COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE - THE GOALS BEYOND PURELY LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The teaching and learning of English have experienced many ups and downs. Each approach reveals some positive and negative aspects. However, it is undeniable that the understanding of the nature of language determines the teaching approach. As time goes, the grammar-translation which used to dominate all the teaching practice reveals some drawbacks. As a result of the teaching method, learners are unable to use what they learnt for communication but description. This paper attempts to restate principles of the commonly used approach worldwide which put language in the right position of what it is "communication". By reviewing some key features of communicative competence which is the fundamental of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), we hope that will benefit practioners who are sparing no efforts to make the teaching and learning of English more efficient.

Key words: *communicative, communicative competence, language teaching, communicative language teaching, teaching methodology*

NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP – MỘT MỤC TIÊU VƯỢT XA VIỆC HỌC NGÔN NGỮ ĐƠN THUẦN

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TÓM TẮT

Việc dạy và học tiếng Anh đã trải qua nhiều thăng trầm. Mỗi đường hướng dạy học đều bộc lộ những mặt tích cực và tiêu cực. Tuy nhiên không thể phủ nhận được rằng việc hiểu bản chất ngôn ngữ thế nào sẽ quy định đường hướng dạy học như thế. Qua thời gian, phương pháp ngữ pháp - dịch, một phương pháp đã từng là chủ đạo trong các hoạt động dạy học đã bộc lộ nhiều điểm yếu. Kết quả của việc học không mang lại giao tiếp cho người học mà chỉ dừng lại ở khả năng miêu tả ngôn ngữ. Bài báo này cố gắng nêu lại các nguyên tắc chung nhất cho đường hướng dạy học theo hướng giao tiếp, một phương pháp đã và đang được ứng dụng rộng rãi trên thế giới, đưa ngôn ngữ về đúng vị trí tự nhiên của nó "một phương tiện giao tiếp". Bằng việc điểm lại các đặc điểm của năng lực giao tiếp, nền tảng của phương pháp dạy học theo đường hướng giao tiếp. Chúng tôi hy vọng rằng điều này sẽ mang lại lợi ích cho giáo viên trong việc giảng dạy để làm cho việc dạy và học tiếng Anh hiệu quả hơn.

Từ khoá: *giao tiếp, năng lực giao tiếp, dạy học theo đường hướng giao tiếp, giảng dạy tiếng Anh, phương pháp giảng dạy*

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INTRODUCTION

Rationales

For many years working as an English language teacher, we bear in mind an idea that what students really learn English for; passing an exam, or being able to use it for real communication. The former goal is just like a cup of tea while the later requires hard working and well strategic to be attained. The fact that the primary goal of any language is communication did not seem to have any bearing on how it was taught. As long as students could reproduce grammatical rules and apply them to the most intricate translation exercises, the teacher was happy and convinced that s/he was doing a good job.

The traditional dominant model of EFL teaching in Vietnam today still presents language as a system of cognitive patterns and reference items to be learned and mastered, in a fashion not dissimilar to mathematical and physical laws or any other subjects. There have been many arguments along with the idea that English should be a subject or a mean of instruction to learn other subjects, in other words "cross curriculum" language.

As a university teacher of the English language in Vietnam for 20 years, we have realized the merits and demerits of the traditional language teaching approach. However, given the situation of EFL teaching in Vietnam, a fundamental shift cannot take place without a fundamental pegagogical change both at theoretical and practical levels. It is a fact that after the release of the 1400 decision of Vietnamese Prime Minister, all the school attendants must study English at grade 3, at the age of 8. English is taught at all educational levels up to university or post-graduate study, aiming at B2, CEFR. It is also a matter of fact that not many university leavers can use English language for the integrated global world of work.

In order to make use of the time and money spent for teaching and leaning English, we should change the way we teach, the way our students study and most important is that we change the attitudes towards the goal of learning English.

