use. Widdowson suggests that the classroom presentation of language must ensure the acquisition of both kinds of competence by providing linguistic and communicative contexts. Linguistic context focuses on usage to enable the students to select which form of sentence is contextually appropriate,

while communicative context focuses on use to enable the students to recognize the type of communicative function their sentences fulfill. Widdowson suggests that the selection of content should be made according to its potential occurrence as an example of use in communicative acts rather than as an example of usage in terms of linguistic structure. (Widdowson, 1978) Grammar must be based on semantic concepts and must help a learner to acquire a practical mastery of language for the natural communicative use of language.

Theoretical framework of communicative competence

Canale and Swain believe that the sociolinguistic work of Hymes is important to the development of a communicative approach to language learning. Their work focuses on the interaction of social context, grammar, and meaning (more precisely, social meaning). However, just as Hymes says that there are values of grammar that would be useless without rules of language use, Canale and Swain maintain that there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar. For example, one may have an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence in Canadian French just from having developed such a 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. (Canale & Swain, 1980) They strongly believe that the study of grammatical competence is as essential to the study of communicative competence as is the study of sociolinguistic competence.

As for “integrative theories” such as Widdowson’s work, Canale and Swain point out that there is an overemphasis in many integrative theories on the role of communicative functions and social behavior options in the selection of grammatical forms, and a lack of emphasis on the role of factors such as grammatical complexity and transparency. They believe that at some point prior to the final selection of grammatical options, semantic options and social behavior options, grammatical forms must be screened for the following criteria: (Canale & Swain, 1980)

- (1) grammatical complexity;
- (2) transparency with respect to the communicative function of the sentence;
- (3) generalizability to other communicative functions;
- (4) the role of a given form in facilitating acquisition of another form;
- (5) acceptability in terms of perceptual strategies;
- (6) degree of markedness in terms of social geographical dialects.

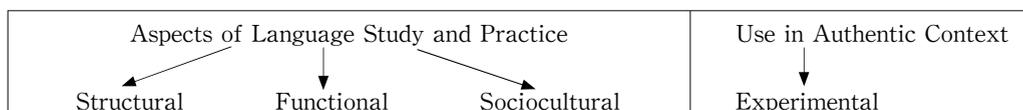
Furthermore, they point out that no communicative competence theorists have devoted any detailed attention to communicative strategies that speakers employ to handle breakdowns in communication. Examples of communication breakdowns include false starts, hesitations and other performance factors, avoiding grammatical forms that have not been fully mastered, addressing strangers when unsure of their social status, and keeping the communicative channel open. They consider such strategies to be important aspects of communicative competence that must be integrated with the other components.

Canale and Swain propose their own theory of communicative competence that minimally includes three main competencies: grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence includes knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence—grammar semantics, and phonology. They point out that grammatical competence will be an important concern for any communicative approach whose goals include providing learners with knowledge of how to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances. Sociolinguistic competence is made up of two sets of rules: sociolinguistic rules of use and rules of discourse. They believe that knowledge of these rules will be crucial in interpreting utterances for social meaning, particularly when there is a low level of transparency between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker’s intention. Finally, strategic competence is made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient grammatical competence.

Applications of the concept of communicative competence to language teaching

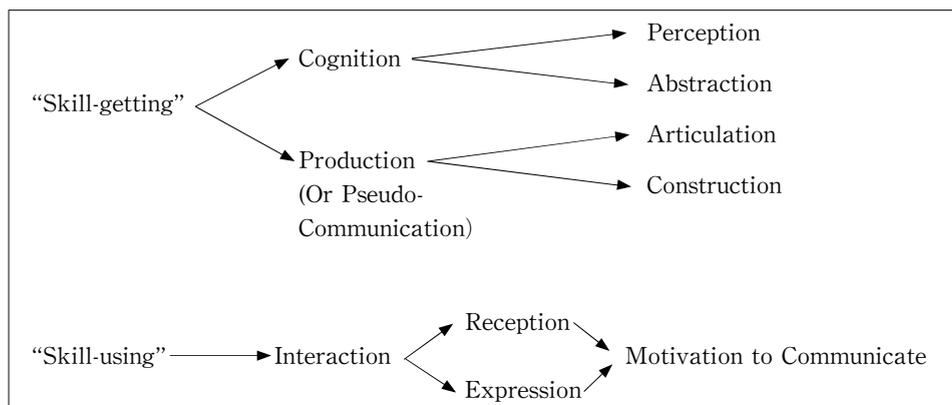
Now the question is how to help our students acquire communicative competence in the classroom. Stern proposes the following language curriculum:



Stern maintains that language teaching can and should approach language learning objectively and analytically through the study and practice of structural, functional, and sociocultural aspects. It should offer opportunities to live the language as a personal experience through direct contact with the target language community. (Stern, 1981)

Similarly, Rivers proposes methodological distinction between “skill-getting” and “skill-

using” activities. She presents the educational framework in a slightly different way.



Through “skill-getting” activities, the teacher isolates specific elements of knowledge or skill that compose communicative ability, and provides the learners with opportunities to practice them separately. Thus the learners are being trained in separate steps of communication skills rather than practicing the total skill to be acquired. In the “skill-getting” stage, as Rivers points out, “the student must learn to articulate acceptably and construct comprehensible language sequences by rapid associations of learned elements.” (Rivers, 1972) The communicative drills developed by Paulston could be utilized. She groups drills into mechanical drills, meaningful drills, and communicative drills.

However, Rivers points out that no matter how much we relate these activities to real-life situations, this practice rarely passes beyond pseudo-communication. It is extremely directed, not self-originating. Rivers maintains the importance of “skills-using” activities. In this stage, the learner should be on her own and not supported or directed by the teacher. She may be working one-on-one with another student or with a small group of students. In this type of practice the student would be allowed to use anything she knows of the language and any aids (gesture, drawings, pantomime, etc.) to express her meaning when she is “at a loss for words.” Consequently it offers an opportunity for language “acquisition” in terms proposed by Krashen, i.e. the unconscious absorption of language in real use. As Stern points out, the activity “offers the learner a chance of developing coping techniques that the learner needs when he finds himself alone in the new language environment.” (Stern, 1981)

Stern and Rivers maintain that these two levels of language teaching (“skill-getting” and “skill-using”) should not be taught as strict sequencing of such activities, but that a variable focus should offer the possibility of greater or lesser emphasis on each aspect at different

stages of a language program.

All of these theories are important in trying to design successful models for foreign language teaching. Theories of communicative competence and communicative language teaching have contributed a great deal to our understanding of language acquisition. We need to continue studying and clearing up confusion in the area of communicative competence. Foreign language teachers and those who design educational materials are especially affected since approaches to language learning using theories of communicative competence place high demands on teachers and material designers. Humanistic techniques, individualized instruction and adaptation of the student-teacher relationship are among the most essential ingredients for successful communicative language teaching. Understanding the concepts of communicative competence and applying them to language teaching is hard work, but the benefits to our students' language learning are well worth the time invested.

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