From communicative competence to communicative language teaching

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Abstract: This paper tried to demonstrate the developmental history of the concept “communicative competence” from three representative models, i.e. Hymes, Canale and Swain, and Bachman in order to find out the interrelationship between communicative competence and actual communication. This discussion highlights three components—organizational competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence in Bachman’s. Only when we have knowledge of language and the capacity to execute the competence, could we apply the communicative pedagogical applications properly into the Communicate Language Teaching (CLT) to achieve these competences.

Key words: communication; communicative competence; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); pedagogical applications

1. Introduction

As one of the most popular words in the 20th century, “communication” has great influence in the language teaching world. That is not only because of its high frequency appearance in the research world, but because of its essential meaning that represents the gradual globalization in the past century. Since Del Hymes, a linguistic anthropologist, proposed the concept of “communicative competence”, Chomsky’s scope of linguistic theory confronted an attack of breaking Chomskyian’s idealism. For Chomsky, he focuses his attention on the rules of the language for a generative grammar. However, for Hymes, his concern is not only on grammatical possibilities in a language, but on feasibility and appropriateness as well (Spolsky, 1989, p. 138; Grenfell & Harris, 1999, p. 16).

Once the communicative competence embarks on the academic and pedagogic world, many linguists enrich the contents and features of communicative competence. After Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) are the representatives who have developed and extended the notion of communicative competence, which attempts to include all these dimensions: the grammatical, the social and the psychological.

However, this is not just some developments in linguistic theory, but an impetus to an establishing concept for language learning and teaching. The introducing of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provides an approach to use language for communicative purposes, which could finally help the learners to attain the communicative competence. But what and how do the teachers teach in the CLT classroom? These pedagogical applications are the main concerns here. Linking linguistic theory with pedagogical practice is the underlying notion in the following discussion.

2. Cradle of the Theory

The components of this part mainly concern the origin of the communicative theory, the nature of

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communication. What’s more, the author would present the interrelationship between communicative competence and actual communication.

2.1 The nature of communication

Any social humans have more or less communicative needs and from time to time want to satisfy the needs, thus, the process of exchanging and negotiating the information by using verbal and non-verbal symbols begins. Undoubtedly, the purposes of talking to each other might be totally different, but they all attempt to achieve a comprehensible result and to meet their needs to the end. Harmer (1991, pp. 46-47) lists some good reasons that either speakers and writers or listeners and readers want to engage in the communication:

For speakers and writers, they
(a) want to say something instead of keeping silent;
(b) have some communicative purpose to gain some effects;
(c) select appropriate language from their infinite language store.

For listeners and readers, they
(a1) have desire to listen to “something”;
(b1) are interested in the ideas that speakers/writers are conveying, which might attain some effects that speakers/writers are expecting;
(c1) process a variety of language to understand what speakers/writers convey.

In the naturally processed communication, information could consist of something conceptual, something social, something cultural, something affective, or even something psychological (Canale, 1983, p. 4). What’s more, not all the people engaged in the communication have similar knowledge background, experience, personalities or metacognition, etc. Therefore, authentic communication could be unpredictable, and be filled with more or less information gaps. Participants need continuous negotiation and judgment to achieve the final understanding. When two people in communication using the same modalities are finely tuned to each other, they are said to involve into the communication successfully regardless of the content of their conversation (Byers, P. & Byers, H., 1972, p. 27). Nevertheless, there are fewer opportunities to have negotiation and repairing between writers and readers since their positions are not so equal in the silent communication. Thus, two persons could have successful communication orally, but be failed in written communication.

2.2 Interrelationship between communicative competence and actual communication

Byers, P. and Byers, H. (1972, p. 7) point out that “the basic processes of human communication through all verbal and nonverbal modalities must be learned with an appropriate competence before any subject matter can be placed in an appropriate human context”. That is to say, to achieve successful and effective communication and to have the ability to use cultural patterns or codes appropriately is the fundamental element to participate in social life, which is the issue we concerned here, communicative competence. Moreover, Andersen (1990, p. 5) defines competence in speaking as an ability to convey what is intended by using appropriate speech in a specific circumstance. Thus, it is obvious to know that there are at least two aspects that communicative competence centers on: knowledge and ability.

3. Three Models of Communicative Competence

The essential component in this part is to trace back three representative models of communicative competence.
3.1 Hymes’ model of communicative competence

In order to understand Hymes’ model of communicative competence, recalling Chomsky’s use of the term “competence” could help us to find out the points that Hymes reacts back. In Chomsky’s theory, his primary concerns were the “ideal speaker-listener, the homogeneous speech community, and perfect language knowledge” (Grenfell & Harris, 1999, p. 16), which is idealized and uniform within a group. Furthermore, his defining of competence was limited to the knowledge of grammar, and performance was categorized into the other kind of knowledge of when, where, how and with whom, which was unsatisfactory (Hornberger, 1989, p. 216) since he simply produces the grammatical sentences with no regard for their appropriateness (Paulston, 1990, p. 288).

In the publication of Gumperz and Hymes’ “The Ethnography of Communication” in 1964, Hymes had already proposed that communicative competence should include the social meaning. It is the person that becomes the highlight of communicative competence. Hymes included both rules of grammar and rules of use into it, which he generalized into four questions as the framework of communicative competence, as follows:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible.
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible.
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate.
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is done.

(Hymes, 1972, p. 284)

These four sectors consider the individual’s linguistic system, the psycholinguistic capacity of the individual, the nature of the communication, and possibility, feasibility, and appropriateness respectively. Hymes provides a good starting point for the development of communicative competence and gradually it becomes the aim of language learning and teaching.

3.2 Canale and Swain’s model of communicative competence

In Canale and Swain’s (1980, p. 27) version of communicative competence, it composes minimally of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and communication strategies (strategies competence). Later on, Canale (1983, p. 6) added another one, discourse competence. Here, according to Hornberger’s (1989, p. 227) idea, Canale and Swain’s framework includes socio-cultural rules of use in the sociolinguistic component to highlight the importance of context, but they seem to overemphasize Hymes’ appropriateness sector. Moreover, they limit the conception of appropriateness into the context, but somehow ignore the formulation the form (grammatical accuracy) in order to achieve the directive function (communicative function).

Nevertheless, interest in the acquisition of sociolinguistic skills is a counterpart of the focus on the pedagogical application in communicative language teaching. Canale and Swain (1980, p. 27) have claimed that a communicative approach in language teaching must integrate the types of knowledge mentioned above to facilitate the learners. They propose some guiding principle for the communicative approach, in which more or less correspond to the ten principles offered by the main British national agency on language teaching and research, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILTR) (Grenfell & Harris, 1999, p. 20). These aspects are authenticity, practice vs. real language, personalization and legitimacy. It is not difficult to notice that Canale and Swain’s version of communicative competence relates more with the communicative approach application in language teaching, which is a route from theoretical cognition to practical testing.

3.3 Bachman’s model of communicative competence

Bachman’s model (1990) is a more current attempt to take forward the subdivision of communicative competence provided by Canale and Swain. He proposes the framework of Communicative Language Ability
(CLA) should include language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms (Bachman, 1990, p. 84). His interest is placed on the influence of strategic competence on language test performance and its measurement. And we could generalize his idea, that is, in order to achieve a communicative goal, language competence is the implement which utilized in the channel and mode offered by psychophysiological mechanisms. The strategic competence determines the most effective means.

Three versions of communicative competence mentioned above clearly indicate three stages of development, which are the initiation, the complementing, and the application. This development was spurred by the global spread of English, which also strengthened people's communicative needs. When Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) appeared in 1970s, how the goal of communicative competence is being met in teaching contexts became the focus. But we cannot help but wonder what communicative competence looks like and how it is applied in language teaching to be achieved by second language learners.

