# The Notion of Communicative Competence and Some Basic Criteria for the Development of Learners' Communicative Competence

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**ABSTRACT**

Chomsky's original notion of grammatical competence encountered many criticisms. The most influential counter idea was that of communicative competence. The term is most usually attributed to Hymes (1971) referring to the use of language in social context. This notion is, as Hudson (1996:224) states, '' much more broadly based than the 'linguistic competence' of Chomskyan Linguistics.'' In addition to referring to the knowledge of linguistic forms, it includes one's knowledge of how to use linguistic forms appropriately (Ibid). Thus, over the past several decades, the notion of communicative competence has become a central preoccupation of language course designers. The main change it has caused in second and foreign language instruction is the shift in teaching methodology from a focus on the structural properties of the target language to an emphasis on the expression and comprehension of meaning . In other words, the main concern in second and foreign language curriculum has changed from fostering learners' linguistic

/ grammatical accuracy to enhancing learners' communicative competence necessary for real life communication.

Thus, the study deals with the notion of communicative competence and attempts to present some basic criteria for the development of learners' communicative competence. The paper falls into three sections. The first section provides a brief review of literature on the notion of communicative competence presenting theoretical background to the notion. The second section introduces some basic criteria for the development of learners' communicative competence. In the light of these criteria, the third section attempts to provide a sample of learning activities and techniques. Then, it presents some pedagogical recommendations that aim at enhancing learners' communicative competence to help them become more able and successful language learners and users.

## Introduction

### The Problem

In the last few decades, there have been a number of changes in attitudes towards language and language learning. Some of the most significant of these changes have been due to the notion of communicative competence which takes into account the relationship between language and the particular situation in which it is appropriate. The most significant change this notion has resulted in is the shift of emphasis from the formal rules of language to what makes language appropriate in a given situation (Gillett, 2005:1). Thus, the study attempts to present some basic criteria for the development of learners' communicative competence.

### Hypothesis:

It is hypothesized that competence involves far more than knowledge of grammaticality; it involves rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.

### The Limits of the Study:

The study is limited to presenting the notion of communicative competence and some of the basic criteria for its development. In the light of these criteria; it introduces some learning activities and techniques. It, also, provides pedagogical recommendations that aim at enhancing learners' communicative competence.

**Aims of the Study:**

The study aims at exploring the significance of the notion of 'communicative competence' and the main criteria for developing it. It also aims at helping teachers to be more efficient so as to enable their learners to have more meaningful language experiences by adopting learning activities and techniques that provide the stimulus for a natural use of the target language.

**Procedures:**

The following procedures are followed:

1- Presenting theoretical background to the notion of communicative competence.

2- Introducing some basic criteria for the development of learners' communicative competence.

3- Providing a sample of learning activities and techniques.

4- Suggesting some pedagogical recommendations.

**Significance of the Study:**

This research is believed to be useful to any contemporary teacher and student of language interested in reconsidering the teaching and learning process in the light of the notion of communicative competence.

# Section One

## Theoretical Background to the Notion of Communicative Competence

Chomsky's postulate of innate knowledge has been controversial; it has provoked a lot of argument among sociolinguists, psycholinguists and linguists. It is criticized by Campbell and Wales (1970:243-60)who contend that Chomsky and many of the psychologists influenced by him have failed to give sufficient attention to the environmental factors involved in the development of the communicative competence. Chomsky (1965:4) makes a distinction between competence and performance. The former refers to knowledge of the underlying syntactic system; it is the innate knowledge of the ideal speaker-hearer and in respect of which judgments of grammaticality are made. The latter, on the other hand, refers to the actual use of that underlying syntactic system and in respect of which judgments of acceptability are made. For instance, in the amount of excitement a person might scream: *House is on fire*; in respect of performance, the sentence is acceptable, but in respect of competence, the sentence will be ungrammatical as *house* is a singular countable noun and may not exist without a determiner.