Aims of language teaching and learning programmes

In Vietnam, before 1990, the dominant model of teaching was grammar translation methods in which the mastering of grammatical patterns was considered the goal of English teaching and learning. After the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) in 1990s, there have been many positive awareness of the aims of English language teaching and learning. However, the real expected outcome is still limited.

Language learning is not just about putting words together correctly. This is where 'communicative competence' becomes important. If an EFL learner knows when to speak, when not to, what to talk about and with whom, and when, and where, and in what manner, then they are communicatively competent. This is, of course, a very important thing to possess. It's not only about having a grasp of the language itself (e.g. correct use of grammar), but more about the understanding of the social and cultural elements which comes with using the language. When you teach English, then, you should not just be teaching the language itself, but also how, when, where, etc. to use it, within a context of the English speaking world.

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concept of communicative competence

The concept of communicative competence was first proposed by Hymes [1] as an expansion of Chomsky's linguistic competence [2]. In light of Chomsky's theory, linguistic competence refers to the learner's ability to understand and create unheard/unseen sentences [2]. This viewpoint of linguistic competence is criticized as narrowed down to the grammatical ties and ignorance of the social aspects of language. Hymes [1] introduces a broader notion of competence, that is communicative competence. The concept of communicative competence then is further analyzed by

Rickheit et.al [3] that consist of theoretical relevance, methodological relevance and practical relevance. In which the theoretical relevance refers to the internal and external structures. While the former relates to effectiveness and appropriateness, the later focuses on how communicative competence be described in terms of knowledge, motivation, emotion and behavior. It also describes how communicative develops and how can this development be influenced. The methodological relevance closely connected to the theoretical relevance of a scientific concept, its methodological relevance must be clarified. In the context of second language teaching, Canale & Swain [4] view communicative competence to be a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse. That is similar to Hymes [1] who lists four characteristics of communicative competence as (1) what is formally *possible*, (2) what is *feasible*, (3) what is the social meaning or *appropriate* of a given utterance, and (4) what actually *occurs* or *performs*. The concept of communicative competence was further developed by Canale & Swain [4], in which they define communicative competence as "the underlying systems of knowledge and skills required for communication". They divide the communicative competence into four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

Components of communicative competence

Hymes' model [1]

Grammatical competence

Grammatical competence or linguistics competence was defined by N. Chomsky [2], as theoretical and practical knowledge of a limited number of grammatical rules, which allow generating an unlimited number of correct sentences. It can be assumed that the grammatical competence in the context of

learning a foreign language is a set of theoretical knowledge (rules) and language skills that are necessary and sufficient for students to construct correct sentences, to understand them, to monitor grammatical errors, to pass judgments about right and wrong linguistic forms, and to perform language testing tasks. The term grammatical competence means the acquisition of phonological rules, morphological rules, syntactic rules, semantic rules and lexical items.

Discourse competence

Canale & Swain [4] defined discourse competence as an ability to make larger patterns of stretches of discourse into meaningful wholes. Later interpretation of discourse competence implies that discourse competence is also concerned with language use in social context, and in particular with interaction and dialogue between speakers (Gumperz [5]). As for Chomsky [2], linguistic theory aims to study the production and understanding of the rules of language that a native speaker-listener acquires during the process of language acquisition. However, socio-psycho-linguistic research rejected Chomsky's limited view of competence and contrary to Chomsky's view, emphasizes the need to study language in its social context. Campbell & Wales [6] pointed out that Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence goes far away from the most important linguistic ability

"...to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made," and they continue, "...by context we mean both the situational and verbal context of utterance."

A more restricted view of pragmatics has been proposed by Katz & Fodor [7] who suggest that pragmatics should be concerned solely with principles of language usage and should have nothing to do with the description of linguistic structure. Chomsky [2] distinguishes pragmatic competence from grammatical competence. Grammatical

competence in this instance is limited to knowledge of form and meaning whereas pragmatics is concerned with knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use.

Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the learner's "knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse" (Brown [8]). In his definition, Brown includes learners' sensitivity to dialect or variety, choice of register, naturalness, and knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech. Tarone & Swain [9] define this competence as the ability of the members of a speech community to adapt their speech to the context in which they find themselves. For example, a more formal variety will be used in an interview whereas an informal register, a "vernacular" style will be used amongst friends. Lyster [10] defines the concept of sociolinguistic competence as the "capacity to recognize and produce socially appropriate speech in context".

Strategic competence

Strategic competence refers to the strategies for breakdowns in communication according to the situation. Canale & Swain [4] define strategic competence as non-verbal and verbal parts of communicative language use, primarily aimed at restoring communication when it has broken down. The competence is understood as "coping strategies" by Savignon [11]. Strategic competence therefore currently refers to the speaker's ability to use communication strategies such as paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, and mime to get the message across and to compensate for limited knowledge or the interference of factors such as being distracted or tired (Canale & Swain [4]). Although both native and nonnative speakers use communication strategies, non-native speakers use them more frequently to cope with problems encountered while attempting to speak a foreign language. Successful language learning is not only a matter of developing grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence but also strategic competence, as it allows a learner to compensate for deficiencies in other areas. (See figure 1).
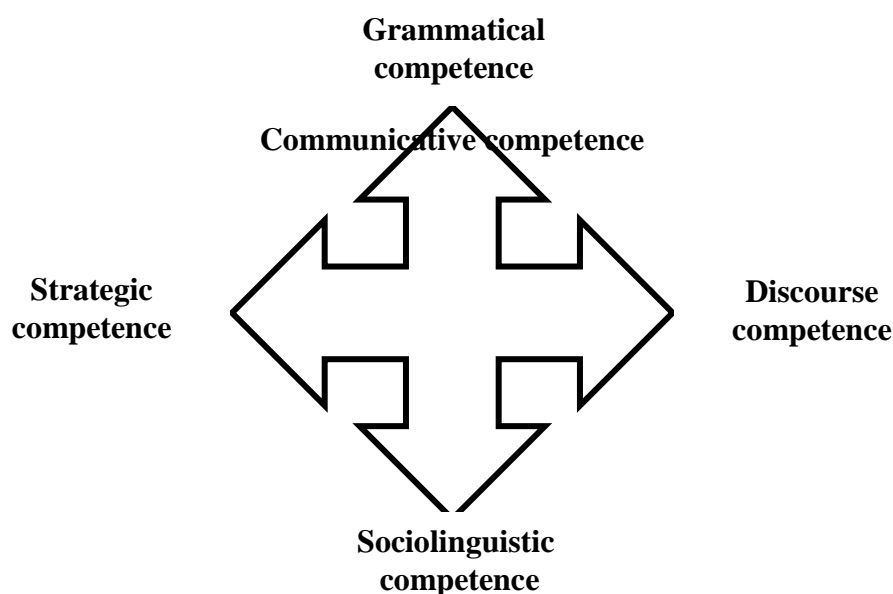