4. Theoretical Framework and Pedagogical Achievement

The discussion about the theoretical framework of communicative competence is mainly based on the recent version from Bachman (1990). Three components are the focuses: organizational competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence. Only when we have knowledge of language and the capacity to execute the competence, could we use communicative language ability properly in a certain context. Furthermore, some pedagogical applications are suggested to achieve these competences.

4.1 Organizational competence

Organizational competence consists of two types of abilities: grammatical and contextual. As Bachman (1990, pp. 87-88) defines, grammatical competence comprises the competencies involved in language usage, while textual competence includes the knowledge of joining utterances together to form a unit of language by applying the rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization. All these could be generalized as linguistic competence, which is the basic notion that belongs to one of the sources for CLT. Even in the early development of communicative competence, for Hymes, linguistics is about language which is a resource rather than an abstract cognitive configuration existed as a mental structure (Widdowson, 1989, p. 129). Therefore, mastery of the language code (verbal and non-verbal) is the main issue to develop organizational competence.

As both processes and goals in classroom learning, CLT puts the focus on the learner (Savignon, 2003, p. 56). In order to satisfy learners' communicative needs, developing organizational competence in both speaking and writing is the necessity. However, from two aspects, the knowledge of the language and the development of the language itself, CLT are divided into two versions: “using English to learn it” and “learn to use English” (Howatt, 1984, p. 279; Holliday, 1994, quoted by RAO, 2002, p. 87). But no matter what kind of the version we would like to adopt, ten principles (Howatt, 1984, p. 279; Holliday, 1994, quoted by RAO, 2002, p. 20) that offered by the CILT should be the guidance.

To achieve organizational competence, CLT should base on the principle of the intention to mean, which implies that language itself should fulfil a meaning or purpose rather than simply practicing a structural model. Thus, some of the classroom activities, such as reporting, persuading, studying literacy and other cognitively demanding texts, discussing, debating, reaching a consensus, and relaying instructions etc. (Johnstone, 1989; Harmer, 1991), could be good choices to practice organizational ability. However, from Canale’s (1983, p. 15) viewpoint, knowledge-oriented activities could not directly relevant for second language pedagogy without
integrating performance skills. Therefore, in the next part pragmatic competence could provide a clearer and more complete picture of communicative competence.

### 4.2 Pragmatic competence

In pragmatic competence, it concerns the relationships between signs and referents on the one hand, and the language users and the context of communication on the other. It includes the knowledge of the pragmatic conventions to perform acceptable language functions as well as the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions to perform language functions appropriately in a given context (Bachman, 1990, pp. 89-90). Like what Stalker (1989, p. 184) has generalized, pragmatics is a set of rules that enable us to match the functions with linguistic structures in the certain contexts in which we are operating.

In communication, the general intention of the speaker is clear, but without the competence to interpret the illocutionary force in a specific way, the listener could have various interpreting meanings. And sociolinguistic competence could enable us to perform functions in an appropriate way. The principles of information gap and unpredictability are the basis in the CLT classroom to practice pragmatic ability. Moreover, being authentic and with legitimacy of tasks could enhance the motivation of the students and prepare them to cope with real-life events.

In order to provide the chances for the learners to perform activities and tasks in the foreign language, Harmer (1991, pp. 126-129) recommends some communicative games which are based on the principle of the information gap, including finding the differences (or similarities), describe and arrange, story reconstruction or poem reconstruction (in Appendix B). Nevertheless, in the communicative teaching, performance is not restricted to speaking and writing skills, but extends to interpretation and comprehension as other productive skills (Edelhoff, 1981, p. 51). The simulation technique concerns either what the participants say and do, or what they think.

Simulation was introduced into CLT classrooms to emphasize cohesive and functional language in use so that a functional purpose could be fulfilled. It creates motivation among the participant to break up the silences in class and take up their own responsibilities to integrate the experiences outside the classroom with their knowledge inside the class. Jones (1982, p. 14) points out that the simulations are related more with ‘the realism of function and the realism of the essential aspects of a situation’. After a simulation experience, some follow-up activities such as project work, role-play exercises, games, informal drama etc. could be proposed (Jones, 1982, p. 62). In short, the simulation applied in teaching could be a useful technique to the pragmatic theory. It provides a model for how the hearer decides what the speakers is talking about and recognizes either the intended direct and indirect illocutionary force(s) (Fraser, 1983, p. 56).

