

## Communicative Competence in English as a Foreign Language: Its Meaning and the Pedagogical Considerations for its Development

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the term communicative competence in a foreign language. It goes through the various definitions and some models of the communicative competence especially those most common models of Hymes 1972 and Canale and Swain 1980 and Alcon 2000. It shows how the term 'communicative competence' has come into existence during the 1970s and how it has become a major aim for teaching and learning of English as a foreign or second language in many countries. The study recommends some activities, based on researcher's personal experience in the field of teaching English as a foreign language and his reading of some previous studies in this field, which may help in developing the communicative competence of English as foreign language learners in Yemen particularly and the whole world generally. These suggested activities are usually communication-based activities that help in making classroom situation more interactive and provide as much opportunities for exposure to English as possible.

**Keywords-** *Communication, EFL, Pedagogical Considerations, Linguistic Competence, CLT*

## 1. Introduction

The field of second and foreign language teaching and learning has been an issue of debate for a long time. Various theories and methods of language learning have been introduced. Grammar translation method occupied the field of foreign and second language teaching for many decades and is still of use today. The field has also been dominated by the behaviorist theory and the idea that language is nothing but a social behavior that can be learned as any other behavior through the process of habit formation; and many language drills have been designed for this purpose. Learners may share the same aim of learning a language which is 'being able to use it effectively'; but which ability is required for that? and how to achieve it? have been questions for both linguists and methodologists!!

With the later trends in language teaching approaches and methodology and the rise of CLT in 1970s, communicative competence has become the main aim for second and foreign language learning. Such competence should be reflected in language syllabi and teachers' training, teaching and learning methodologies...etc. Many courses have been changed to employ these new trends in teaching to fulfill the learners' needs in learning a language. In the context of Yemen, the course '*Crescent English Course for Yemen*' introduced in 1990s has been designed to achieve students' communicative competence in English.

Communicative competence means having 'a competence to communicate'. This competence can be oral, written or even nonverbal. It is an inclusive term that refers to possessing the knowledge of the language as well as the skill to use the language in real life situations for fulfilling communicative needs. Language, according to many researchers, is a means of communication, and it comprises four main skills; vis, listening, speaking, reading and writing. To acquire these language skills, one needs not only to learn grammatical rules but to practice such skills till he gets used to all of them. Whenever s/he acquires the skills of the language and manages to use them effectively and appropriately according to the context in which s/he is involved, we can say that s/he achieves the required level of the communicative competence.

In the following sections, this paper will shed some light on the theoretical background of communicative competence in English. It will try to show what do we mean by communicative competence? What are its main components? And how can we promote it in the context of English as a foreign language?

## 2. Defining Communicative Competence

To define the notion 'communicative competence' we can delve into the two words that constitute it, of which the word 'competence' is the headword. Competence can be described as the knowledge, ability or capability while the word 'communicative' has the meaning of exchange or interaction. So we can say that communicative competence is nothing but a 'competence to communicate' that is, having the ability that allows the person to communicate in order to fulfill

communicative needs.

The term 'communicative competence' was first used by Dell Hymes in 1966 in his lecture delivered in a conference on '*Developing the Language of the Disadvantaged Children*', then it was published as a paper entitled '*On Communicative Competence*' in 1972 and republished in 2001. Hymes has introduced his notion 'communicative competence' in contrast to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. For Chomsky (1965), competence is "the ideal speaker-listener knowledge of his language"(p:3). He argued that the focus of the linguistic theory is "to characterize the abstract abilities of the speaker listener which enable him to produce grammatically correct sentences" (p: 3). Hymes (1972) points out that communicative competence doesn't only represent the grammatical competence but also the sociolinguistic competence. He has stated that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes, 2001, 60) and defined communicative competence as "the tacit knowledge" of the language and "the ability to use it for the communication" (p: 16).

From the discussion above, we come to a conclusion that the term competence as used by Chomsky equals the grammatical or linguistic competence in Hymes' model which represents only one part of the communicative competence.

Savignon (1972) defined communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" (p: 8). This means that, to her, communicative competence is close to Hymes' view (1972). She considers communicative competence as an ability for functioning in communicative settings and this is something totally different from the linguistic competence by Chomsky (1965) as no one can function in real life situation with only grammatical competence. For Savignon (1983), competence is "what one knows" and performance is "what one does" (p: 94).

Terrel and Krahen (1983) have defined communicative competence as the use of language in social communications without grammatical analysis. They related communicative competence to the communication and didn't give a focus for the grammatical competence. This means that communicative competence is manifested in the communication. They argued that the primary goal of language learning should be the development of the communicative skills. They arrived at a principle that "language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning" (Krashen and Terrell 1983:55).

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication. This view agreed with Hymes and others that communicative competence includes various competencies. Knowledge here refers to one's knowledge of the various aspects of language and language use, while skill refers to how one can use the knowledge in actual communication.

Widdowson (1978) defined communicative competence in terms of Usage and Use; where 'Usage' refers to one's knowledge of the linguistic rules, and 'Use' refers to one's ability to use his

knowledge of the linguistic rules for effective communication.

From the discussion above, this paper defines the term '*communicative competence*' as both the knowledge of the linguistic and not linguistic rules of communication and the skill to use such knowledge effectively and appropriately in real life situations for the purpose of fulfilling communicative goals.

### 3. Models of communicative competence

#### 3-1: Dell Hymes' Model of Communicative Competence:

In his contribution to the research planning conference on Language Development Among Disadvantaged Children in 1966, Hymes introduced the term 'Communicative Competence' in his lecture that was later on published as a paper entitled 'On Communicative Competence' in 1972 to become a prominent term and an issue of debate in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning. Hymes (2001: 55-56) has mentioned that Linguistic theory, from the perspective associated with transformational generative grammar has two parts: Linguistic Competence (the tacit knowledge of language structure) and Linguistic Performance (the process of applying the underlying knowledge to the actual language use). As performance can't reflect competence except under the ideal speaker-listener knowledge and use of the language, performance cannot be relevant to linguistic theory. Such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in abstraction from sociocultural features that are considered to be a major part of their description, and performance is viewed as just a selection among the various options the one that is easiest to be produced and understood. He emphasized Chomsky's words that his position is also the position of the founders of general linguistics, particularly those as de Saussure in his distinction between *Langue* (language structures) and *Parole* (individual speech).

Hymes believes that knowledge of language structure and sociocultural rules are both important in language acquisition. A learner acquires knowledge of language not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. "He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when no, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes, 2001, p. 60). By this discussion, Hymes shows that grammatical knowledge or linguistic knowledge in Chomsky's linguistic theory is not sufficient to explain the child's competence to accomplish communicative needs.

Based on his above mentioned discussion, Hymes reaches a point that for the theory of language and language use to be developed, the judgments and abilities must be recognized not only in grammaticality and acceptability as in Chomskyan model of competence and performance, but in four levels. He suggests this framework for integrating linguistic theory with theory of communication and culture; and raised these four questions on which his framework based on:

- Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of means of implementation available;

- Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated; and
- Whether (and to what degree) something done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (Hymes, 2001, pp. 63)

### 3-2: Canale and Swain Model of Communicative Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) introduced their model of communicative competence which has become the most common for researchers in this field nowadays. The model was not a contrast to Hymes' one but it is rather a further development for it. This development in the field of communicative competence is continuing till today. Canale and Swain believe in the importance of the sociolinguistic work that Hymes had emphasized in his model of communicative competence. Their model focuses on the interaction of grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence and they have maintained that:

there are rules of language use which would be useless without the rules of grammar. For example, one may have an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence in Canadian French just from having developed such competence in Canadian English; but without some minimal level of grammatical competence in French, it is unlikely that one could communicate effectively with a monolingual speaker of Canadian French. (1980: P. 5).

