An Innovative Approach to the Development of Communicative Competence in Students

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Abstract: *Communicative competence is defined as the ability to interact effectively with others. At its most basic, competence is seen as a combination of language aptitudes an individual has for learning a foreign language. Such potential contributes to his/her attaining high levels of performance. This paper considers the following: the nature of communicative competence and some of its models; the importance of developing communicative competence among students; and the implications of communicative competence in English language teaching and learning.*

Main part: In the last quarter of the past century, as a result of research in the fields of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and socio-semantics, there has been an increasing interest and, consequently development, in the communicative properties of language use. Most notably in the concept of communicative competence as distinct from linguistic competence; a notion introduced to the discourse of linguistic theory by Noam Chomsky (1965). In his much-acclaimed book "Aspects of the Theory of Syntax", Chomsky draws a distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in real-life situations). He points out that "linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance". (p. 4). This dichotomy, regarded as purely linguistic by many of his contemporaries, has opened the doors to differing views and triggered wide rejections. As a result, attempts have been made to further broaden the concept of linguistic competence to include the sociolinguistic aspects of language necessary for the performance of acts of communication. This paper article attempts to shed light on those differences and beyond.

The concept of **communicative competence**, as developed in linguistics, originated in response to perceived inadequacy of the notion of linguistic competence. That is, communicative competence encompasses a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, but reconceives this knowledge as a functional, social understanding of how and when to use utterances appropriately.

To the question 'how often are we faced with students learning the English language who "know the grammar but just can't use the language"?', the answer is unfortunately very often if not always. Students studying English as a foreign language almost unanimously claim that the six or seven

period of studying the language at school has been a total waste of time. They claim that the English language courses they have been introduced to do not equip them with the necessary tools that should enable them to take part in a two-way dialogue in English. They further claim that they often find themselves quite incapable of expressing their emotions, feelings, their agreement, disagreement, likes, dislikes, etc., in an English social context. They often identify their difficulty with English as 'not knowing enough words'. But the main problem, however, is that they don't know the right words to use in a sentence or utterance in order to be communicative. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that instead of acquiring ways of using the language in meaningful situations to produce meaningful acts of communication, they have mastered the formation rules of the language. In short, they have mastered the one, language usage, without the other, language use. Or according to Light (1997) communicative competence should achieve four main purposes: expressing wants and needs, developing social closeness, exchanging information, and fulfilling social etiquette routines. From the above statements, it appears that students learning English as a foreign language are still being exposed to the problem of not being able to actually use the language in normal communicative settings in both the spoken and the written modes. This is surely a result of the deficiency of the traditional teaching and learning strategies being employed and which have dominated the teaching of English as a foreign language in many parts of the non-Anglophone world throughout the years. Allen & Widdowson (1974) argue that "the difficulties which students encounter arise not so much from a defective knowledge of the system of English but from unfamiliarity with English use and consequently their needs must be met by a course which develops knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of different communicative acts."

The notion of communicative competence is one of the theories that underlie the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. At least three core models exist. The first and most widely used is Canale and Swain's model and the later iteration by Canale. In a second model, sociocultural content is more precisely specified by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell in 1995. For their part, they saw communicative competence as including linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, actional competence, and discourse competence. A third model widely in use in federal language training in Canada is Bachman and Palmer's model.

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