Communicative Competence Revisited

Introduction

A student understands the meaning of a conversational dialogue but the grammar disturbs him. Our student is familiar with dialogues where questions are followed by answers and where speakers courteously paraphrase each other. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" would be followed by "No, I haven't" or "Yes, I have.", economically practising the interrogative and declarative moods. Conversations in reality are often not so symmetrical and, for once, the dialogue in the book was not artificial and hence the disturbance. An external moderator wishes to fail a teacher who delivered a lesson that was in many ways well executed. Our teacher taught a "traditional" lesson with exchanges governed by closed questions and highly controlled language. There were few opportunities for the students to use the language freely either with the teacher or between themselves. What unite these two situations are the issues of communication, both what it is and how communication is developed.

It might be thought that the teacher who taught the "traditional lesson" and those who continue to teach "traditionally" are responsible for the students who have problems dealing with "real" conversations. But this is too simplistic as in the case of our student the other class members were clearly amused by his discomfort. They clearly knew something about language, whether by acquisition, learning or transfer, that he did not. And it is also useful to remember that many of today's teachers of English are the successful product of traditional methods. However, the external moderator was in a position to elevate communication and communicativeness over all other criteria. This example shows the risks run by teachers who fail to conform. Those who omit to read the scriptures and follow the orthodoxy risk excommunication!

Communication, Competence and Performance

Canale (1983) provides a definition of communication as, ".. the exchange and negotiation of information between at least two individuals through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, oral and written/visual modes, and production and comprehension processes."

He lists the following characteristics of communication as;

1. A form of social interaction.
2. Involving a high degree of unpredictability and creativity.
3. Taking place in discourse and socio cultural contexts that constrain appropriate language use.
4. Limited by psychological constraints.
5. Having a purpose.
6. Involving authentic language.
7. Being judged as successful or not by the achievement of the communicative purpose.

It is worth noting that the degree of unpredictability is open to discussion. For Halliday, (1985) it is the very predictability of language that accounts for the success with which people communicate. However, a distinction should be made between native and non-native speakers. Native speakers are able to use the context of situation to anticipate what meanings are being exchanged. Non-native speakers are required to cope not only with a language that is unfamiliar but also with situations that might be outside their experience. Even the topics of conversations may be different.

Communicative Competence

Brown (1987) gives a succinct definition of the term "communicative competence". "Communicative competence, then, is that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings within specific contexts." Part of this definition indicates that besides being related to a particular situation competence is also tied to the interaction of the participants. Thus meaning is not unambiguous but has to be clarified. Meaning can also change some time after the event as new information becomes available. The frequently heard expression "Oh, so that is what he meant when he said ..." shows that meaning can be re-evaluated. Pride (1979) says that communicative competence is the possession of an individual language user and is with respect to the speech communities that the individual belongs.

Other writers have given a more systematic description. Canale and Swain (1980) propose that communicative competence "refer to relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or the knowledge of the rules of language use." (p.6) Later in their article they add a third component, strategic competence. Canale (1983) revises this framework further. There are four parts:

a) Grammatical Competence

Under this heading he includes "features and rules of language such as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics." Grammar is an important part of communicative competence. Canale and Swain reply to Hymes stating, "Just as Hymes was able to say that there are rules of grammar that would be useless without rules of language use, so we feel that there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar." Unfortunately, while stating the necessity of grammatical competence, they give no indication of how it is achieved.

b) Discourse Competence

The division between grammatical competence and discourse competence is the usual distinction between sentence-level grammar and intersentential relationships. Canale uses this term to describe the skill and knowledge to combine utterances in spoken and written texts with coherence and cohesion. This would include cohesive devices "such as pronouns, synonyms, ellipsis, conjunction and parallel structures. Regarding the language learner, Cook (1989) writes that in order to be an effective participant in discourse he or she "needs to be able to identify what type of discourse he or she is involved in, and predict how it will typically be structured."

c) Sociolinguistic Competence

This relates to the appropriate production and understanding of utterances according to contextual factors. These factors are outlined by Thomas (1995) who uses Hymes' SPEAKING mnemonic.

Situation	The setting or scene
Participants	Speaker, hearer, audience etc.
Ends	The outcomes or goals of individuals
Act sequences	Message, message content
Key	Tone, manner or spirit of act
Instrumentalities	Channel or mode (written or spoken)
Norms	Norms of interpretation and interaction
Genre	Categories such as joke, lecture or advertisement

d) Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is the ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication techniques to:
1) Compensate for communication breakdowns that might result from a lack of competence in areas such as vocabulary.
2) Enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Examples of 1) might include drawing a picture or substituting a foreign word for unknown English word.

An alternative framework is offered by Bachman (1990), describing what he terms communicative language ability. Communicative language ability combines competence and performance "in appropriate contextualised communicative language use". Bachman is concerned with the issue of testing and relates communicative competence to the idea of proficiency in language.

His interest in testing leads him to separate strategic competence from language knowledge. The justification for this being that two people may have the same knowledge and control over a language but have differing degrees of success in using this knowledge. This has implications for test validity. Evidence in the classroom of these differential abilities is sometimes found after placement testing. Students with similar or identical grammar scores are not equally able to participate in the class. Bachman also sees strategic competence as something that is always available to the learner and native speaker alike and not just when a breakdown in communication occurs.

