

A few notes on communicative competence

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Although the term *communicative competence* is a major buzzword, there are a number of different interpretations as to what this concept entails, what its status in linguistic theory is and what its relevance to second language teaching may be. What is especially noteworthy, however, is the polarization that discussions of communicative competence often entail: frequently, communicative competence is seen as a counterpart of, rather than a complement to, grammatical or linguistic competence. We will see, though, that this view is neither justified nor helpful.

Some of the discussion's polarity is probably historically based. The recognition of a communicative component to language proficiency developed as a counter-movement to the strong emphasis on linguistic competence at the time. In response to Noam Chomsky, Hymes 1972 raises a number of important questions regarding the status of Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. Originally a somewhat programmatic conference paper, Hymes' article points to the fact that the existence of an "ideal speaker/hearer" as assumed in Chomskyan descriptions of grammar (linguistic competence) is a dubious construction – and to Hymes even entails a disregard of actual, "imperfect" speakers and hearers as all people are by necessity.

Hymes points out that restricting the perspective to ideal cases (thereby neglecting linguistic performance) vastly diminishes the effectiveness of linguistic description: a lot of the things people actually do when they use language are not accounted for. Whereas linguistic descriptions of competence focus on the question whether something is formally possible, a number of other categories are relevant to actual speech, formal possibility being only one of them:

a) is something feasible?

To what extent do psycholinguistic limitations determine what is actually said and understood?

b) is something appropriate?

To what extent does an utterance comply with the context in which it is made?

c) is something done?

Are there preferred ways of saying something that is there, for example, speech functions typically performed with certain language material?

Overall, Hymes seems to regard his ideas as an extension of current linguistic theory, rather than a replacement of it. However, the latter has sometimes been held against Hymes. There is

enough evidence in the text, though, to justify saying that Hymes acknowledges descriptions of linguistic competence, but wants to see them strengthened by descriptions of language in use to arrive at a more comprehensive picture that combines grammar and pragmatics. Difficult as it is to obtain, this more comprehensive view of language may be more informative and more useful for the purpose of describing and teaching language. Historically fruitful was Hymes' suggestion that linguistic routines play a role here, that is, typical features of organizing discourse by using markers of coherence, agreement, disagreement, turn-taking etc. From a communicative perspective, those routines gain importance, as they help structure conversation in a way not describable by means of syntax alone. They are, therefore, bits of knowledge that need to be acquired.

Canale & Swain 1980 take up the notion of communicative competence in order to examine what may be effective ways of developing it through teaching. First, they deliver a critical appraisal of Hymes' notion of communicative competence, stressing that they regard both components, rules of grammar and rules of communication as essential and complementary. It is, to their mind, not a question of either / or, but you need to develop both if you want to educate proficient speakers.

The theories and the research Canale and Swain examine in the second section of their paper support this point: neither will a focus on grammar alone produce L2 speakers that are fluent communicators, nor will merely teaching communication be sufficient to achieve this aim, as it will neglect the development of grammatical competence – and both are to be considered necessary components of communicative competence. A way out that Canale and Swain offer lies in combining the necessary grammatical structures and the speech functions the learner wants to perform.

Canale and Swain discuss the reasons for an overemphasis on communication in many "communicative approaches" (p. 23f.) and propose a model of communicative competence that contains grammatical knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge (Hymes' feature of appropriateness in communicative competence) and communicative strategies (managing communicative breakdowns, misunderstandings, etc.). They stress the importance of "needs analysis", that is, an account of what it is the learner needs to be able to do, and which language material he will need to do so. Also, they emphasize the need for classroom situations in which learners have opportunities to perform those language functions they are supposed to be using outside the classroom (foreshadowing the concepts of skill-building and skill using we will encounter in Nunan's text, Canale and Swain would probably have stated that skill-using is generally largely underrepresented in classrooms).

Kasper 1997 basically takes up this thought and asks how we can arrange classroom learning situations beneficial to developing pragmatic competence in a second language. Fortunately, Kasper says, L2 learners already possess some amount of sociopragmatic knowledge by virtue of being proficient speakers of an L1, e.g., they have a general idea of what things are usually

said and done on which occasions. However, L2 learners do not necessarily use their pragmatic knowledge for L2 production. Besides, we can only rarely trace a form-function mapping between L1 and L2 in which similar language forms carry similar functions as in *könnte, würde* (Germ.) vs. *could, would* (Eng.). In most cases, L2-specific language forms, i.e., pragmalinguistic knowledge must be acquired along with pragmatic speech functions. Research points to the fact that learners may benefit from awareness raising concerning the use of certain communicative strategies and the appropriateness of utterances in a given context.

