

# Communicative Competence

*Sandra J. Savignon*  
Pennsylvania State University

## **Framing the issue**

The introduction of the construct communicative competence in discussions of second/foreign language proficiency dates from the early 1970s. Although the term itself may have been new, the underlying concept it represented was in fact rather straightforward and certainly nothing new: if the purpose of language study is language use, then the development of language proficiency should be guided and evaluated by the learner's ability to communicate. In naturalistic (non-classroom) settings, human language communication of course takes both oral and written forms and develops in one or more languages wherever social interaction occurs.

Given the 1960s academic theories in linguistics and learning psychology upon which the prevailing recommendations for classroom language teaching methods and materials were based, however, the introduction of *communicative competence* as a guide for the teaching and evaluation of learners proved nothing short of revolutionary. Early advocates were met with skepticism if not outright hostility. This brief summary considers the underlying support, both theoretical and empirical, for communicative competence as a goal of 21st century second/foreign language pedagogy and evaluation along with the implications of the construct for shaping classroom practice in the many different contexts in which English is taught.

## **Making the case**

An appreciation for the revolutionary impact of early proposals for an approach to language teaching that would reflect an underlying construct of communicative competence is best gained against a backdrop of the established methodology of the mid-twentieth century. In the 1940s linguists at the University of Michigan were engaged in developing materials for teaching English to international students studying in the US. Dissatisfied with prevailing grammar-translation materials for their purpose, they looked instead to the dominant language and learning theories of the time: structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. Language was seen as a

set of grammatical structures – phonemes, morphemes and syntax – that could be learned through extensive drilling of grammatical patterns and pronunciation. At about the same time, US entry into World War II had resulted in a military need for speakers and interpreters of a wide range of native languages, some of them unwritten. The result was the Army Specialized Training Program (ATSP), an oral-based program involving intensive study and drill.

Commercialization of “army method” methods and materials for wider use in US schools took place during the Cold War period that followed the war itself. Impetus came in 1957 with the successful launching by the Soviet Union of Sputnik, the earth's first artificial satellite. Alarmed US officials set off a race to compete with Soviet technological advances. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1959 provided funding to improve education at all levels in the fields of science, math and foreign languages. Intensive summer institutes for foreign language teachers were designed to develop what was for many a non-existent ability to actually understand and speak the language they were teaching while at the same time training them in what would become known as the audio-lingual method, the “New Key” in language teaching. Seminars at the core of each institute taught teachers the basics of structural linguistics and behaviorist learning theory. The grammar-translation method with which teachers were familiar was characterized as a rusty old key, ill-suited to unlocking the door to language proficiency.

With continued government support for materials development and teacher training, the audio-lingual method was claimed to have promoted language teaching to a science. Teaching of “the four skills”, (listening, speaking, reading and writing, in that order) through memorization of sample “dialogs” and drilling of grammatical patterns to avoid “errors” and attain “mastery” became the new pedagogical model that would influence teacher practice not only in the US but in classrooms worldwide. With the introduction of the tape recorder to provide native speaker models of pronunciation and grammar, language “laboratories” sprung up in schools across the land to enhance the use of audio-lingual materials. Development of the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to assess English proficiency for international applicants seeking admission to US schools dates from this period.

An initial challenge to the underlying theories of audio-lingualism came with assertions by a young US structural linguist and cognitive scientist Noam Chomsky (1958) that human language development, or *linguistic competence*, was much more creative than that represented by Skinnerian behaviorism. Hymes (1972), a sociolinguist concerned with language use in social

interactions, subsequently used the term *communicative competence* to provide a much broader view of language use. Speakers need know not only grammatical structures but norms of usage and appropriacy in a given social context. In his emphasis on function and social context in language use Hymes was influenced by the European Prague School of functional linguistics. His scholarship offered a perspective on language largely ignored within the US where the enthusiasm for what can rightly be seen as a Chomskyan revolution resulted in the establishment of independent departments of linguistics at major universities.

At about this same time, a young teacher in the language teaching profession itself, adept at drilling dialogs and patterns in both NDEA summer institutes and college courses of the 1960s, was discouraged by the repeated failure of learners to use structures and vocabulary they had rehearsed when offered opportunities for spontaneous interaction. In her subsequent comparative study of three groups of beginning college French learners at the University of Illinois she found that time devoted to practice in spontaneous communication, with all the grammatical and pronunciation errors that such communication inevitably implies, was essential to developing what she termed *communicative competence*. At the end of the 18-week course of study learners in the experimental group who had engaged in unscripted classroom communication in place of laboratory drills to "reinforce patterns" far excelled learners in the control group in their ability to use French in a variety of unscripted communicative tasks. Equally important, they demonstrated a grammatical accuracy (linguistic competence) equal to those who had spent time repeating patterns in a language lab (Savignon, 1972).

The findings were the first to challenge audio-lingual theory by providing empirical evidence that for beginning adult learners classroom practice in spontaneous communication contributed to the development of communicative competence with no loss of grammatical accuracy. A collection of role plays, games, and other communicative classroom activities were developed subsequently for inclusion in the adaptation of the French CREDIF (Centre de Recherche et d'Étude pour la Diffusion du Français) materials, *Voix et Visages de la France*. The accompanying guide (Savignon, 1974) described their purpose as that of involving learners in the experience of communication along with providing them with the strategies to do so. Teachers were encouraged to provide learners with the French equivalent of expressions like 'What's the word for...?', 'Please repeat', 'I don't understand', expressions that would help them to participate in the negotiation of meaning. These and other coping strategies became the basis for subse-

quent identification by Canale and Swain (1980) of *strategic competence* in their proposal of a three component framework for communicative competence, along with *grammatical competence* and *sociolinguistic competence*. Savignon (1983) subsequently used this framework in elaborating an approach to classroom practice consistent with the underlying construct of communicative competence.

Meanwhile, in Europe during the 1970s the language needs of a rapidly increasing group of immigrants and guest workers, and a rich linguistic tradition that, as noted above, included social as well as linguistic context in description of language behavior, led to the Council of Europe development of a syllabus for learners based on functional-notional concepts of language use. Derived from functional linguistics that views language as meaning potential and maintains the centrality of context of situation in understanding language systems and how they work, a threshold level of language ability was described for each of the languages of Europe in terms of what learners should be able to do with the language (van Ek, 1975). Functions were based on assessment of learner needs and specified the end result, the goal of an instructional program. Without reference to methodology, the term *communicative* was used to describe programs that used a functional-notional syllabus based on needs assessment, and the language for specific/purposes (LSP) movement was launched.

Concurrent development in Europe focused on not only the goals but the *process* of communicative classroom language learning. In Germany, for example, against a backdrop of social democratic concerns for individual empowerment articulated in the writings of sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1970), language teaching methodologists took the lead in the development of classroom materials that encouraged learner choice and increasing autonomy (Candlin, 1978). Their systematic collection of exercise types for communicatively oriented English teaching were used in teacher in-service courses and workshops to guide curriculum change.

### **Pedagogical implications**

In time, the inadequacy of a four skills model of language use would come to be recognized and the shortcomings of audio-lingual methodology widely acknowledged. Along with a general acceptance of the complexity and interrelatedness of skills in both written and oral communication and of the need for learners to have the experience of communication, to participate in the *inter-*

*pretation, expression and negotiation of meaning*, newer, more comprehensive theories of language and language behavior came to replace those that had looked for support to American structuralism and behaviorist psychology. Aided by the development of audio and visual recording technology, the 1970s marked the beginning of an explosion of research in both first and second language development based on observable data as opposed to extrapolation from general theories of language and learning.

The expanded, interactive view of language behavior these studies provide presents a number of challenges for classroom language teachers. Among them, how should form and function be integrated in an instructional sequence? What is an appropriate norm for learners? How is language proficiency to be measured? Acceptance of communicative criteria entails a commitment to address these admittedly complex issues. Equally important, it requires a new focus on teacher education to ensure that teachers themselves have the communicative competence to provide learners with the kinds of spontaneous interaction they need.

The nature of the contribution to language development of both form-focused and meaning-focused classroom activity remains a question in ongoing research. The optimum combination of these activities in any given instructional setting depends no doubt on learner age, nature and length of instructional sequence, opportunities for language contact outside the classroom, teacher preparation, and other factors. However, for the development of communicative competence, findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience. Grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences. Nor should explicit attention to form be perceived as limited to sentence-level morphosyntactic features. Broader features of discourse, sociolinguistic rules of appropriacy, and communication strategies themselves should be included.

Berns (1990), a sociolinguist who has focused on norms in the teaching English as an international language stresses that the definition of a communicative competence appropriate for learners requires an understanding of the sociocultural contexts of language use. In addition, the selection of a methodology appropriate to the attainment of communicative competence requires an understanding of sociocultural differences in styles of learning. Curricular innovation is best advanced by the development of local materials which, in turn, rests on the involvement of classroom teachers.

The highly contextualized nature of communicative language teaching (CLT) is underscored again and again. It would be inappropriate to speak of CLT as a teaching method in any sense of that term as it was used in the 20th century. Rather, CLT is an approach that understands language to be inseparable from individual identity and social behavior. Not only does language define a community but a community, in turn, defines the forms and uses of language. The norms and goals appropriate for learners in a given setting, and the means for attaining these goals, are the concern of those directly involved. Related both to the understanding of language as culture in motion and to the multilingual reality in which most of the world population finds itself is the futility of any definition of a "native speaker", a term that came to prominence in descriptive structural linguistics and was adopted by teaching methodologists to define an ideal for learners.

Whatever the subject matter, assessment is often the driving force behind curricular innovations. Demands for accountability along with a positivistic stance that one cannot teach that which cannot be described and measured by a common yardstick increasingly continue to influence program content and goals. Irrespective of their own needs or interests learners prepare for the tests they will be required to pass. In the case of English language proficiency, high-stakes tests often determine future access to education and opportunity. The ongoing development and revision of language assessment policies to reflect current understanding of communicative competence is therefore essential to the promotion of communicative classroom practice.

Disappointment with both grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods for their inability to prepare learners for actual communication, along with enthusiasm for an array of alternative methods increasingly labeled "communicative", has led inevitably to no small amount of uncertainty as to what are and are not essential features of CLT. Thus, a summary description of communicative competence would be incomplete without brief mention of what CLT is not. CLT is not concerned exclusively with face to face oral communication. Communicative principles apply equally to reading and writing activities that involve readers and writers in the interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning; the goals of learning depend on learner needs in a given context. CLT does not require small group or pair work. Group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for communication, but classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature

and may well be inappropriate in some contexts. Finally, teaching for communication does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness.

Terms sometimes used to refer to features of communicative teaching include 'task-based', 'interactive', and 'process-', 'inductive-' or 'discovery-' oriented. Immersion programs, study abroad, and content-based instruction of the kind sometimes found in professional courses for adults offer fuller and often privileged examples of opportunities to develop communicative competence. For mainstream public education however a major hurdle in the widespread adoption of a more communicative approach has proven to be the attitudes, training and practices of classroom teachers. Considerable resources are currently being devoted worldwide to respond to the need for language teaching to meet the communicative needs of learners in an increasingly global society. Whether in Europe, Asia or the US, there are reports of reform efforts confronting issues of coordination among language teachers and teacher educators over language policy and curricular and methodological innovation. (Savignon, 2002).

The challenges facing classroom innovation no doubt reflect to some extent the relatively new status of modern languages in formal school curricula. Prior to the 20th century the study of Greek, Latin and other classical languages was valued above all for the development of analytical skills. Modern languages were learned informally for communication through exchange and travel. With the gradual acceptance of modern languages as worthy of inclusion, teachers eager for respectability and esteem took care to teach them on the grammar-translation model prized by their colleagues in the classics. A similar pattern persists today. The findings of studies of US teacher practice echo those of classroom observations worldwide. Teachers remain adamant about explicit attention to form through practice drills, completion of textbook activities and grammar practice worksheets. Long held professional values and beliefs and specific instructional rituals often reflect how teachers themselves have been taught.

For language teaching to represent true change not only in theory but in classroom practice, a reform of goals, materials and assessment is insufficient. Attention needs to focus on increased opportunities for both pre-service and in-service teachers to experience and practice ways of integrating communicative experiences into their lessons for beginning and advanced learners alike. Teacher collaboration with institutional support is essential to promote and sustain collaboration, innovation and change.

**SEE ALSO:** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Communicative Language Testing, Audio-Lingualism, Native Speaker Fallacy

## References

- Berns, M. S. (1990). *Contexts of competence: Social and cultural considerations in communicative language teaching*. New York: Plenum.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, (1) pp.1-47.
- Candlin, C. (1978). *Teaching of English: Principles and an exercise typology*. London: Langenscheidt-Longman.
- Chomsky, N. (1959). A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior. *Language*, 35 (1), pp. 26-58.
- Habermas, J. (1970). Toward a theory of communicative competence. *Inquiry*, 13 (1-4), pp. 360-375.
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In Pride J. and Holmes, J. (eds) *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. pp. 269-293.
- Savignon, S. J. (1972). *Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign Language Teaching*. Philadelphia: The Center for Curriculum Development.
- Savignon, S. J. (1974). Teaching for communication. In Coulombe, R. *Voix et visages de la France: Level I (Teachers' Guide)* Chicago: Rand McNally. (Reprinted in *English Teaching Forum*, 1978, 16, pp. 2-5, 9.
- Savignon, S. J. (1983). *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley
- van Ek, J. (ed). (1975). *Systems development in adult language learning: The threshold level in a European unit credit system for modern language learning by adults*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.