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Communicative Competence and Its Dilemma in the Chinese Context

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1. Introduction

In this paper, first I would like to discuss the notion of 'communicative competence' used by different authorities, attempting to specify the ways in which it is used by different authorities. Then I will outline the development of the framework of the components of communicative competence from different perspectives: grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence and so on. Finally I will briefly analyse the dilemma of communicative competence cultivation in the Chinese context. The purpose is to evaluate the extent to which communicative competence is an appropriate goal for English language teaching in the Chinese context.

2. Communicative competence and the ways in which different authorities use it

Many authorities (Wilkins, 1979; Canale and Swain, 1980; Faerch et al, 1984) have greatly contributed to the establishment of theoretical framework of communicative competence. Hymes (1972) first used the term 'communicative competence', comparing with Chomsky's 'linguistic competence', to think about language from social perspectives in the mid-seventies. But the concept of communicative competence began to emerge and became a central focus in the early eighties (Stern, 1983: 111).

Wilkins (1979) argues that teachers should consider the communicative purpose of language teaching from the very beginning, rather than taking into account linguistic aspects of language teaching. He believes that teachers should enable students to do certain things with language, such as to express judgements, to explain, to recommend, or prohibit. In analysing the conventions of language use, he pays much more attention on the *functions* of language, such as warning, narrating because what we do with language is to express the meaning of these kinds of functions. He also acknowledges that the combination of grammar

and vocabulary will play a fairly important role in enabling us to express and convey meanings, associated with *grammatical structures*. He even puts forth a "notional approach", which defines linguistic content in notional terms, involving both functional meaning and conceptual meaning. He argues that "we can set out to activate the grammatical and lexical knowledge which we have already created by working in a systematic way through the different functions of the language". He tends to regard these as the directions that language teaching is taking in the future. In the end of the article, Wilkins stresses the importance of providing learners with a generalizable knowledge of language by laying a grammatical foundation for communicative purpose. It is no doubt that Wilkins' statements about current development in the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) supplies a point of departure to explore some issues relevant to communicative competence.

By contrast, the article by Canale and Swain (1980) represents broader research effort in this domain, measuring the feasibility and practicality of communicative competence. They illustrate the distinctions between grammatical (or grammar-based) and communicative (or communication-based) approaches quite clearly. They distinguish between competence and performance in some depth. Then they give a basic definition to the term of communicative competence, which "refers to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of rules of language use."

Hymes's theory of communicative competence involves judgements of four kinds: whether something is possible, feasible, appropriate and actually performed, which links linguistic theory to a more general theory of communication and culture:

1.   Whether (and to what degree) something is formally *possible*;

2.   Whether (and to what degree) something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available;

3.   Whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

4.   Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually *performed*, and what its doing entails.

(Hymes 1972: 281)

In comparison, Canale and Swain (1980) believe that Hymes viewed communicative competence as the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and probabilistic system of competence:

Communicative competence is thus viewed by Hymes as the interaction of grammatical (what is formally possible), psycholinguistic (what is feasible in terms of human information processing), sociocultural (what is the social meaning or value of a given utterance), and probabilitic (what actually occurs) systems of competence.

(Canale and Swain 1980: 16)

And they insist that in Hymes' model "the inclusion of probabilistic rules of occurrence" seems to play an important role in language use while almost all other models ignore this aspect.

3. Components of communicative competence

In order to get familiar with what the components of communicative competence have been argued to be, should compare the different views from different authorities.

According to Canale and Swain (ibid.), Hymes' notion of communicative competence intended to include both grammatical competence and contextual or sociolinguistic competence. They further discuss some diversity of opinions as to "(i) whether or not the notion 'communicative competence' includes that of 'grammatical competence' as one of its components and (ii) whether or not communicative competence should be distinguished from (communicative) performance" (ibid.: 19). They admit that "the sociolinguistic work of both Halliday and Hymes is important to the development of a communicative approach in that they have been concerned with the interaction of social context, grammar, and meaning (more precisely, social meaning)" (ibid.: 19).

The dissatisfaction about the former theories of communicative competence is listed by Canale and Swain (1980: 25) as follows:

First, with the exception of Savignon (1972) and Stern (1978, 1979), no communicative competence theorists have devoted any attention to communication strategies that speakers employ to handle breakdowns in communication. … Second, few of these theories deal rigorously with a range of criteria sufficiently broad for establishing the sequencing of semantic concepts, grammatical forms, and communicative functions in a communicative approach. … Finally, little serious attention has been devoted to criteria for evaluation and levels of achievement/proficiency with respect to a given theory of communicative competence.