Here we can say that their model had highlighted the importance of grammar for effective communication. This, physically, seems to be in contrast with Hymes' phrase that without the rules of language use, the rules of grammar would be useless. Anyway, both models emphasized the interaction of both grammatical competence and social competence in any communicative event. For Canale and Swain, "the study of sociolinguistic competence is essential to the study of communicative competence as is the study of grammatical competence" (P. 6).

In the following lines, we will delve into the components of communicative competence in the framework introduced by Canale and Swain (1980: 31) and Canale (1983):

- **Grammatical competence:** This competence includes knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, grammar and phonology. This knowledge is similar to Hymes' linguistic competence and considered as a part of the communicative competence as it represents the underlying system of the language and how to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of the utterance.
- **Sociolinguistic competence:** This component of the communicative competence is made up of sociocultural rules of language use. This knowledge is very important in interpreting and producing utterances in social context. The knowledge of social rules is essential for producing and understanding utterances that are appropriate to the context in which language is used. It is similar to sociolinguistic competence in Hymes' model of

communicative competence.

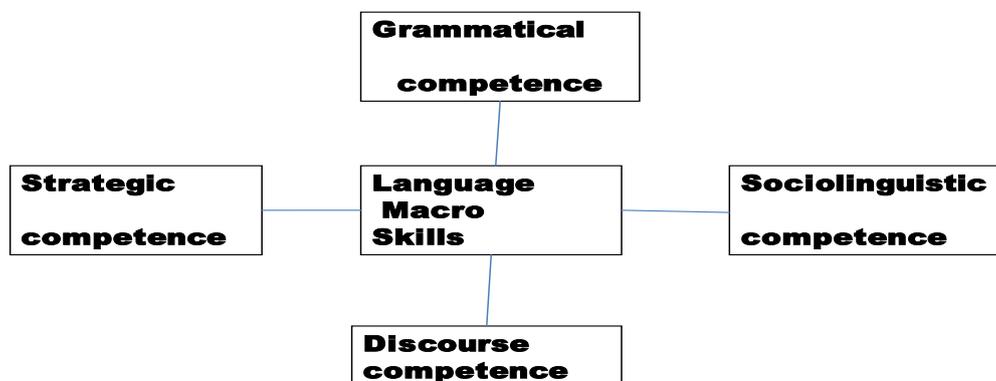
- **Strategic competence:** This component is made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication. These communication breakdowns may be due to insufficient linguistic or sociolinguistic competence.
- **Discourse competence:** A component added by Canale (1983) that represents the ability to combine language structures and language functions into a coherent and cohesive text.

### 3-3: Alcon's model of communicative competence

Though many models of the communicative competence have emphasized the importance of language for communication, they did not show clearly the position of the four language macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as a main component of the communicative competence. They just dealt with the various components of communicative competence related to various aspects of the language, stressing the sociolinguistic and cultural aspects of the language as well as the pragmatic meanings. What I am satisfied with as a model for communicative competence within the context of the foreign language is that one raised recently by Alcon, though it has not been so common in literature as the article was written in Spanish.

According to Jordà (2005: 56), Alcon's model of communicative competence comprises three main components: Discourse competence, Psychomotor skills and competencies and strategic competence. The *discourse competence* comprises linguistic competence, textual competence and pragmatic competence. The *psychomotor skills* include the language four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The last component which is *strategic competence* refers to the strategies used for compensating lack of linguistic or sociolinguistic competencies. I am hereby stressing the importance of including the language four macro skills as a main component of the communicative competence that should be developed simultaneously with other competencies in order to build up EFL learner's communicative competence. I believe that grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence have nothing to do if a learner doesn't have the skills to use them. So these macro skills should be developed as a part of learner's communicative competence.

Based on the discussion above mentioned, the researcher has come to the conclusion that the communicative competence consists of all the competencies mentioned in the previous models in addition to language macro skills. These skills and competencies are interrelated and interact with each other to form the communicative competence.



**Figure 1: Model of Communicative Competence**

In the above model, the competencies are similar to the competencies mentioned in Canale and Swain model (1980) and Canale model (1983), while the language macro skills refer to the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The researcher believes that the knowledge of grammatical and sociolinguistic rules is useless if a learner doesn't have the skills to use such knowledge for communication. So he believes that language macro skills stand at the heart of the communicative competence and form a major part of it. An example of this, some learners may know how to apply grammatical rules in their writing and in the same time, due to their reading of the use of sociocultural rules or being aware of such rules as it is similar to their mother tongue, they may know how to use social and cultural rules according to the context but they find themselves unable to express themselves fluently unless they have the speaking skill.

#### **4- Developing EFL learners' Communicative Competence:**

Developing the communicative competence in English as a foreign language in Yemen as well as in many other countries where English is taught as a foreign language is an aim that learners struggle to achieve. Achieving such an aim depends on many factors related to teachers, syllabi, teaching situation, environment and learners themselves as well. There are many learning strategies or activities that are usually selected for enhancing language learning. These activities that enhance language learning are usually communication-based activities and task-based activities. These activities usually play a big role in developing communicative competence and enabling communication skills in comparison to those strategies of imitations, memorization and repetition drills that mainly concern about language and its structures rather than the use of that language. A new trend in the last third of the last century was the emergence of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach that recommends teaching English through communication or by using it. This section is an attempt to sum up some activities, based on the researcher's long experience in the field of teaching

English as a foreign language at Aden University and his reading of some recent studies in the field of teaching English as a foreign or second language, which may help in developing students' communicative competence.

#### **4-1: Oral conversation and dialogue in pairs or groups:**

Teachers should understand that classroom is the only place for EFL learners to practice their English and to get exposure to it. As children usually build their abilities for communication in their native language through their exposure to their native language surrounding them, a foreign language learner doesn't have such opportunities for exposing oneself to the target language in foreign language context except for classroom hours. So teachers should encourage students to converse in pairs and groups. These activities proved to be of high value in the cultivation students' communicative competence as they provide students with more opportunities for exposure and help them in building their confidence in their language and releasing language anxiety. Building up self-confidence and releasing language anxiety will facilitate language acquisition as these two factors are considered to be main hindrances of language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Daly, Caughlin & Stafford, 1997; Park & Lee, 2005).

Pair and group work activities encourage students to practice their language and provide opportunities for exposure and use. Such activities are effective in developing various aspects of communicative competence as using language in these activities guarantees the development of language macro and micro skills and competencies.

#### **4-2: Teacher–student interaction:**

EFL teacher should play the role of a facilitator in his classroom in order to help language learning to take place. He should create a democratic and enthusiastic atmosphere and interact with his students. Researcher's observations as well as other studies have shown that teachers who encourage more interaction in their classroom achieve good results and produce competent speakers while teachers who spend their time lecturing their students while students passively listening and take notes often fail to cultivate the communicative competence of the students and produce students who are incompetent users of English (Wang & Castro, 2010). So teachers should interact with each and every student in his classroom and create an atmosphere that motivates students to interact with him.

#### **4-3: Using Literature:**

Literature, whatever the genre drama, short stories, novels..etc. is considered to be useful in developing EFL students' communicative competence as it provides students with authentic language inputs as well as equip them with English culture. If movies acted by Native English actors are shown to EFL students, it will help them to understand English pronunciation, manners of interaction and cultural aspects. Such literary texts serve in developing linguistic competence through offering students a repository of vocabulary and grammatical rules. It also helps the learners to understand

English culture and how to use language in accordance with the contexts. Storytelling can be used in the classroom as an activity for training students how to communicate. Teachers here ask their students to read stories, and then to narrate them to their classmates. By doing this, learners will develop their linguistics competence of as well as their communication skills.

