

Considerations on Communicative Competence and Its Assessment

Alexandra BARBANEAGRA
Larisa USAȚII

“Ion Creangă” Pedagogical State University, Chisinau (Republic of Moldova)/
“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati (Romania)

Abstract: *The present article provides an overview of communicative competence, the way it was treated in the 1960s through the early 1980s, and how its component competences were described and have been updated in recent investigations. The article also touches upon approaches, methods and methodological tools and their application has been paid great attention to. The assessment of actual language use in the moment of testing and test-taking competence are types of communicative competence in the study of language acquisition. The theoretical models of communicative competence have been supplemented and enhanced by empirical approaches known as domain of analysis. The domain of analysis refers to the forms, meanings and use, assemblies of knowledge, skills and competences. Scholars and educators interested in communicative competence would also like to engage with related models such as communicative or functional adequacy that will create useful mechanisms by applying communicative competence for specific fields, skills, genres and contexts. This concept focuses attention on the particular task which is performed and wonders to what extent communication was adequate by examining the following dimensions: task requirements, content, comprehensibility and coherence. Functional adequacy may require reflection necessary for determining what is considered adequate. Related models will help broaden the traditional views of communicative competence.*

Keywords: *communicative competence, methodological tools, assessment, language acquisition, second language, test-taker, context*

INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence is an essential language skill. It is the ability to adjust language use according to specific contexts and to employ knowledge and strategies for successful communication. [12]. *Communicative competence* is described by Light J. (1989) as “the quality of being functionally adequate in daily communication or of sufficient knowledge, judgment and skills to communicate” [14]. Dell Hymes introduced in 1967 and later in 1972 developed the concept of communicative competence [1].

Contemporary with the changing attitudes about what language users were able to produce and comprehend, Dell Hymes (1967, 1972, 1992) [2] referred to the social rules of language use. He suggested the term *communicative competence*, a phrase that numerous authors adapted in the subsequent years, and which has been kept in use to the present – to refer to knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing the social meaning of the language. The term *communicative competence* received further prominence. Among the key arguments made by the scientists included the need to prioritize linguistic functions as opposed to language forms. Savignon S. suggested starting the training of communicative skills from the start of the language learning program [3].

Canale M. and Swain M. continued to investigate the issue and elaborated on the three component competences of it such as grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, but in 1983 they added one more competence – the fourth – discourse

competence, thus suggesting the division between sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence, the latter meaning mastery how to combine grammatical forms and meanings, as a result achieving a spoken or a written text of different genres [4]. Celce-Murcia M. et al. in 1995, in turn, proposed five core competences: linguistic, strategic, sociocultural: actional competence which means transmitting and understanding communicative intentions, that is matching actional intention with linguistic form through knowledge of speech actions and, the fifth – the discourse competence – pointing out this to be a central one enriched by the strategic competence which is used to compensate the deficiencies in the other component competence [5]. In 2008 Celce-Murcia proposed another component to her model – formulaic competence – stating that the last one plays an important role in the formation of language in the communicative abilities of the learners [6]. However, another multilevel model was put forward by Bachman L.F. and Palmer A.S. (1996, 2010) in such a way making a distinction between language knowledge and metacognitive strategies [7]. Further, they distinguished between organizational knowledge, which included textual knowledge, and grammatical knowledge which comprises lexical, functional and sociocultural knowledge.

The description of the component competences differs. Yet, one can observe, that all of them see the importance of linguistic/grammatical knowledge, social competence and language use.

More recent investigators appreciate the role of extended discourse or formulaic language differently, they highlight competence referring to using language to put communicative goals into action and emphasize the importance of communication strategies in facilitating L₂ competence. Canale M. and Swain intended to look critically at language classrooms, language instruction and more globally what second language learners need to know in order to communicate effectively or to put it clearer “what else does a language user need to know” [8].

Approaches may differ as to how many competence categories are determined (identified) and whether they are discrete or hierarchically organized, all contribute to the sense that learners need grammar and other communicative abilities.

The authors then presented the communicative competence defined as a construct (model) made up of the sum of other three competences: grammatical, which has received great attention in contemporary theories as including knowledge of lexicon and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology; sociolinguistic competence – the product of rules of language use and the rules of discourse; and strategic competence – the (non)-verbal communication strategies (appeals for help, clarification, self-monitoring etc.). Models of communicative competence show that language use has a social component. They refer to the use of context-appropriate language in the second language as sociolinguistic competence because the sociolinguistic elements of language are important in L₂ interactions. For example, language learners benefit from the ability to address other speakers according to norms of status and politeness, to demonstrate degrees of formality or informality. Sociolinguistic competence provides opportunities to establish friendships and personal connections. From a language learning viewpoint, L₂ learners use the competence to participate in an interaction and to have access to future possibilities for communication and acquisition. Sociolinguistic competence shows how the speaker’s characteristics influence the patterns of language use, how identity is related to language choice, and how one varies speech according to settings. Competence language users are not only grammatically accurate but also situationally appropriate.

By recognizing sociolinguistic competence, a component of overall communicative competence, the researchers confirmed that context does matter, but current approaches do not exclusively rest on the role of the context or no role of it at all but recognize the role of the context in some way. Several approaches incorporate facts beyond the formal properties of grammar/context. For example, the functional approach explores how meaning is expressed through language by examining how a linguistic form is mapped to a concrete function or how a function is expressed through linguistic forms. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the capacity necessary to use language in real-life interactions. This ability concerns functional goals and social ones, the ability to make friends. This competence is related to identity as the speakers can reflect such characteristics as age, gender, socioeconomic class, community, and social networks, thus contributing to our understanding of the social nature of language use.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology applied to the elaboration of this article is based on the structural research method. The theoretical foundation of the research problem was the study of the specialized literature in the field of communicative competence. In order to achieve the objectives proposed in the work, the following scientific research methods and tools were used: the analytical method, through which the essence of the researched problem was reached; the synthesis method was applied to establish the connections between the investigated phenomena; the systemic analysis method, through which the main components of communicative competence were researched.