Hymes (1971:5-7) rejects Chomsky's competence performance distinction. He criticizes Chomsky's theory of the ideal speaker- hearer for excluding social aspects of

communication. He opines that Chomsky's theory has failed to deal with the normal person as it neglects socio – cultural aspects. He (Ibid: 13-14) contends that once competence is viewed as '' the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language use, which the speaker – listener possesses'' then it is supposed that '' this involves far more than knowledge of (and ability for) grammaticality '' . It involves ''rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless'' (Ibid: 14). He (Ibid) maintains that ''if a speaker were to produce grammatical sentences without regard to the situations in which they were being used, he would certainly be considered deranged''. Thus, the study of competence entails consideration of such variables as attitude, motivation, and a number of socio- cultural factors (Ibid). In support of this view, Dittmar (1976:238) states that ''speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a state of constant interaction''. Thus, Hymes (1971:13) proposes that a linguistic theory should develop to provide a more constitutive role for socio cultural factors. And, he calls for competence that is ''fed by social experience, needs and motives and issues in action that is itself a renewed source of motives, needs, experience'' (Ibid:15). To cope with this view and in an effort to extend some of the general principles of formal grammatical analysis to the study of speech as a form of social interaction, a linguistic theory within which socio-cultural factors have an explicit and constitutive role has to be adopted. Consequently, the concept of communicative

competence as opposed to linguistic competence has been introduced. In this respect, Dittmar (1976:163) states that ''Hymes (1968a) was the first to coin the term 'communicative competence' with his demand for qualitative extension of linguistics theory by the incorporation of aspects of functional communication''. While linguistic competence refers to the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence covers his ability to select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters (Pride& Homles, 1974:205). For instance, the same person might utter any of these three sentences depending on the circumstances:

- *I should be grateful if you could make less noise.*
- *Please, be quiet.*
- *Shut up.*

Here, the utterances range from a 'high' or formal style down to a 'low' informal one. Thus, communicative competence, in Pride's term (1979:5) is a possession of the individual language user; it refers to the individual's achievements of appropriateness and effectiveness in his choice of language and associated non-verbal behaviour. In this sense, the researcher opines, as Hudson (1996:224) does, that Chomsky's (1965) concept of 'linguistic competence', one's tacit knowledge of formal structures , has developed into a broader notion of 'communicative competence'

which takes into account the relationship between language and the particular situation in which it is appropriate.

Thus, Hymes (1971:18) breaks with Chomsky's model in which '' Judgments are said to be of two kinds: of grammaticality, with respect to competence; and acceptability, with respect to performance''. He (Ibid: 18-19) contends that an adequate theory of language use requires judgments to be of four kinds rather than two:

1. Judgment of possibility: It concerns whether or not something is formally possible. It is roughly equivalent to Chomsky's notion of competence as grammaticality. For example, a communicatively competent speaker knows that the sentence *me go sleep now* transgresses these rules, while *I am going to sleep now* does not (Cook, 2003:42).

2. Judgment of feasibility: It concerns whether or not something is feasible. It is roughly included within Chomsky's notion of performance. It refers to '' a psychological concept concerned with limitation to what can be processed by the mind '' (Ibid: 43). For example, the rules of English grammar make it possible to expand a noun phrase, and make it more specific, by adding a relative clause. Thus, an utterance might be criticized not on the grounds that it is ungrammatical, but rather on the grounds that it is not very feasible as it is of little relevance to the practical applications of knowledge about language (Ibid).

3. **Judgment of appropriateness:** This concerns the relationship of language or behaviour to context. For example, it is inappropriate to call a police 'darling'. It is also inappropriate to use slang or taboo words in a formal letter. Further, not showing deference to the elderly is generally inappropriate to particular cultures (Ibid: 44).

4. **Judgment of attestedness:** It concerns whether or not something is in fact done (i.e. actually performed).It seems that this kind overlaps with feasibility.

To sum up, it can be said that the goal of communicative competence theory is '' to show the ways in which the systematically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behaviour'' (Hymes , 1971:23-24). Thus, there is more to using a language than knowing the grammar. There are four sectors in relation to such system as he (Ibid: 14) points out: 1- possibility 2- feasibility, 3- appropriateness and 4- attestedness. This general applicability of the term gives Hymes justification for referring to 'communicative competence' in contrast to Chomsky's narrow notion of 'grammatical competence'. Therefore, assessment of sentences must not be limited to grammatical and psychological factors emphasized by Chomsky but rather it must include those aspects of communicative competence; sentences should be assessed by the context, by the way in which they are affected as actions. In this respect, Cook (2003:42) states that '' there would

be a kind of social monster producing grammatical sentences unconnected to the situation in which they occur''. Likewise, Dittmar (1976:162) explains that the concept of communicative competence ''describes the ability of individuals to communicate with one another under situationally and normatively defined conditions which are linguistic, Psychological, social and pragmatic in nature''. Here are some of the main factors involved in communication that influence the competent communicator's choice of words and grammar:

1- who we are talking or writing to,

2- what we are talking or writing about,

3- what the purpose of our message is,

4- where we are,

5- what we feel about the topic,

6- the likely or actual responses from our listener or reader,

7- how we feel towards our listener or reader,

8- what sort of impression we want to give, and

9- how much time we have got (National Extension College Trust Ltd, 1994).

Yule (1996:197) states that communicative competence can be defined in terms of three components, '' as the ability to use the $L_2$ accurately, appropriately, and flexibly''. The first component is 'grammatical competence'. It is knowledge of the language code involving the accurate use of words and structures in $L_2$. The second

component is 'sociolinguistic competence' referring to the ability to interpret or produce language appropriate in different sociolinguistic contexts. It enables the learner, for instance, to know when to say *can I have some water?* Versus *Give me some water!* according to the social context. The third component is 'strategic competence' referring to " the ability to organize a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties'' (Ibid). It is composed of mastery of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that may be called upon to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence or to limiting conditions in actual communication (Canale, 1983:27). For instance, $L_2$ learners will inevitably experience moments when there is a gap between communicative intent and their ability to express that intent; some learners may just stop talking and others will try to express themselves via a communicative strategy. This model of communicative competence is put forward first by Canale and Swain in 1980 and revised by Canale in 1983. In addition to these three components, he (Ibid: 2-27) has distinguished another one in his revised model. It is 'discourse competence' referring to knowledge of rules required to combine forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken or written texts. Thus, the taxonomy of fourth sub competence may be viewed as clarification and improvement of Hymes' notion of communicative competence. To sum up, communicative competence can be thought of as covering

the overall speaking and comprehending abilities of the language user in making use of language in communicative situations in an effort to enhance effectiveness of communication.

# Section Two

## Some Basic Criteria for the Development of Learners' Communicative Competence.

The notion of communicative competence has influenced all areas of applied linguistics. The biggest influence has been upon the teaching of English as a foreign language. Since the development of communicative competence, current language teaching methodology views language as a communicative process taking as its starting point the notion of communicative competence.

This section attempts to present some basic criteria for the development of learners' communicative competence:

1- **Avoidance of excessive emphasis upon grammatical accuracy:**

Teachers should adopt an approach that allows them and their learners '' to achieve a more balanced view of what successful communication involves'' (Cook, 2003:46). Hence, there is the need for the communicative approach inspired by Hymes which ''aimed to develop learners' capacity to use the language effectively'' (Ibid).

2- **Taking into account that grammatical competence is an intrinsic part of communicative competence:**

In this regard, Celce- Murcia (1991:459) contends that by providing instruction which emphasizes both grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency, ESL/EFL teachers will

enable learners to achieve efficient and effective communication in the target language they are learning and help them become more able and successful language learners and users. Thus, it is essential for language teachers and curriculum developers to avoid misinterpreting the term 'communicative competence' as the separation of grammatical competence from communicative competence.

3-      Taking into consideration the cultural and social elements which affect the use of language:

It is not enough to be proficient in grammar and vocabulary but rather to have knowledge of how language functions and to have some specific cultural awareness in order to grasp what a speaker really intends (National Extension College Trust Ltd, 1944). For instance, a fluent English user who has never been to an English pub, might as well not realize that ''*what are you drinking*?'' is more likely an offering to buy him a drink rather than information concerning the contents of his glass (Ibid).

4-      Communication is not carried out through speech only but also through communicative features that accompany speech such as facial expressions, head nods, body postures , tone of voice , eye contact and other paralinguistic means and without these features communication would sound lifeless.

