



BEYOND GRAMMAR: NAVIGATING THE PATH OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN SLA

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Abstract

The article explores the concept of communicative competence in the context of SLA and its implications for L2 teaching and learning. Introduction of the construct of communicative competence marked a departure from the then-current notions established by Chomskyan schools of thought. Chomsky asserted that linguistic competence is the tacit understanding that exists between native speakers of a language and that linguistic performance, which is the realization of underlying competence, is different from linguistic competence which many not fully be reflected in performance. Dell Hymes dismissed Chomsky's notions and maintains that communicative competence is to be understood in terms of an overlapping matrix of four criteria: whether an utterance is grammatically possible, feasible in terms of use, contextually appropriate, and it can be performed by the speaker. Halliday asserted that humans realize their experiences of the physical and metaphysical world through the metafunctions of language. Canale and Swain maintain that communicative is the outcome of the interface between grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competencies. The article attempts to shed light on the implications for L2 instruction and course as well.

Keywords: SLA, competence, performance, surface- structure, deep- structure communicative competence, grammatical competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, psycholinguistic, integrative motivation, lateralization, syntactocentric.

Introduction

The notion of communicative competence has gained wide currency over the decades in the linguistic circles of SLA, ever since it was introduced in the early 1970s. Its theoretical underpinnings can be traced back to the seminal works of Dell Hymes (1972) and Michael Halliday (1970). Dell Hymes coined the phrase "communicative competence," which underscored that meaningful communication is the outcome of the interface between multiple competencies in the socio-cultural context of the target language, signaling a sharp departure from the then-current notions of language learning and use established by Chomsky. Similarly, CEFR defines communicative language competence "as comprising several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic" (CEFR., P-13). The term SLA has been used in this write up without considering the subtle nuances and conventions that differentiate between ESL and EFL practices. English language has pervaded almost every sphere of human interaction, and its significance as a global language is ever-increasing, yet our approach to L2 instruction still pivots around the metalinguistic explorations intended to develop accuracy at the expense of getting one's meaning across. However, current

theories and practices call for a paradigm shift that focuses on communicative competence in the target language.

Chomsky, through his seminal works (1957, 1965), postulated that linguistic competence is the inherent knowledge that exists between “an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community.” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3) and that linguistic competence is distinct from linguistic performance, which is the actual use of language in the real world. Grammatical competence, which consists of “the syntactic, phonological, and semantic components” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 16), and pragmatic competence form linguistic competence. The syntactic component consists of a base structure or deep-structure component and a transformational or surface-structure component. The base structure strings together the sentence constituents, which are transmuted by the surface structure. Language production is realized when the semantic component interfaces with the base structure and the phonetic component with the surface structure. Similarly, morphological competence, which is a speaker’s innate knowledge of the formation of words and their constituent parts, and phonological competence, which is a speaker’s ability to recognize and produce the meaning making units of sounds in their language, “relates a structure generated by the syntactic component to a phonetically represented signal” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 16). Pragmatic competence relates to the speaker’s schemata, or background knowledge and personal beliefs, which enable a person to communicate with the required level of awareness of the socio-cultural and situational contexts, and it also enables the individual to understand social implicatures, which are not explicitly stated in communication but are to be inferred from the attendant contexts, and the ability to understand and employ deictic expressions. Pragmatic competence also provides discourse competence, which is required to engage in coherent and cohesive discourse in oral and written forms (Chomsky, 1965). Thus, Chomsky’s notion of grammar is “a description of the ideal speaker-hearer’s intrinsic competence” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4) to understand and engage each other in meaningful interaction, except for the barriers to communication. The barriers to communication are those that exist externally, such as noise, etc., or they can be directly related to the interlocutors, such as lack of attention, tiredness, or any kind of distraction. Noticeably, slips in utterances do not indicate the innate competence of the speaker; rather, they could be the result of a lack of attention or just a mistake. Chomsky’s notions on language underscored that native speakers of a language possess a similar level of linguistic competence, irrespective of whether one is a seasoned orator while the other is not, because they differ only at the level of performance and not at the level of competence. Chomsky’s insights provided a deeper understanding of the complexities of human communication and the role of underlying competence in facilitating communication.