Theory and theoretical concepts should be translated into practice. Over the past 50 years applied linguists, including language specialists, have developed translational tools to convert theories of communicative competence into assessment practice. These translational tools fall into two broad interrelated categories:

- ✓ *theoretical constructs in the form of models and frameworks,*
- ✓ *fields of practice that comprise approaches to assessment and their associated methods.*

Theoretical constructs/models have become elaborate as understandings about various aspects of communication and language ability have developed. Among them are the models of communicative competence: “communicative language testing”, “performance testing”, “specific purpose testing”, and “task-based language assessment”. One of the most thoroughly developed models is the “theoretical framework of communicative language ability” proposed by Bachman and Palmer in 1996. In a more recent form (2010), the “language ability” construct is defined as the “capacity that enables language users to create and interpret discourse” [9]. Language ability is divided into two constructs: *language knowledge* – pragmatic and organizational information and *strategies competence* – a set of strategies used when mobilizing language *in situ*. Later, these authors made a distinction and divided language knowledge into organizational and pragmatic knowledge.

In addition to the above-mentioned, they propose that individuals/learners draw upon personal attributes (age, personality, educational experience) and topical knowledge (information base). Actual performance is done using cognitive strategies – making associations and applying rules filtered through affective feelings connected with topics. When the learners use the language, the attributes interact with one another, intra-individually – topic knowledge, language knowledge, and inter-individually – test taker and examiner and with characteristics of the situation – texts, tasks, and technology. Context is a crucial element.

The learner's performance or according to Hymes's term – the actual language use – is determined in the moment of testing and in the experience of the test-taker. *The performance assessment of the communicative language ability* is an individual ability, and it is observed only in a social context.

Task-taking competence is a type of communicative competence. In communicative tasks for receptive skills assessment, test takers may be asked to read and listen to authentic texts taken from real-world materials or to respond to texts that stimulate language activities. A speaking role-play between an interlocutor and a test taker is more communicative than a multiple-choice item in reading. Both tasks require knowledge of the context of use for successful performance. Another way for language assessment concerns the need to reconcile different perspectives on the scope of communicative competence, that is, to know where to draw boundaries and whose views should take precedence. Any test is performance because the test-taker understands that he is producing a sample language for a special purpose.

Another method for language assessment refers to sociolinguistic interviews, whose purpose is the collection of language data for quantitative analysis, audio or video recording is a necessary element of the sociolinguistic method. The method aims to collect a range of language use styles through a variety of spoken tasks.

Communicative performance is known to be affected by the specific dynamics of the test-taker and the assessment context. Among the possible interacting factors are the test instruments (e.g. rating scales, task types); the test task, topic and version (informal conversation about holidays, pair discussion on food preferences); the test taker's current state (tired, stressed, confident); and several other factors (the size of the room, the audibility or clarity of instructions).

The domain analysis is an important starting point for getting an assessment, the elements of communicative competence are valued in real-world settings. It is also important for carrying out validation research. It refers to the forms, meanings and use, assemblies of knowledge, skills and competences that language learners engage in target language use situations. It is also a significant point of comparison while doing validation research, as test-takers represent key aspects of the domain. Various research methods have been used to analyse language use domains, characteristic of test performance, and the relationship between these.

Despite translational efforts such as the communicative language ability model and a well-developed tradition of scholarship (erudition) to guide fields of practice, test developers have tended to mobilize communicative competence in test infrastructures (tasks, items, rating scales, scoring etc.) relying on even more straightforward and practical instruments.

The communicative competence framework has strong ties to assessment, as Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model was developed in part to meet assessment concerns and to improve the construct validity. One widely used framework is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which comprises lists of scales describing what language learners "can do" across different levels, contexts and modalities. The widely implemented CEFR for Language Proficiency Scale also has at its foundation a Communicative Competence framework, a fact that highlights its validity in comprehensively describing and assessing the types of skills and knowledge needed to communicate in a second language [11].

The frameworks make the process of test development more manageable and test scores interpretable for various situations. As such frameworks gain recognition among educators and policymakers, they become *de facto* constructs themselves, thus creating conditions where language test providers have to their tests' alignment with the framework to gain recognition.

Yet, there is a limit to the extent to which any framework of this kind can be adapted for specific contexts of use. In this way the process of translating a theoretical model can and often does become a process of simplification and standardization.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is worth saying that the application of communicative competence to teaching practice is not an easy undertaking. The constant appearance of communication tools creates many options for language teachers at present. These tools mean that learners have more opportunities than ever to interact with speakers of the target language and members of the target culture. The developments (achievements) in technology have had profound effects on human communication and second language teaching and learning as well. The strategies used for engaging in communication are evolving because of these methodological tools. The effective facilitation of the learner's communicative competence is dependent upon the design of the task in which learners engage. One of the key points to consider when deciding what approaches, methods, and methodologies to use and how to use them is to be aware of the affordance of the tools, that is, how they influence the communication between the participants. Communication is best viewed/seen as shared within a concrete/particular communicative context or event. The application of the construct of communicative competence in second language acquisition has been centred on the development of communicative competence in a language. Communicative competence, according to theory and methods, has been elucidated across different modes, abilities and types of assessment.

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