The greatest problem in teaching seems to be that much of classroom discourse can be considered an impoverished variety of English – not so much in grammatical terms as from a pragmatic perspective. The balance of power in the classroom renders many pragmatic considerations unnecessary that are an integral part of communication outside the classroom, among them the use of politeness, turn-taking routines, etc. Kasper notes that many teachers miss out on the opportunity of using classroom management conducted in the L2 as a chance to model pragmatic knowledge: classroom management, however, contains all elements of genuine communication that other classroom sequences lack – teachers could well exploit it as a way of modelling how requests are conducted in the L2 etc. Kasper suggests using several task formats to raise the learners' awareness in the areas of sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. Besides, she recommends using tasks that contain practice opportunities (again, the idea of skill using is stressed).

Using Nunan 2004 and Hughes 2003, we can approach the idea of teaching communicative competence(s) from a somewhat different angle. Starting from the traditional distinction of oral and written skills into listening, speaking, reading, and writing, Nunan and Hughes give a rather detailed analysis of the four skills. Operating within the integrative framework that has guided us so far, both authors assume that the skills can only be separated analytically, but appear in combination in real life communicative activity. Of the two, Nunan emphasizes the teaching point of view. He analyzes both the micro-skills (or sub-skills) involved in using the individual skills and the relation between in-class and real-life communication situations: what demands does, for example, listening put on the learner inside and outside the classroom? Hughes approaches the skills from a complementary perspective, that of testing, and gives a fine-grained analysis of what mastering a certain language skill involves and what pitfalls are involved in its testing.

Both authors tend to warn teachers of the same fallacy that characterizes language teaching in general: just as you will not promote communication by concentrating on grammar only, you will not be able to arrive at comprehensive speaking skills by practicing isolated sentences only. Both in teaching and testing, you will have to make sure that what learners do has a degree of comprehensiveness and complexity characteristic of the full skill. Using Nunan and Hughes, we can now give an estimate of the qualities of tasks suggested in schoolbooks: are they potentially successful in training the skills they target? Is their testing component

convincing? Do they bear any relation with skills as components of communication, i.e., do they practice abilities that are useful outside the classroom, or are the tasks solely geared towards classroom situations? Do they comprise skill-using, too, or only skill-building? And if they only contain skill-building, who will safeguard that the learners will be able to transfer them to a situation outside the classroom?

As to the relevance of all this to the classroom, the competence descriptors in the current guidelines (MSJK 2004) somewhat converge with Nunan's view of tasks for the communicative classroom. Based on the Common European Framework, the descriptors largely present a range of pragmatic functions to be mastered by the learners. Whatever one may feel about the adequacy of the descriptors, one thing is apparent: the guidelines stress the communicative functions to be developed, at the same time shifting the responsibility for their development onto the teachers more than previous versions did. The guidelines also draw on the integrative approach to teaching that has been characteristic of all the positions presented so far ("die Teilkompetenzen integrieren und bündeln, vielfältiges Üben und Anwenden ermöglichen und einen isolierten 'Testbetrieb' bezogen auf einzelne Teilkompetenzen ausschließen". MSJK 2004:20). As far as testing is concerned, the guidelines mention a number of test tasks involving authentic material and/or authentic situations. We can therefore safely assume that the shift towards real life communication is intended. Even a brief analysis of schoolbook material suggests that the task types used are in need of improvement, though. Apparently, schoolbook publishers are still struggling with the new requirements, and there is room for reflection and amendments.

Before the background of Nunan's suggestions of different task types in the communicative classroom as well as Kasper's recommendation to use corpus-based, authentic language material for teaching and learning purposes, we will be able to make use of the language material that both Dörnyei & Thurrell 1992 and Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992 present. However useful they may be, you may notice tendencies in Nattinger and DeCarrico to take the idea of speech formulae a little too far and to base all of language teaching on them. Hopefully by now our integrative view of communicative competence will help us put these ideas into perspective: we will of course be able to use the language material presented by Nattinger and DeCarrico as pragmalinguistic knowledge that is useful to the language learner – but basing all of language teaching on it may just prove to be the same fallacy as trying to practice grammar or communication in isolation. And that is where we can find a connection with Canale and Swain again: there is no reason to believe that practicing anything in isolation will lead to something as complex and comprehensive as building up communicative competence.

References

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