Components of Language Competence
Language Competence, Organisational Competence, Pragmatic Competence, Grammatical Competence, Textual Competence, Illocutionary Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence. (Bachman)

He equates communicative competence with language competence, which he then further divides into organisational competence and pragmatic competence. Organisational competence is combined Canale's grammatical and discourse competence. Discourse competence is termed textual competence by Bachman. Pragmatic competence is concerned with the relationship between language users and the context and is divided into Illocutionary competence and Sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence is an ability to produce and comprehend an utterance appropriately in a particular context. A complete description draws both on speech act theory and Halliday's functional view of language. Under sociolinguistic competence he includes sensitivity to differences in dialect, register and naturalness.

While these competencies can be analysed separately, they are expected to be available and used by the language user simultaneously.

The description of communicative competence gives a fuller description of language than previous grammar based models, but before it is used to guide what to teach we need to place the learner within the framework. Shaw (1992) does this by looking at the degree to which the competence described is universal, language-specific or culture- specific. He gives the example of teaching the process approach to writing. This might be a skill the language learner is already familiar with from their L1 (a part of universal competence) and perhaps more attention could be paid to the language in such a situation.

Which language - Language varieties and appropriateness
Communicative competence includes sensitivity to dialect or variety and differences in register. In teaching terms it should be asked which varieties learners need to understand, and the other side of this equation what sort of language learners need to produce. While linguistic descriptions can avoid prescription, teachers have to select which samples of language to use in class and are required to make assessments about students' language. Along with the idea of communicative competence arises the idea of standards even if of an apparently simple binary "successful or not successful" type. The question then becomes "Which standards?" or perhaps even "Whose standards?" There exists a heterogeneous speech community and some speakers may be members of several speech communities being able to move between them. Hymes points out "fluent members of communities often regard their languages, or functional varieties, as not identical in communicative adequacy." It is also the case that native speakers are not uniformly competent and there may be areas where instruction is necessary. That native speakers have gaps in their competence indicates comprehensive competence cannot be a realistic goal for most language learners. In the section that follows I plan to examine the issue of standards with respect to two areas: language variety and appropriateness.

For Stalker (1989) "There is no golden book of correctness rules". However, he argues standard American English fulfils certain functional roles and that a knowledge of its features is necessary in certain contexts to make an appropriate linguistic choice. Thus an awareness of standard American English should be part of communicative competence. In defining what standard American English is he seems to suggest it is an ideal. "It is that form of language that we use when we engage in communication events with strangers, people beyond the group of people whom we regard as "our group". Some learner's accents evoke negative stereotypes with some native-speakers (Zuengler, 1989) which may result in the learner being discriminated against. Stalker suggests standard American English maximises the success of an encounter with a stranger.

Milroy (1991) suggests "the socially functional nature of a varied repertoire". Distinctive codes are maintained, even ones that are considered low status, for a purpose. Linguistic variety can function to show solidarity with or alternatively mark social distance from an interlocutor. Speakers may wish to do either. Communicative competence would suggest that language learners need access to these varieties if they are to function in an environment where the variety is used.

Talking specifically about second language learners in a second language setting, Zuengler (1989) poses the question "What language varieties are available as target choices?". She points out that learners may have their

own target models distinct from the standard. This may be the result of influence from peers, parents or others, illustrating the importance of group solidarity. Although Zuengler refers to the learners as IL (interlanguage) speakers suggesting a transitory or developmental state for their language variety, this may not be the case. Richards (1979) writes, "The evolution of lasting non-standard varieties of a standard language is a consequence of the perception by the immigrant of the larger society, and a reflection of the degree to which the immigrant groups have been admitted into the mainstream of the dominant culture."

There seems to be an implicit assumption that language learners are learning a language to converse with native speakers. Consequently, the standards of competence to aspire to are often with reference to native speaker norms. With learners in a second language setting, this may be a reasonable assumption. These assumptions are also evident when discussing a foreign language setting as the shown by the following quotes from Richards:
"In a foreign language setting there is always an effort to acquire an overseas standard form of English, and not some local form of English."

Following on from this, if learners are conceived of as having an equal role in a communicative event, then they also play a part in the convention construction. While there is an important role for culture in language teaching, material about British or American life sometimes simply makes learning more difficult and is not that interesting to students who are not going to visit either country in the near future. Culture differences regarding what is thought of as "polite" behaviour and its linguistic expression could be explored with reference to the learners own values.

In terms of accent to be produced, it is also interesting that Munby's list fronts RP (Received Pronunciation). According to Macaulay this accent is spoken by only 3% of the population of Britain. While teaching books on pronunciation advocate "intelligibility" as a goal, dictionaries still use RP as a basis for guidance on pronunciation.

Conclusion

Communicative competence is an important concept that influences all areas of teaching. Its evolution has influenced how many teachers view language with it increasing seen as a social construct broader than a set of grammar rules. From the above review communicative competence has implications for;
    1) What is taught in the classroom,
    2) How it is tested.

The concept of communicative competence can also be applied to the classroom itself. Teachers who determine what topics can be spoken about, when it can be spoken about and for how long it can be spoken about leave a limited space for learners to occupy. Consequently, Johnson (1995) talks about classroom communicative competence. Learners need to be informed of the norms and expectations that are to operate in the classroom and why. So referring back to our original teacher a third factor needs to be mentioned and that is.

    3) Roles in the classroom

A more varied role for the teacher would open the possibility of a different range of communicative exchanges for the learner. However, the communicative classroom does not exist in isolation from the society it is in nor from the classroom practice of other subjects. Just as communicative competence is context specific, effective communicative classroom practice may prove to be culturally specific.

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