Fig. 1. *Components of communicative competence (Hymes [1])*

Bachman's model

Bachman [12] puts forward new views and proposes schematisation of what he calls language competence. According to Bachman [12], communicative language ability (CLA) can be described as consisting of both knowledge or competence, and the capacity for implementing or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualised communicative language use. He states that language competence consists of two components: 1) organizational competence, and 2) pragmatic competence and each component comprises its own subcomponents. The former is composed of grammatical competence and textual competence (equal to 'discourse' competence in Canale's mode [l3]). Pragmatic competence is focused on functional aspects of language and consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. The former pertains to sending and receiving intended meanings and the latter concerns politeness, formality, metaphor, register, and culturally related aspects of language. (See figure 2)
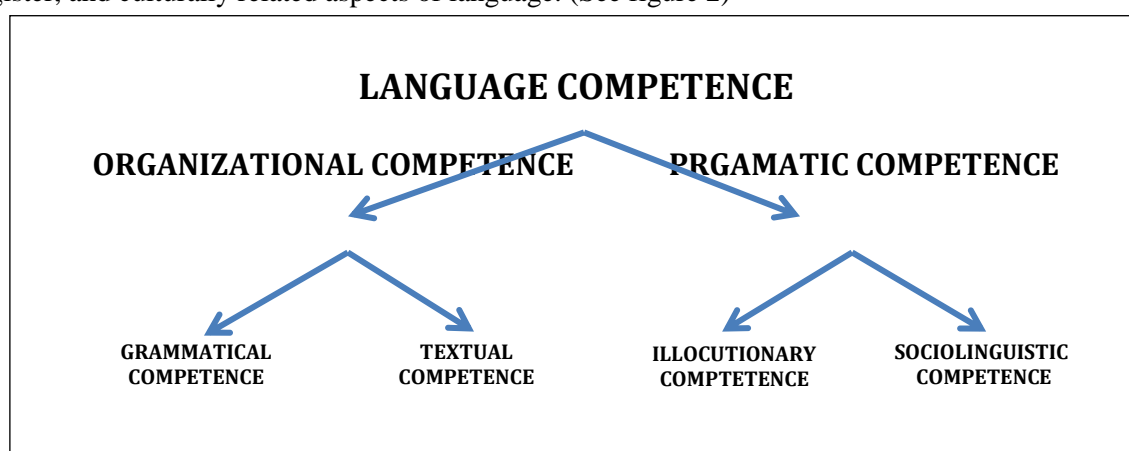

Fig. 2. *Components of language competence (Bachman [12])*

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING

Communicative language teaching (CLT)

According to Richards & Rodgers [14], "CLT starts from the theory of language as communication". Its aim is to teach learners to communicate in the target language. Richards & Rodgers [14] define CLT as an approach (not method) that aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching. Richards [15] maintains that "CLT today refers to a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, their learning goals, and so on". CLT, therefore, appeals to those who seek a more humanistic approach to teaching, one in which the interactive processes of communication receive priority (Richards & Rodgers [14]).

CLT also develops procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. The four language skills are listening, reading, speaking and writing. This marks the uniqueness of CLT and differentiates its scope and status from other approaches and methods in language teaching because it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language (Richards & Rodgers [14]).

Communicative competence constitutes a key part of CLT. It goes far beyond the linguistic competences and involves using language as a tool to achieve a premeditated goal via verbal processing. CLT perceives language as a functional means of attaining a certain aim and succeeding in interpersonal communication (Harmer [16])

Since the emergence of this approach more emphasis has been put on the ability of second language learners to effectively communicate in target language (Brown [8]). Less attention is paid to precise wording, flawless grammatical structures, correct

pronunciation and familiarity with irregular forms. Pragmatics, discourse, language functions and interaction have become the buzzwords of second language learning. In practice this means teaching the target language not as a set of grammatical rules and an infinite inventory of vocabulary but as a communication tool taking into account context and the fact that pragmatic comprehension and the effect of illocutionary acts are conditioned by cooperation among discourse participants.

Challenges in conducting CLT in Vietnamese context

In Vietnam, the term CLT has become a buzzword among English language teachers at all levels. However, a thorough understanding of the term is vague to many teachers, event educators. Along with learner-centered teaching style is not fully understood. The trainings of CLT have taken lots of finance and energy of both teachers and the government, the real teaching practice at schools is a kind of "new look same taste". The unsuccessful implement of CLT can be of sampan; learners, educational system and teachers. From learners, they are lack of motivation for communicative competence, resistance to class participation using Vietnamese during group work and low English proficiency. The difficulty that comes from the educational system can be the lack of facilities, large-size class and especially the exam-based curriculum. Last but not least, teachers of English at schools are not fully equipped with CLT theory both in teaching and testing practices.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the previous parts, the CLT is the most suitable teaching approach up to now in terms of developing communicative competence for language learners. By nature, the acquisition of any languages requires not only linguistics sets of rules but also rules of use or in other words, learners should be competent at discourse, sociolinguistic, strategic rather than linguistics competence.

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