A learner of a language has to acquire paralinguistic knowledge related to such features as gestures and nods which

are neither universal nor the meanings they express are identical in different cultures. For example, it is said that in Siri Lanka to shake the head sideways means 'yes' while nodding the head down means 'no'. Another example that can be given is that sticking out the tongue is an indication of apology in parts of China , the evil eye in parts of India, a rude sign in England and it means 'no' in the Marquesans (Argyle, 1972:144). In this respect, Abercrombie (1968:31) states that ''we speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our entire bodies; conversation consists of much more than a simple interchange of spoken words''. Thus, to learn a language adequately one has to master both the linguistic and paralinguistic features of that language paying attention to the differences in paralinguistic behaviour between one's language and the target language.

5- The acquisition of communicative competence requires purposeful use of the target language on the part of the learner. Additionally, the acquisition occurs when learners participate in interaction which affords comprehensible input and output.

# Section Three

## <u>Suggested Learning Activities & Techniques</u>

Learning activities and techniques should aim at dealing appropriately with speech events in the target language, many features of which are culture specific. Learners are to be taught how to salute, how to introduce themselves to others, how to talk to a shop assistant at a department store, or a clerk at a bank or how to conduct a conversation on the telephone. Thus, teachers have to create classroom situations in which the learners are free to choose what to say drawing on linguistic as well as paralinguistic elements of the target language so as to let them develop their pragmatic skills. Furthermore, learners must be provided with linguistic environments that correspond to the authentic communicative setting in which they might find themselves, i.e. coming into contact with samples of the target language. This can be done through designing activities to engage the learner in the process of actual communication giving central importance to the purpose of the communicative activity. For purposes of constructing such exercises, one can suggest techniques that operate by providing information to some students in the class and with holding it from others. The goal of such activities is not only the learners will know about $L_2$, but also they will develop communicative competence in it (c.f. Johnson, 1981:201). One can also suggest adopting these learning activities that require purposeful use of the target language on the

part of the learner such as establishing social relations, seeking and giving information , expressing reactions, learning to do something, persuading , discouraging , entertaining others, and displaying achievements (c.f. Rivers Cited by Reiss, 1981:122-124). Another type of communicative activities can be suggested. These activities are based on authentic material related to the subjects they study. For instance, when the teacher deals with shopping activities, he/she hands out brochures from department stores, banks , etc, and working in groups, the students make their own brochures giving information about their own department store or bank (c.f. Bernaus, 1987:46). This type of output is essential for enhancing communicative competence so as to enable students not only to learn the language but also to use it. The main positive merit of such types of tasks and activities in which the learners have to interact with each other is that ''the results of such task- based learning provide overwhelming evidence of more and better $L_2$ use by learners'' (Yule, 1996:197). Despite that, there are fears that learners will acquire each other's mistakes. In addition, the researcher believes that carrying out such imaginative activities to develop the learner's competence is impeded by the sad fact that in Iraq and many other developing countries, classes are so crammed with pupils that the very thought of getting them to learn through this approach sounds , at least, unreal. The other point is that pupils

**lack motivation to communicate in the foreign language in the classroom.**

**Now, an attempt will be made to present a learning activity with all the steps it involves and with some details to be as an example.**

## The activity:

**It involves the following steps:**

**1. Let the students listen to a dialogue between an official and a manager; the official asks the manager for two hours off to see the doctor because he is ill.**

**The following is an excerpt from the dialogue:**

**Official: May I have a word with you?**

**Manager: Yes, what is it?**

**(Note: let the students listen to the dialogue twice or three times).**

**2. Let the students have free role playing in expressing the following points:**

**a. the length of leave,**

**b. the reason of leave**

**c. and the roles they would play, such as between a tutor and a student , a son and his father / mother, two friends and so on.**

**3. Then let the students listen to different people asking for a leave. While they are listening, they have to write down notes under these headings and to state how much polite they are:**

| | The reason of leave | The length of leave | The degree of politeness |
|---|---|---|---|

| John<br>Mary<br>Mr. Wood | | | |
|---|---|---|---|

**4. At last, lead the class into discussion about the speakers in the three dialogues whether they are polite, very polite, not polite or rude and why they think so and what the implications, indications and conditions of politeness are.**

## Commentary:

**Although the teaching material is unauthentic, the learners are required to work authentically, constructing their own meanings, their own expressions, using their own knowledge and contributing in the teaching material. It involves real participation which has a certain unpredictability because each participant cannot exactly predict what the other is going to say and what forms of language he will use. If answers are predictable, there would be no real communication as there would be nothing new to say. To be able to act the dialogue freely, the learner has to do one or both of the following:**

