

*COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE:
A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH*

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I Corinthians 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (Revised Standard Version)

In the above verse from the Bible, the apostle Paul uses the word “tongues” to refer to languages that were spoken in a time of religious fervor, and which were considered by some to be a way of communicating with God through the help of the Holy Spirit. These speakers of “tongues” were not concerned if any other person in their immediate audience understood them or not since they were trying to communicate with God, although Paul indicates that their speaking was sometimes interpreted. At other times, the Holy Spirit gave the apostles and other believers the ability to speak to many people in many languages for the specific purpose of giving the message of God’s love to the world. The students in our language classes, however, usually have a more secular audience and are learning a language in order to be understood by their immediate audience, and they have the more general purpose of wanting to be able to communicate socially with other people. In present research, these students are said to be wanting to improve their “Communicative Competence.”

Several researchers attribute the creation of the term “Communicative Competence” to Dell Hymes as a contrastive form to Chomsky’s “linguistic competence.” Theodore V. Higgs and Ray Clifford say that Hymes defined the term “as consisting of the na-

tive speaker's intuitive knowledge of the linguistic rules of his language and also his knowledge of the social rules . . . that define the total environment in which communication is to take place."¹

H.H. Stern presents a helpful chart in his book, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*.² It is a chart of change and innovation in language teaching from the 1880's to the present. This chart shows that a new methodology was developed about every one or two decades, each theoretically building on or modifying or replacing past methods. The focus in the 1980's is on some communicative approaches.

Communicative approaches break with past teaching practices primarily in the emphasis given to grammar and grammatical structures. The feeling that some now have is that knowing grammatical structures does not mean that foreign language learners can use that language in realistic situations. Wilga M. Rivers says:

Materials writers and classroom teachers realized that students needed to express ideas in correct grammatical patterns (or in incorrect patterns as they struggled to express ideas and concepts for which they did not yet have the linguistic means.) Students needed also to know the culturally acceptable ways of interacting orally with others--appropriate levels of language to use in different situations; conversational gambits; what gestures and other body language were appropriate; when one might intervene in conversation and when one should wait for others; which questions and comments might be made and which would offend. They also needed to understand the message content of stress and intonation.³

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It should be pointed out that Rivers does not go so far as to say that linguistic competence should be abandoned in favor of cultural or social studies, or that grammar should be sacrificed for the sake of fluency. Indeed, it would seem impossible to do so. Earl W. Stevick echoes the same concern when after telling of his own experience in learning a foreign language in the era of "accuracy before fluency" with its accompanying assumptions that any error should be avoided and that fluency was simply "the result of a large amount of practice," he says that he hopes that no-one "suggests that either accuracy or fluency be abandoned in favor the other."⁴

Stern gives his own definition of communicative competence which is, in part, "the intuitive mastery that the native speaker possesses to use and interpret language appropriately in the process of interaction and in relation to social context . . ." However, he also does not divorce communicative competence from linguistic competence. Instead, he says that communicative competence "implies" linguistic competence, but that the main focus of communicative competence is an "intuitive grasp of social and cultural rules and meanings that are carried by any utterance."⁵

If we accept these concepts of communicative competence, what does this mean for teachers? If the researchers and theorists are correct, it would seem to mean a move from classroom materials that present primarily grammatical material to writing syllabi and setting up a classroom atmosphere that provide the students with opportunities to use the target language with each other in simulated "outside-the-classroom" situations in the hope that in some miraculous way the students will gain some native-speaker intuition.

However, it may be impossible for a non-native speaker to gain this intuition for a second or foreign language, especially if he begins learning that language as an adult, since, as is obvious, na-

tive speakers gain much of this intuition in their childhood not only by using the language, but by living in the culture. Stern, therefore, suggests that we think about the communicative competence of a second language learner somewhat differently, and, perhaps, more realistically. He says that "besides grammatical and sociolinguistic competences . . . an additional skill which the second language user needs . . . is to know how to conduct himself as someone whose sociocultural and grammatical competence is limited, i.e., how to be a 'foreigner'."⁶ Therefore, a good part of the teacher's role is to do what he or she can to help the learners gain some intuition of the target language, but he or she should not expect perfection or even near perfection for a long while if ever. A more attainable and possible equally helpful goal is to help the learner to be able to avoid being impolite or awkward during encounters with native or near-native speakers and to be able to recover gracefully should such an encounter occur. Likely, the amount of time needed for this task in the classroom will depend partially on whether the target language is being taught in a country where the target is spoken or in a host country.

A related problem is pointed out by Stevick who suggests that readily noticeable errors will indicate inadequacies in linguistic competence, but that faulty communicative competence does not necessarily produce errors that stand out. Thus, at times the severity or number or both of linguistic errors may be so great that they will cover up a communicative problem so much that neither speaker or recipient are aware of it.⁷

Help with both these problems might come from River's suggestion that:

Communicative competence is not just the ability to chatter fluently in the new language within the framework of sociolinguistic rules of the native language. Where they are available, native speakers or

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near-native speakers with considerable experience of life in the other community should be brought into the classroom.⁸

However, attempting to give the learners some intuitive understanding of the target language is not the only, and perhaps not even the primary, problem facing language teachers. Higgs, writing in *Curriculum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher*, points out that "major problems can result when student needs and program goals fail to match." He goes on to say that if beginning and intermediate language courses are treated as a kind of preliterature program, then the students' "ability to speak and write accurately is often valued below the ability to analyze and criticize literary works." Higgs suggests that instructors in this situation must avoid the "temptation to teach reading through reading and stick to their communicative guns."⁹

Also, Higgs and Clifford state that what a student is specifically competent of doing must be taken into account. They feel that communicative competence should not be taken as a term for "communication in spite of language" but should be considered as "communication through language," and also, that there should not be a lessening of grammatical precision in the name of communicative competence.¹⁰

Another warning is given by Barry P. Taylor in the *TESOL Quarterly* for March 1983 as he writes:

Over the last few years there has been a strong movement away from highly structured, teacher-centered, grammar-based teaching in favor of task oriented, communicatively-based, learner-centered, teaching, often including the use of certain so-called "humanistic" approaches. Some of these new approaches, however, have been misunderstood and have caused considerable anxiety and confusion among both ESL

teachers and their students. ¹¹

In other words, if communicative methods are not used correctly, if they are misapplied, or if they are used just because they are the latest methodological fad, they are less satisfactory and, possibly, more dangerous for the student than some of the methods that preceded them. For example, Higgs and Clifford suggest that there is the danger of producing terminal learners; that is, learners who reach a certain level of language mastery but cannot improve their mastery even with further intensive training. Higgs and Clifford state that some terminal learners come from language programs which were taught by "instructors who had chosen not to correct their students' grammatical mistakes for philosophical, methodological, or personal reasons." They further state that "four semesters of instruction are enough to produce a terminal profile," and in fact, this profile may be created in less time. Also, students who are in programs that "place an early emphasis on unstructured communication activities . . . minimizing or excluding entirely considerations of grammatical accuracy . . ." may seem promising and may develop a large vocabulary and speak quickly, but they also obtain and fossilize incorrect structures thus becoming unable to progress in competency. ¹²

Taylor makes some suggestions for avoiding some problems in communicative classes. Concerning teaching materials, he suggests, among other things, creating materials that set up an "information gap" thereby creating a "real communicative situation"; that is, making one learner obtain from or give to another learner some information needed to complete a task. The point being that "communication" is necessary to close the "gap." He also advocates a low stress classroom atmosphere, trying to get the students "committed to accomplishing something" in the target language, and then providing instruction in the proper sequence "to meet those emerging needs." ¹³

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So, it seems that improving a student's communicative competence is desirable, but there should not be a sacrifice of grammatical competence. Also, we must realize that if we switch from an accuracy-first to a communicative program, we are switching from a grammatical base to an action base, and also may be switching from a program that aids further language study to one which is terminal. At this point in time, if a choice has to be made, most of the above researchers seem to favor retaining a firm grammatical base. As well, when making the above choice, several researchers also remind us that our students' emotions, needs, and desires must also be taken into account. In fact, perhaps this brings us back to the Bible verse which was quoted at the beginning of this paper and Paul's warning that without love, anyone who speaks in "tongues," whether teacher, student, or whoever, is simply a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. That is, our "communicative competence" may be directly related to our love for our fellow human beings.

NOTES

1 Theodore V. Higgs and Ray Clifford, "The Push Toward Communication," in *Curriculum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher*, ed. Theodore V. Higgs (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1982), p. 58.

2 H. H. Stern, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 113.

3 Wilga M. Rivers, *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981) p.84.

4 Earl W. Stevick, *Teaching and Learning Languages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 27-28.

5 Stern, p. 229.

6 Stern, p.229.

7 Stevick, p. 16.

8 Rivers,p. 237.

9 Theodore V. Higgs, "What Can I Do to Help?" in

Curriculum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher, ed. Theodore V. Higgs (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1982), p. 7.

10 Higgs and Clifford, p. 60.

11 Barry P. Taylor, "Teaching ESL: Incorporating a Communicative, Student-Centered Component," *TESOL Quarterly* 17, No. 1, (1983), p. 75.

12 Higgs and Clifford, pp. 65-67.

13 Taylor, pp. 79, 85.

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