Rethinking the Role of Communicative Competence in Language Teaching

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3.1 Introduction

In the mid-1990s I had many discussions with colleagues concerning the role of ‘communicative competence’ in language teaching and applied linguistics. These discussions resulted in two publications (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995; Celce-Murcia 1995). Then during the late 1990s I co-authored a text on the role of discourse and context in language teaching (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000), which further influenced my thinking about the role of communicative competence in language teaching. In this paper I present a revised and updated model of communicative competence which synthesizes and elaborates on my previous work and which further explores the role that this model of communicative competence could play in language teaching.

The term ‘communicative competence’ has been in circulation for about forty years and has been used extensively in justifications and explications of communicative language teaching. Thus before I discuss my revised model in some detail, I would like to summarize briefly the evolution of the term ‘communicative competence’ starting with its original source (Hymes 1967, 1972) through the contributions of Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), and Celce-Murcia et al. (1995). There have been other models proposed to represent constructs similar to ‘communicative competence’ (e.g., the ‘language ability’ in Bachman (1990); Bachman and Palmer (1996); however, these models have been developed with language assessment in mind—rather than language teaching. For most discussions of language pedagogy per se, the model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), along with the elaborations proposed by Canale (1983), remain the key sources for discussions of communicative competence and related applications in applied linguistics and language pedagogy.
As mentioned above, ‘communicative competence’ is a term coined by the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes (1967, 1972); he put forward this notion in response to the theories of the formal linguist Noam Chomsky (Chomsky 1957; 1965), who focused on linguistic competence and claimed that any consideration of social factors was outside the domain of linguistics. Hymes (1972) argued that in addition to linguistic competence (the rules for describing sound systems and for combining sounds into morphemes and morphemes into sentences), one also needed notions of sociolinguistic competence (the rules for using language appropriately in context) to account for language acquisition and language use. Hymes thus argued that language structure and its acquisition were not context-free, while Chomsky had claimed they were (i.e. that an innate language mechanism was sufficient to account for first language acquisition).

At about that time applied linguists and language teachers were developing the communicative approach to language teaching in reaction to grammar translation and audiolingual approaches to language pedagogy. Many applied linguists adopted Hymes’ terminology and perspective, and his notion of communicative competence thus became part of the theoretical justification for a new language teaching approach and new teaching materials that were compatible with communication as the goal of second or foreign language teaching.

Among the earliest applied linguists to develop and elaborate a model of communicative competence that course designers and language teachers could apply to teaching and assessment were Canale and Swain (1980), who added strategic competence (i.e. the ability to compensate for problems or deficits in communication and do various types of planning) to the linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence that Hymes (1972) had proposed; however, they referred to ‘linguistic competence’ as ‘grammatical competence’. A few years later, Canale (1983) added discourse competence (the ability to produce and interpret language beyond the sentence level) to the model.

In the mid nineties Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) proposed that actional competence (the ability to comprehend and produce all significant speech acts and speech act sets) should also be part of communicative competence. These authors made two changes in terminology re: the Canale-Swain model: (1) that sociolinguistic competence be modified to sociocultural competence (the cultural background knowledge needed to interpret and use a language effectively) and (2) that grammatical competence be re-labeled as linguistic competence to explicitly include the sound system and the lexicon as well as the grammar (i.e., morphology and syntax). This historical development of the components included in the various models of communicative competence is summarized in Figure 3.1: