Children's Acquisition of Communicative Competence and Discussion on Awakening and Developing Students' Communicative Competence in University English Teaching

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ABSTRACT

What plays an important role in language teaching and learning is Communicative competence. This paper tries to explore the children's acquisition of communicative competence and yet with the spread and development of English around the world and its increased use in Iran, research about improved methods to develop university students' English level has become of great importance.

This paper also dissects the inevitability and viability of developing students' communicative competence in University English Teaching (UET) and also debates the advantages and challenges of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) for UET. A questionnaire is used to determine students' understanding of the term communicative competence.

Keywords: communicative competence; acquisition; children; English language teaching; communicative competence; university English teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

As Hymes points out native speakers who could produce any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language would be institutionalized if they tried to do so. Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have to enable them to use and interpret linguistic forms.

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to give commands, etc. in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings. It needs to be pointed out that cross-cultural differences can and do produce conflicts or inhibit communication. For example, certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in conversation, while the native English speakers they may be talking to have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking, and find silences embarrassing. In this way, the

concept of communicative competence must be embedded in the notion of cultural competence or the total set of knowledge and skills which speakers bring into a situation. In fact, all aspects of culture are relevant to communication, but those that have the most direct bearing on communicative forms and processes are the social structure, the values and attitudes held about language and ways of speaking, the network of conceptual categories which results from shared experiences, and the ways knowledge and skills are transmitted from one generation to the next, and to new members of the group. All in all, communicative competence refers to knowledge and skills for contextually appropriate use and interpretation of language in a community; it refers to the communicative knowledge and skills shared by the group, although these reside variably in its individual members. The shared yet individual nature of competence reflects the nature of language itself.

2. CHILDREN'S ACQUISITION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

All human infants are born with the capacity to develop patterned rules for appropriate language use from whatever input is provided within their native speech community. Children are essentially participant-observers of communication learning and inductively developing the rules of their speech community through processes of observation and interaction. So input is very important in the process of acquiring communicative competence. Sources of input for children vary depending on cultural and social factors. For example, mother's talk is often assumed to be universally the most important source of early input, but wealthier social classes in many cultures delegate most caretaking to servants, while in some other cultures, older siblings have major childrearing responsibilities.

One more thing need to be pointed out is that when children have limited input from any source, communicative development may indeed be retarded, though this may be overcome in later childhood.

2.1. Social interaction

Although language acquisition is generally considered to be primarily a cognitive process, it is clearly a social process as well, and must take place within the context of social interaction. Our following discussion will focus on the interaction between adult and children. Halliday claims that children learn the meaning of language because of the systematic relation between what they hear and what is going on around them. While all language is learned in the process of social interaction, different linguistic forms are considered 'typical' or appropriate between adults and children. Much of the earlier research on acquisition in the process of adult-child interaction focused on the importance of children's repetition of adult speech. There are speech communities where mimicry is very common, and considered the most appropriate form of social interaction between adults and young children. There are also influences which children themselves have on adult communicative behavior. According to Von Raffler-Engel and Rea, much of the interaction between adults and children is nonverbal, or paralinguistic; children often confirm understanding with facial expressions or head nods, which suggest the need to expand the scope of interaction.

2.2. Language and enculturation

We must admit that language is mainly learnt rather than inherited. Language learning for children is an integral part of their enculturation from three perspectives: 1) language is part of culture, and thus part of the body of knowledge, attitudes, and skills which is transmitted from one generation to the next; 2) language is a primary medium through which other aspects of culture are transmitted; 3) language is a tool which children may use to explore the social environment and establish their status and role-relationships within it. Hall distinguishes three kinds of learning, which are *formal learning, informal learning and technical learning*.

Formal learning takes place through precept and admonition, and transmits those aspects of culture which are not to be questioned.

Informal learning takes place primarily through nonverbal channels of communication, with the chief agent a model used for imitation. Pragmatic competence is also acquired informally.