Basing on the overall views, Canale and Swain (1980: 28) propose a theoretical framework for communicative competence, identifying three essential components, namely "grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence". Grammatical competence refers to "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology"(ibid.: 29). Sociolinguistic competence consists of "sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse". Strategic competence is made up of "verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence". From the framework, we can see that Canale and Swain add a new dimension in analysing the components of communicative competence called "strategic competence", which enriches the theoretical framework of communicative competence. Three years later, Canale (1983: 9-10) divided communicative competence into the following four aspects of knowledge and skill:

—   grammatical competence (mastery of the language code)

—   sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness of utterances with respect both to meaning and form)

—   discourse competence (mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve unity of a spoken or written text)

—   strategic competence (mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication, and to make communication more effective).

In the case of Faerch *et al*. (1984), they attempt to summarise Canale and Swain's views and develop a new framework for components of communicative competence including linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence, fluency and metacommunicative awareness by introducing three new dimensions:

One of these, the question of what impression different types of interlanguage make on native speakers, is of general relevance to communicative competence both in and out of school. A second dimension, which covers the relationship between learners' general cognitive and social development and their language proficiency, is of particularly relevance to foreign language teaching in schools, as is the final dimension, learners' metacommunicative awareness.

(Faerch *et al*. 1984: 167)

4. Dilemma of communicative competence cultivation in the Chinese context

In the Chinese context, the new syllabus distributed in 1993 placed an importance on communicative competence setting up the aims and objectives to foster learners' preliminary communicative competence. Since then a new revolution has taken place in English language teaching (ELT) in China with a new series of English textbooks for junior and senior middle school students. How to foster learners' communicative competence became an important focus in ELT. A lot of teachers and experts have explored different methods to obtain this objective. ELT in China has made a lot of achievements, however, the learners' communicative competence still remains at a low level. This phenomenon will enable us to reflect to what extent communicative competence is an appropriate goal for classroom application in Chinese context.

   In the first place, the main point is that evaluation system in China also has a considerable impact on practical teaching and learning. With the constraint of examinations, the summative evaluation cannot reach the level of language communication. Therefore, genuine communication actually can impossibly realized and implemented in test, which results in deficiency of instrumental motivation. People tend to reflect and question the usefulness and significance of communicative competence. It is always the case that the majority of educat

ional institutions will draw a conclusion that CLT can not appropriately meet the needs of ELT in China. As a result, the focus of ELT will be shifted from communicative competence to test skills. McKay (2002) has analysed this phenomenon in detail with reference to the study undertaken by Burnaby and Sun (1989) as follows:

The Chinese teachers in the study believed that whereas CLT would be appropriate for Chinese students who intended to go to English-speaking countries, an emphasis on reading and translation would best meet the needs of many English learners in China. In addition, the teachers pointed out several factors that made the implementation of CLT difficult in China. First, many students believed that this approach would not help them to pass the traditional national examinations, which tended to be discrete-point, and structurally based. In addition, many students felt that some of the activities in CLT seemed more like games than serious learning. Furthermore, the large class size and limited resources and equipment made it difficult to implement group work and use authentic materials.

(McKay, 2002: 113)

The other factors influencing English language teaching are the expectations of teachers and schools, who primarily create the social climate of education. We cannot ignore the negative effect made by them on cultivating communicative competence. McKay (ibid.: 121) argues that "the most challenge to CLT has come from teachers themselves, who feel that in many cases the approach does not meet their students' needs." And CLT "makes unreasonable demands on their knowledge of western cultures, their fluency in the language, their planning time, and their textbook and material resources". Two kinds of misconceptions are from teachers and schools. With respect to teachers, to cultivate learners' communicative competence seems to be beyond the range of knowledge that learners need acquiring to pass national entrance examination, which has already been a heavy burden to them. Taking this stance will more or less influence their classroom practice. As for schools, the criteria or principles for evaluating their educational quality are only to judge how many students have been enrolled by higher school institutions. Therefore, the study and implementation of communicative competence have to stay on the theoretical level. In classroom practice, it is impossible for CTL to actually work well.

The strong desire to get a good score in entrance examination also enables students to lose the interest and motivation in participation in communicative activities which will provide very good opportunities for the students to expose to language use. Thus, classroom practice also encounters a conflict between learners' interest and requirement of communicative competence cultivation. In addition, the components of communicative competence are concerned with complicated aspects as shown above. The ultimate formation of communicative competence will not be realized if the learners are reluctant to make contributions to it.

Furthermore, the general tendency of teaching methodology is shifting its focus, because new teaching methods are continuously emerging, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Richards, 2001), Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1983) and Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching (Nunan, 1992) and so on. The practitioners' emotions and enthusi

asm for CLT has cooled down in recent years in China. Many scholars began to show great concern with new concepts, new techniques and new approaches including TBLT.

Conclusion

Communicative competence has been viewed as a core concept in ELT, authorities in this domain are continuously deepening their understanding about its components from different perspectives, which enables us to shape a framework that is more profitable to ELT. Problems of communicative competence in the Chinese context originate from evaluation system, teachers' and schools' misconceptions and learners' interest. Besides, new ELT concepts and approaches have more and more impact on communicative competence.

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