Hymes (1972) dismisses Chomsky’s notions as a “revitalization” of the “Saussurian concepts of langue and parole” (Hymes, 1971, p. 273) since they do not consider language in its entirety as it sidelines the social contexts of language use. While Chomsky maintains that grammaticality is primary to linguistic competence and acceptability is fundamental to linguistic performance, Hymes considers grammaticality as one of the many aspects of linguistic competence, and, hence, to understand the “underlying competence,” the sociocultural milieu of language use must be considered. Further, Hymes (1972) suggests that knowledge of the rules of grammar would be of no significance unless the language user does not know the rules of language, which relate to aspects of sociolinguistic competence. According to Hymes, linguistic competence is “that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts” (cited in Brown, 2007, p. 219). Hymes proposes a notion of communicative competence based on an overlapping matrix of four criteria: whether an utterance is grammatically possible, whether it is feasible in terms of use, whether it is contextually appropriate, and whether it can be performed by the speaker as it really demands. (Hymes, D. 1971). What Hymes means when he says whether a particular utterance is grammatically possible is that a certain structure may be grammatically correct, and certain other structures can be grammatically incorrect in each language. Whether and to what degree means that linguistic possibilities exist on the spectrum and cannot be judged as standalone items in the sense that some utterances can be well within the accepted norms of a given language while some other utterances in the same language may be context-dependent and their level of acceptability may vary. Hymes is of the opinion that the concept of linguistic competence transcends the limits of formal possibility because an utterance that is grammatically sound can be inappropriate in a certain sociocultural context. Hymes incorporated the notion of ability into the domain of communicative competence, asserting that “individuals differ with regard to their ability to use knowledge” (Hymes 1972,

p. 283), implying that knowledge about language forms and knowledge of language are also decisive factors of communicative competence.

Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory underscores the dynamic communicative aspect of language. According to Halliday, language is a social semiotic system with which humans make meaning in sociocultural contexts. He pointed out that 'language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted' (Halliday, 1978, p. 9). According to Halliday, language is a cultural code that teaches humans how to integrate themselves well into society. Halliday asserts that humans realize their experiences and the need for self-expression through the three metafunctions of language. We realize and communicate our knowledge and experience of the physical and metaphysical worlds through the experiential component of the ideational metafunction, while we employ the logical component to rationalize our experiences of the world. The second metafunction lies in the realm of interpersonal communication and social relationships. The third metafunction is textual, with which speakers and writers construct texts that are coherent, cohesive, and relevant to the context (Halliday, 2005). It is the textual metafunction that enables us to differentiate between a coherent set of clauses or sentences and a haphazard set of clauses.

Canale and Swain (2002) postulate that communicative competence subsumes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence, and that communicative competence differs from communicative performance, "which is the realization of these competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances" (Canale and Swain 2002, p. 6). Therefore, the primary goal of L2 language teaching and learning must be "the integration of these types of knowledge for the learner...throughout a second language program" (Canale and Swain, 2002, p. 27). They reject the notion of 'ability for use' as a component of language competence as suggested by Hymes, while they maintain that communicative performance includes "factors such as volition, motivation, and pathology that may influence the range of choices of action one has in each domain" (Canale and Swain 2002, p. 8), whereas Hymes attribute psycholinguistic factors such as memory, perceptual strategies, etc. to communicative competence.

Grammatical competence

Grammatical competence is the "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar, semantics, and phonology" (Canale and Swain, 2002, p. 29), and it is "mastering the linguistic code of a language" (Brown, 2007, p. 219). In language acquisition, particularly in L2 acquisition, the learner's ability to produce accurate language is crucial, lest communication fail to produce its intended effects. However, grammatical competence, according to Krashen, is a byproduct of conscious learning, which functions as a monitor or editor of our utterances (Krashen 2009). Conscious learning equips the learner with rules of syntax and grammar, which can be made use of only when three conditions of time, focus on form, and knowledge of the rules are met. Second language performers require time to consciously apply the rules to language and process their utterances accordingly. Moreover, overuse of conscious rules may result in hesitant and slow speech and impede communication. The second prerequisite for the use of a monitor in language performance is that the subject should "be focused on the form or thinking about correctness" (Dulay and Burt 1978) of their utterances, which is not often possible in communication. The third prerequisite for the working of the monitor is that the language performer must know the rules to be applied. However, for rules to be applied in a communicative context, the other two preconditions of time and focus on form must be met. This is substantiated by tests where the subjects are put in "monitor-free contexts where they are focused on communication and not on form" (Krashen 2009, p. 17). In communicative contexts where the preconditions do not meet, their utterances reflect "the operation of the acquired system alone, without the intrusion of the conscious grammar" (Krashen 2009, p. 17), and where the conditions are met, the results reflect "the contribution of the conscious grammar (Krashen 2009, p. 17). According to Bachman, grammatical competence stems from the language user's organizational competence in L2, which in turn encompasses several relatively independent competencies such as knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology/graphology (Bachman, 1995).

Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence consists of the language user's knowledge of "sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse" (Canale and Swain, 2002, p. 30). It pertains to the language user's ability to use language appropriate for the social milieu, incorporating value systems and topics appropriate for the situation. On the other hand, it also includes a speaker's ability to not engage in a discourse on a topic that does not fit well in the context and to desist from the use of language in terms of lexis, tone, register, etc. that is not concordant with the context and with the relationship that exists between the speaker and the audience. and Bachman defines sociolinguistic competence as "the sensitivity to or control of the conventions of language use." (Bachman 1995, p. 94). Bachman identifies four distinct abilities as fundamental to sociolinguistic competence as the sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety, "characterized by different convention, and the appropriateness of their use will vary, depending on the features of language use context", sensitivity to differences in register depending on the "field of discourse, "style of discourse" and "mode of discourse"(Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens, 1964 pp-09-94, cited in Bachman, 1995, p-95), sensitivity to naturalness which enables a language user "to formulate or interpret an utterance which is not only linguistically accurate"(Bachman 1995, p-97), but also reflect natural or similar to that of the native speakers of that language. It is the language user's ability to comprehend and appropriately employ language in such a way that it sounds natural in each sociocultural context and involves a native-like competence in understanding linguistic nuances like idioms, colloquialisms, dialects, and register. In the absence of cultural sensitivity, a person may sound awkward and even offensive in his use of language, whom Benett terms "a fluent fool" who speaks a foreign language well but doesn't understand the social or philosophical content of that language. Such persons tend to "overestimate" their linguistic ability "but fail to comprehend the subtle nuances of the language" and, hence, "may develop negative opinions of the native speakers whose language they understand but whose basic beliefs and values continue to elude them." (Benett, M.J. 1993, P-16). Knowledge of and the ability to interpret figures of speech and cultural references also have a place in sociolinguistic competence. Lexical knowledge of a language would help in decoding many of these, as they are contained in the lexis of languages, yet culture-specific references and figures of speech with their extended meanings may elude the understanding of people who do not have the competence to interpret their significance in each context. Bachman includes the ability to interpret figures of speech in sociolinguistic competence because "the conventions governing the use of figurative language, as well as the specific meanings and images that are evoked, are deeply rooted in the culture of a given society or speech community" (Bachman, 1995, p. 98).

Strategic competence

Strategic competence consists of the strategies that language users employ to keep the discourse going. Strategic competence relates to the speaker's ability to make use of "the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies... to compensate for breakdowns in communication..." (Canale and Swain, 2002, p. 30). Strategic competence involves the metacognitive strategies of goal setting, apprising, and planning (Bachman and Plamer 2010). 'Goal setting' involves the user's decision on how to approach the task at hand, while 'apprising' relates to considerations of the feasibility of accomplishing the task. The third aspect of sociolinguistic competence, namely, 'planning', is related to how a language user makes use of the linguistic expertise at their disposal to accomplish a task. Though the notion of strategic competence has been defined differently, all these definitions converge substantially into the same sphere, and it applies to both L1 and L2 communication since barriers to communication can occur in both. Moreover, learners sometimes transfer their L1 strategic competence to L2 communication in the context of SLA. Therefore, it is important that L2 learners be trained in strategic competence to keep communication going, drawing on whatever cognitive and metacognitive strategies are at their disposal. The construct of strategic competence bears considerable significance for L2 learners, as they need to know how to manage breakdowns in communication, especially in oral assessments.

Discourse competence.

Discourse competence is a speaker's or writer's ability "to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances" (Brown, 2007, p. 219), which is inherently part of grammatical competence. Similarly, Bachman asserts that linguistic competence involves organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence comprises grammatical competence and textual competence. Grammatical competence encompasses the knowledge of vocabulary,

morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology (Bachman, 1995). These are reflected in our use of language, as in the lexical items and their inflections and structures that we choose to express our ideas both in the spoken as well as in the written forms, while textual competence refers to our knowledge of how to string together two or more sentences in succession both in oral production and in written form in various contexts of realization of the language in accordance with the norms of cohesion and rhetorical organization. Textual cohesion refers to the way in which components of a text—words, sentences, and paragraphs—are strung together, “marking the semantic relationships such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion” (Halliday and Hassan, 1976, cited in Bachman, 1995, p. 88), coupled with the norms of putting together “old and new information,” which results in coherent spoken or written realization of the language, whereas rhetorical organization refers to the ways in which a text or speech is structured to effectively convey a message and persuade or inform the audience. The organization of content is crucial in rhetoric, as it impacts how easily the audience can follow and be convinced or informed by the argument or narrative presented. Rhetorical organization includes “common methods of development such as narration, description, comparison, classification, and process analysis” (McCrimman 1984, cited in Bachman 1995, p. 88). Textual competence relates to the spoken language too, as seen in discourse analysis. Pragmatic competence, according to Bachman, is “the relationships between... the language users and the context of communication” (Bachman 1995, p. 89). In other words, it relates to the utterances, both spoken and written, produced by speakers and writers and the intended effects of such utterances.

Moreover, a syntactocentric approach to language teaching and learning in L2 contexts does not sufficiently equip learners with the semantic and pragmatic competence expected of them. To elucidate the point, consider the following sentences:

1. It is too noisy here.
2. It is too leaky here.

If viewed syntactocentrically, both sentences have the same structure, but they considerably differ in their meaning. In the first sentence, ‘it’ is used as a dummy subject because sentences in the English language must have a grammatical subject, whereas in the second sentence, ‘it’ denotes a referent or a denotatum that exists in the physical world (in this case, the speaker should be referring to a particular part of an object), which could be anything such as a pipe that leaks. Since the denotatum is implied in this instance, this aspect of language use demands pragmatic competence or knowledge of the contextual use of language. Similarly, another aspect of language use is related to implicature, where the language user says one thing but implies some other thing, which falls outside the purview of the syntactocentric approach to linguistic competence. To elucidate this aspect in another vein, consider the first sentence again:

3. It is too noisy here.

This sentence can be considered a matter-of-fact statement about a situation. However, it can also be construed as a suggestion to move to some other place or even as an instance of admonition for those who cause the noise. To understand the connotative meaning of the utterance, lexical and grammatical knowledge of its constituents alone will not suffice; rather, the listener or the interlocutor should possess an understanding of the prosodic and paralinguistic features of the language used, which calls for knowledge of the context of the utterance or pragmatic competence.

Implications for L2 instruction

In contrast to syntactocentric pedagogic approaches, courses that provide L2 learners with basic communicative competence to get one's meaning across without placing undue emphasis on grammatical or sociolinguistic accuracy would be more feasible. Lenneberg (1967) and Piaget (1954) have maintained that similarities do exist in children's first language acquisition and second language acquisition in the sense that children focus more on getting understood by their interlocutor without being deterred by considerations of the grammatical accuracy of their utterances. Hence, L2 learning, and acquisition can proceed in the same fashion. However, adults and adolescents process language quite differently from the way children do, due to the lateralization of the brain (Canale and Swain 2002). Hence, L2 instruction in adolescent and adult contexts must take into consideration the grammatical inaccuracies that L2 learners are prone to commit and emphasize receptive skills during the early stages of learning. The question of accuracy cannot be dismissed

altogether where L2 learning is intended for academic purposes, especially in academic writing. The notion of communicative competence is relevant to course design as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary objective of language teaching and learning is to get one's meaning across effectively and appropriately in the milieu in which it is used, and the goal of language teaching must be to equip learners with the competence "to meet their communicative needs in the second language" (Canale and Swain, 2002). Moreover, L2 learners should be trained to rely on the strategies of their acquired competence in L1 to get their meaning across successfully, especially in the early stages of second language learning (Canale and Swain, 2002). Since English has attained the status of a global language, criteria for communicative competence in SLA need to be directed towards intelligible and effective communication across all cultural milieus rather than striving to benchmark against the stereotypes of native or native-like competence. We exist in a milieu of plurilingualism where our "experience of language in its cultural context expands,... (and) builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experiences of language contribute and in which languages interrelate and interact" (CEFR p. 4). Learners who are generally demotivated due to the cumbersome grammatically organized syllabus and teaching approach are likely to be more motivated by the communicative approach since it demands active involvement of the learners in SLA contexts. Further, learning tasks and activities should focus on learners' communication needs. Hence, what is required is a synthetic approach that sets aside all linguistic 'pride and prejudices' but integrates all aspects of communicative competence without placing undue importance on any component.

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