Technical learning is at an explicitly formulated, conscious level, and includes all that children find out in school about the grammar they have already acquired informally; rules are explained by adults and deviations usually corrected without emotional and moral involvement. Written language skills are most likely to be taught in a technical mode, and more advanced oral rhetorical skills may also be developed at this level. All cultures make use of all three of these modes of enculturation to some degree, but formal learning tends to be prominent where authority in the family is strictly ordered in a hierarchy, and where there is a great respect for tradition. On the other hand, children are more likely to be taught on a technical level in a knowledge- oriented society. Cultural and social information is encoded in all channels of communication, and in all dimensions of each channel.

In short, the role of language in enculturation is both for personal growth and for socialization. From the perspective of the community as a whole, creating conformity and effecting transmission of the culture are the primary functions of language learning, i.e. successful socialization.

2.3. Teaching english in Iran

Nowadays English, as an international language is widely used in communication between people and countries. The English language has spread and developed worldwide, which is a fact that cannot be ignored. In Iran, as the main foreign language taught and employed in communication with foreigners, the use of English has dramatically increased, especially in the recent years. However, English Language Teaching (ELT) in Iran has not affected the traditional teaching model whereby students learn English just to pass exams and teachers lecture mainly to help students achieve this goal. The direct consequence is that students fail to communicate effectively with others in English. Clearly, students" overall skills cannot be enriched, especially for students at university level. Teachers in English faculties do a better job and that is to set an ultimate goal in mastery of all four skills with an emphasis on listening and speaking so that students in their future work and social interactions will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to boost their ability to study independently and improve their cultural quality so as to meet their demands. It goes without saying that this method cannot be widely implemented as expected. Also what can be done in order to develop university students' communicative competence remains number one priority.

2.4. The notion of communicative competence and its awakening

One of the earliest concepts of communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972). He believed that the ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. Students should learn how to use a language in their daily communication in order to demonstrate their mastery of a language. Hymes" (1972) theory of communicative competence has been widely acknowledged and accepted by English educators and scholars (Canale & Swain, 1980; Kunschak, 2004; McKay, 2002). As the concept of "communicative competence" is being further developed, different language skills such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic and pragmatic competences are receiving increasing focus (Davies, 2005; Hedge, 2000). Kramsch (2006, p.36) states that "language learning, as the acquisition of communicative competence, is now defined as the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning between two interlocutors or between a text and its reader."

It is believed that one of the main goals of both ELT and in Iran nowadays is to develop students' communicative competence, as more students will need English as a communicating tool after graduation. If students can use the English knowledge, skills and cultural aspects they have learned to communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds in real language contexts, they are then using English as a communication tool.

2.5. The inevitability and viability of awakening students communicative competence

Generally speaking, students that their major is English are a minority at Iranian universities. But more students will use English in future careers such as business, law, and journalism. English will be used as a tool to communicate or negotiate with different people after their graduation. In other words, the popularity of English worldwide paves the ground for a clear rationale to reform ELT in Iran, get rid of exam-oriented education, and to focus on developing students' listening and speaking skills, so they learn to communicate effectively with others. Improving university English teachers' abilities and qualifications necessarily mean improving university students' communicative skills. Teachers should participate in designing syllabi and be aware of the objectives of UET. Many Iranians who have M.A and Ph.D. degrees related to the English language/literature or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) become valuable resources for UET. Many such teachers are overseas graduates and are both spirited and better perceptive of the English language and culture. Therefore, the prospective and reformative consciousness of such teachers gives UET new chances and fervor. University facilities and resources are also gradually improving comparing with the past decade. Moreover, UET in Iran today is more student-centered. Teachers can mostly act as igniters in the process of communicative language teaching (CLT). As Kramsch (2006, p.38) have pointed out, "[teachers] set up the conditions under which learners learn to learn. The teacher is to be a "guide on the side, rather than sage on the stage". We should also be cognizant of the different attitudes of teachers and students toward English teaching and learning. It cannot be ignored that many university students still do not have clear rationales for learning English, or they learn English for the sheer sake of passing exams. Thus, it is not an easy job to implement a plan to develop university students' communicative competence.