To sum up, language competence consists of two types of competence, organizational and pragmatic. Having the competence means the learners are capable of applying the knowledge of grammatical rules and the cultural patterns or codes to a particular context to achieve particular communicative goals appropriately, effectively and successfully. When teachers use various communicative teaching materials in the CLT classrooms, they are actually teaching students to participate in the communication of their human world and how to learn the second/foreign language.

### 4.3 Strategic competence

Strategic competence is regarded as an important part of all communicative language use by Bachman (1990, p. 100). And Farch and Kasper (1983, p. 31) also argue that communication strategies represent “a highly significant aspect of IL communication” and should “be incorporated into foreign language teaching objectives as
an integral part of communication competence”. Bachman includes three components in strategic competence: assessment, planning, and execution. These types of competence strategic competence could be utilized to compensate for the deficiencies in other competencies. Therefore, strategic competence is considered as a general ability for the individual to make the most effective use of available abilities to carry out verbal or non-verbal tasks (Bachman, 1990, p. 106).

Studies (Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989; Kellerman et al., 1990) show that when a L2 speaker wants to solve his/her lexical problem and maintain his/her communicative intent, two main referential strategies are adopted. They are conceptual and linguistic. They use a conceptual strategy to possess the referents known to relate to perceptual features or other properties. When they adopt a linguistic strategy, they will relate the referent to a real-world entity with which they are familiar to communicate about unconventional abstract shapes (Bongaerts & Poulisse 1989, p. 257). Thus, in CLT classroom teachers need to teach students to be adept at making full use of what s/he knows to perform a function using language willingly and flexibly.

Bachman (1990, p. 105) suggests some practices in test tasks. For instance, doing reading comprehension, the test taker should learn to recognize the information outside the discourse to answer questions requiring inference. In oral tests, when the test taker is required to distinguish two similar pictures as quickly as possible, s/he needs to adopt the strategy of ignoring the propositional content and communicating the nonverbal visual code to present the distinct features. What’s more, an examinee would adopt different strategies to meet the different criteria in the test scoring. From the examples above, it is easy to find out strategic competence is not a branch of communicative competence, but rather a wise ability to modify the communicative goal while making up for the limited L2 competence.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, the author has tried to demonstrate a developmental procedure and the framework of communicative competence by introducing three versions of it, Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990). Hymes was the first to use the term “communicative competence” to contrast with Chomsky’s ideal competence. In Canale and Swain’s framework, it includes sociocultural rules of use in the sociolinguistic component to highlight the importance of context. And Bachman’s model deepens and extends the subdivisions of communicative competence. The competence as a concept solves the problem of inadequacy of linguistic competence, which has great influences on recent developments in language teaching.

Thus, in this essay, three aspects of communicative competence and their teaching and testing application are explored respectively in accordance with Bachman’s recent version. They are organizational, pragmatic and strategic competence. Organizational competence concerns about grammatical and contextual abilities, which is the knowledge aspect of communicative competence. Pragmatic competence is a system of rules that enable us to match the functions with linguistic structures in the certain contexts, which decides the aspect of ability. And strategic competence could be regarded as a technique or a tool to make the most effective use of available abilities to carry out verbal or non-verbal tasks.

However, communicative competence suffers from a problem. Its shapelessness makes it difficult to be defined and limited for both research and teaching. CLT has been a usual practice in language teaching but some of the possible problems we could not ignore. For example, we need to consider the size of the class, the fair opportunities to communicate in the class, the proper percentage of error-correction, the specific cultural context
and the availability of authentic materials, etc. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, it is hard to predict how well the theoretical framework will bear the developmental examining. But the communicative competence could always be the worthwhile aim of language researching and teaching.

References:

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