In the context of Yemen, the researcher believes that literary texts used in English syllabi of the faculties of education are not sufficient for enhancing students' communicative competence for two reasons: the first is that only very few texts are selected to be taught within the syllabi while the second reason is that such selected texts are from old literature that learners feel frustrated to deal with due to its ancient language that is mostly out of date in today's world. This leads most of the students to read just summaries of the literary texts in order to pass the end term examinations instead of dealing with original texts that are supposed to enrich them with natural inputs and cultural aspects for language acquisition.

#### **4-4: Simulation and Role-play Activities:**

Simulation and role-play activities are so effective for promoting students' communicative competence. The most important condition here is that students should consider themselves as much real as possible. Such activities proved to be effective in promoting communicative competence and making the classroom more interesting and interactive. A study by García-Carbonell, Rising, Montero & Watts (2001) on the role of simulation and game activities on communicative competence acquisition of a foreign language revealed that such activities are more effective than formal instruction in enhancing the communicative competence.

Role-play activities are also very important in enhancing students' communicative competence. In these activities, EFL learners are asked to perform some scenes from a play or to create some dramatic work to act. Quing (2011) and Ampatuan and San Jose (2016) have studied the role-play as an approach for developing students' communicative competence. Their studies revealed that role-play is an effective approach for developing communicative competence and cultural aspects. They added that these activities provide students with opportunities to express themselves, build up their self-confidence to use the language they have learned and enhance their communication skills.

#### **4-5: Computer-Assisted Classroom Activities:**

Teachers should benefit from computer and modern technology in English language teaching. Today, there are so many English programs, recordings, videos that help students to learn English and develop their communicative competence. If the teacher employs such technology in his teaching, it will be very effective in enhancing EFL learners' competence and achieving language acquisition. Using computer oral activities in classroom provide students with opportunities of exposure to native English speakers that learners can not get in their environment.

Chun (1994) has studied the use of computer-assisted classroom discussion in facilitating the

acquisition of interactive competence of the first year foreign language German learners in written discourse. His study revealed that students feel freer in suggesting topics, interacting and asking questions than in the formal instruction as the role of the instructor is decentralised here. The study can be transferred, according to Chun, to students' spoken competence as well.

#### **4-6: Reading English news and watching English TVs:**

Another way to involve students in real life language situation that provide them native language experience inside and outside classroom in foreign language context is motivating them to watch English news, films, online lessons at TVs and to read English newspaper and website news. This will help a lot in developing learners' communicative competence as it will expose them to various types of texts and vocabulary and keep them in touch with English outside the class as well. Such a type of free choice learning activities is so effective in achieving language acquisition.

#### **4-7: Investing social media as e-mail, what's up and facebook... etc.**

Social media tools are so important in developing communicative competence as they provide learners opportunities to use language and learn from each other in free group-discussions. Students may feel shy to speak in face to face discussion but it is easier for them to share voice records or a piece of writing via social media devices. It provides them opportunities to learn from their mistakes through their discussions as being far from their colleagues reduce their stress in making mistakes and losing face. Such activities increase the linguistic competence of students as well as the other competencies. These tools help students to befriend English people and to get opportunities for natural exposure to native English speakers.

#### **5. - Conclusion:**

This paper has been an attempt to explore the process of defining the term 'communicative competence'. It has gone through the various definitions of the term in order to highlight its meaning in foreign language learning and teaching. 'Communicative competence' is viewed as the knowledge of the rules of language and language use and the skill to use such knowledge effectively and appropriately in real-life situations. Communicative competence has become a major aim for second and foreign language learning and its models have been developed to include various aspects of language such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, strategic, language macro skills...etc.. The study recommends employing communicative language teaching approach and its activities, together with modern technologies and cooperative learning as ways for achieving a good level of communicative competence in English as a foreign language at Yemeni schools and universities.

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