2.6. The merits of awakening students communicative competence

Students develop their listening skill and also gain confidence during the process of communication at the same time while developing their speaking abilities and increasing their vocabulary level. It is vivid that an English context is automatically created during various activities when implementing CLT while English is used as the tool for students to communicate with each other. The English context can help students cultivate their sense of the language, and create a milieu where students can improve their English ability. CLT provides students a chance to speak and share ideas in a rather relaxing way. Thus, students become the leading characters in the classroom, and their initiative and motivation are both enhanced. If one worry about the lack of English written work that may include students' English study, can rest assured because CLT not only focuses on developing student' listening and speaking skills of English, but also reading and writing skills. CLT can introduce new teaching methods, creating a miscellaneous teaching process. Teachers can use different resources to help students awaken their communicative skill, which is another illustration of the diversity of the teaching method. For example, English teachers can use pictures to promote group discussions, subsequently helping students understand the informational and cultural background of different topics. Games can also be used to help students learn vocabulary and practice their writing skills. More to the point, teachers can help students create an English context when teaching grammar and Western culture. They can ask students questions. During group discussions, students both practice their spoken English and learn about different cultures. Grammar can also be practiced during this process. However, the challenges of CLT cannot be overlooked and yet the traditional ELT model in Iran remains a big challenge.

2.7. The challenges of developing students communicative competence

The first and for most, a traditional limitation to developing students' communicative competence is the inappropriate interaction between teachers and students. Teachers simply spend much time lecturing while students take copious notes and seldom participate in class. The relatively fatiguing test based teaching method makes students unenthusiastic to freely participate in classroom discussions. Therefore, in Iranian universities the communicative teaching approach still cannot be eye-catchingly witnessed in action. It seems that teachers and students have failed to understand the benefits of enhancing the communicative competence in the process of ELT. We should also take into account that the number of students in English classes is way greater than expected (generally around 50 to 60 in one class). Therefore, greater numbers of students do not have enough opportunity to communicate with each other in English. Students' lack of initiative may also play role in the effectiveness of teaching.

The second hindrance to implementing CLT is the method of evaluating UET. Currently, the evaluation reforms pay more attention to developing students' integrated ability. Students who take the oral English proficiency tests are mostly higher-intermediate students, who comprise a small portion of the university population. Although some universities pay more attention to developing students' communicative competence, the traditional assessing system is still deep-rooted, and the shift between "accuracy" and "fluency" is still worth considering if this teaching method is to be more vastly implemented.

Yet another challenge of CLT may be related to the students. The lack of input and output of English leads to a lack in students' reading vocabulary skill, which might make it

difficult to successfully implement this teaching method. Furthermore, different attitudes toward learning English may also hinder students' learning. Thus, it is necessary that teachers and students create a good balance between English teaching and learning, and allowing the communicative competence to gradually soak in.

2.8. Questionnaire

A) Questionnaire layout

A questionnaire was exercised to explore university students' understanding of CLT and their need to learn English at university. Altogether 150 participants answered the questionnaire; 97 respondents were lower-intermediate students and 53 were higher-intermediate. Both groups were asked to answer the questionnaire at intervals of the classes.

B) Analysis

Table 1. Students opinions about communicative competence and CLT

Questions	Options	Intermediate Students	Percent	Advanced Students	Percent
Do you know what "Communicative competence" means?	Yes	6	37.11	25	47.16
What area is communicative competence mostly concerned about?	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	14 45 4 3	14.43 46.39 4.12 3.09	5 40 5 3	9.43 75.47 9.43 5.66
Which skill matters for you?	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	30 51 3 2	30.92 52.57 3.09 2.06	15 30 6 2	28.30 56.60 11.32 3.77
Are you satisfied with university English teaching?	Yes No Neutral	55 35 7	56.70 36.08 7.21	35 15 3	66.03 28.30 5.66
Did you meet your demands for which you came to university?	Yes No Neutral	65 25 7	67.01 25.77 7.21	20 30 3	47.16 56.60 5.66

Regarding the first question, 37.11% of students at the lower-intermediate level the term "communicative competence", while only 47.16% of students at the higher-intermediate level knew this term. This term is not very well-known among these students.

It is for sure necessary that the purpose and benefits of implementing CLT should be explained to students. Question two is designed to discover students' thoughts about the area that they think communicative competence is mostly concerned about. Although not too many students had heard the term "communicative competence", many seemed to understand what

communicative competence emphasizes. Many of the students at both levels believed that the communicative teaching approach focuses on speaking skills (because students are exposed to various communicative activities, such as group discussions, role playing, and debating). Question three is designed to discover students' thoughts about the four basic skills in English learning. Not surprisingly, students at both levels believed speaking is the most important skill – 52.57% of the lower-intermediate students and 56.60% of the higher-intermediate students chose this skill. The listening skill was chosen by around 30% of the students in both levels. Few students regarded reading or writing as the most significant skill when learning English. Also, few students chose two skills altogether because they might believe, for example, that speaking and listening skills inherently go together. Generally speaking, as students have to go to interviews or communicate with various people after graduation, speaking seems to be the most important skill for them However, the components of communicative competence, which are linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Dai & Chen, 2008; Hedge, 2000), and the purpose of CLT are far more complicated. The last question was meant to determine lower-level students' and higher-level students' satisfaction and expectations with UET. Among the lower-intermediate students, 56.70% thought positively about learning English at university and believed that UET satisfied them. However, many higher-intermediate students felt that UET didn't meet their expectations. Their reasons were that they did not learn useful things and that their English ability had not improved, there was not enough opportunity to practice English in class, class is boring, and they did not like the teaching method.

2.9. Implications

From the questionnaire, we can see that quite a number of students still hold great desires for learning English at university; improving speaking skills is one of the most important things for students. As Hedge (2000, p. 71) notes, "communicative language teaching sets out to involve learners in purposeful tasks which are embedded in meaningful contexts and which reflect and rehearse language as it is used authentically in the world outside the classroom". Therefore, I believe that CLT is useful for creating a learning environment and should be implemented in more Iranian universities. Also, curriculum design and class size should be adapted to better fit this teaching method. Developing students' communicative competence should help students more easily use their English. Their pragmatic competence can also be developed through cultivating their English ability using this teaching method, allowing students to learn English in a more practical way. Scovel (2006, 19) points out that "[communicative competence] does not neglect grammatical competence; it simply builds upon it by emphasizing that other skills need to be acquired if one is to become a fluent and accurate speaker of another language". Therefore, it is also necessary to have a post-communicative model when implementing CLT. ELT in Iran needs to be discussed by both teachers and students so they might gain a proper understanding of the aim and how ELT can be further developed and reformed. According to Bygate (2001, 17-28), teaching English is not simply providing "the opportunity for learners to use language in order to communicate meaning without focusing on accuracy" and "a distinct methodology and syllabus may be needed".

3. CONCLUSION

This paper talked about the acquisition of communicative competence. The most important thing is communication, i.e. through early imitation or repetition, social interaction and enculturation, children can obtain the rules of speaking in their speech community, thus become a member of their society.

The use of UET will produce new English speakers, especially in EFL countries such as Iran. We should also understand that it is necessary for UET to have reasonable aims and requirements, and that it is necessary to improve current teaching methods to improve students' oral English proficiency. Awakening and developing students communicative competence is mandatory for ELT in Iranian universities, and should be a priority when teaching and learning English today. University English teachers should be armed with ample knowledge to guide students in the process of learning English. Therefore, it is promising to implement integrated skills into English teaching when promoting the communicative teaching approach. We should look at CLT as a task within the bigger framework of ELT. Therefore, from the discussions above, it will be suitable to implement the communicative language teaching approach to help university students in Iran improve their English skills way more efficiently.

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