1. **Drawing on what he already knows from previous dialogues, from group conversation or from reading or any other source of pervious knowledge.**

2. **Using the teacher as a resource centre that provides him with what he wants to say.**

It is also a good communicative technique to make the listening material as a springboard for a discussion and to lead the learners to focus on the implications arising from the material rather than a mere concentration on what is heard. The learners are led to discuss the sense of politeness, its indications, implications and its conditions in their native language and make use of what they already know and link it to the target language.

At last, it can be said that the activity has made use of many of the communicative criteria. It provides the learners with one of the best opportunities that allows them to develop their own thoughts going beyond the confines of the material itself, to participate actively contributing in carrying out the activity and sharing the responsibility for their own learning. It has, also, made use of the classroom as a social environment where learners experience social forms of working in pairs and in whole class session. Furthermore, motivation is a highly significant factor in the activity. The task itself - the acting of the dialogue in pairs, the free role playing, making use of their knowledge and discussing the sense of politeness - provides the stimulus for a natural use of the target language.

## Pedagogical Recommendations:

In the light of the pervious discussion conducted through out the paper, the following pedagogical recommendations can be suggested:

1.  The researcher thinks that language courses should involve materials that teach both the linguistic behaviours as well as paralinguistic ones of the target language so as to develop student's pragmatic skills. Thus, learners are to be taught how to interpret language in its linguistic and non-linguistic context. The non linguistic context may include relationships between participants, their attitudes and emotions, their inferencing procedures, their cultural and world knowledge, their perception of the situation and their paralanguage. The linguistic context, on the other hand, includes other parts of the same text and participants' knowledge of other texts. (c.f. Johnson & Johnson, 1999:249). Consequently, learners will be taught how to deal appropriately with speech events of target language, many features of which are culture specific.

2.  Communicative language teaching based on the notion of communicative competence should aim at providing language learners with information, practice and much of the experience required to meet the communicative needs in the second or foreign language. Furthermore, as grammatical competence is an intrinsic part of communicative competence, it should also consider enhancing learners' linguistic / grammatical accuracy as an indispensable part of any second and foreign language instruction. Thus, teachers have to adopt grammar teaching approaches which attempt to integrate grammar instruction with communicative language use.

3. **Another recommendation to be made is that any contemporary teacher and student of language needs to reconsider the learning and teaching process in the light of the notion of communicative competence and the recent theoretical developments which attempt to interpret language for classroom use. Thus, the aim of language instruction must extend to what has come to be known as communicative competence and must not be limited to the teaching of traditional written and oral skills. At this point, it is worth noting that the researcher does not claim that a language user need not have an accurate knowledge of linguistic forms, but rather that the perfect knowledge of linguistic forms is not enough to make a learner a communicatively competent language user.**

4. **Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize as Hudson (1996:224) does that ''some parts of communicative competence may be due to universal pragmatic principles of human interaction, but there are certainly other parts which have to be learned''. For instance, different communities have different conventions for answering the phone call: in English you say 'Hello', in Italian you say 'Pronto' (ready), in Spanish 'Diga' (say) and so on.**

5. **Finally, students have to be encouraged to break away from their total reliance on teachers and learn to focus their learning capacities upon themselves.**

## Conclusions:

To conclude, one can say that the notion of communicative competence is worth studying as it constitutes an essential step in supplementing our awareness of the language learning process , giving a 'constitutive role' to social cultural factors. Consequently, teachers will be able to adopt more effective teaching methods and select more appropriate teaching materials the goal of which is to develop learners' communicative competence taking into account that concentration on grammatical competence only, however, will not provide the learner with the ability to interpret or produce language appropriately. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the notion of communicative competence intended by Hymes does not provide any priorities for any single component, or aspect over another. Thus, a language user is not supposed to have only an accurate knowledge of linguistic usage but rather to have a compromise of grammatical competence as well communicative competence incorporating sociolinguistic and contextual competence.

Finally, one can recognize the significance of developing learners' communicative competence. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and students of language to reconsider the learning and teaching process in the light of the notion of communicative competence.

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