From Communicative Competence to Communication Proficiency: A Theoretical Study

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Abstract

This study revisits the term 'communicative competence' and delves into its details. It presents briefly various models of communicative competence to show what has been written on this term, and then it introduces the term 'communication proficiency' as a broader term that includes all competencies and skills required for communication. It contributes to the field of research in applied linguistics as it helps scholars avoid the confusion associated with the term 'communicative competence' which is used differently by different scholars due to their different perceptions of the term 'competence'. Competence has been perceived by some scholars as knowledge of language while others have perceived it as an overall ability that includes all what we need to function in real life and fulfill communicative needs.

Keywords: Communicative competence, communicative proficiency, competence, performance

INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence has become the major goal of language learning though its meaning and underlying details are still debatable. While some scholars view communicative competence as language knowledge others view it in a broader way as an overall ability that includes both language knowledge and performance skills. Chomsky (1956) differentiated between competence and performance where he viewed competence as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language" and performance as "the actual use of language in concrete situations" (p. 4). On the other hand, Hymes (1972) introduced the term 'communicative competence' to refer to both 'the tacit knowledge' of the language and 'the ability to use it' for communication. This view reflects his perception of communicative competence as a broad term that includes all skills and abilities required for communication. This view was later on emphasized by Savignon (1972) who viewed communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" (p. 8) and Rivers (1973) who considered communicative competence as a synonym of "spontaneous expression" (p. 26) which means an ability to express oneself spontaneously and automatically in any interactive situation. Canale and Swain (1980) provide a detailed description of communicative competence similar to Hymes and they considered communicative competence as abstract knowledge that can be manifested in communicative performance. Prior to this, Widdowson (1978) considered language usage (knowledge of rules) and language use (skills to use this knowledge for communicative

purposes) as two sides of the performance. On the other hand, Wiemann & Backlund (1980) argued for incorporating competence and performance under one term called 'communicative competence'. As these views regarding competence and performance may create some confusion for scholars, this study surveys these various views on communicative competence and then introduces the term 'communication proficiency' as an alternative term that includes language knowledge and performance skills required for communication.

1. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The term communicative competence came into existence by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s and it has been then developed to become a major area of research in the field of applied linguistics. To understand what this term means, one can define the two words comprising it. Communicative competence means a competence to communicate where *competence* refers to a broad term of ability that involves language knowledge and the skills to use such knowledge while the word *communicative* relates to interacting and sharing ideas (Ahmed & Pawar, 2018). Communicative competence appeared as a reaction to Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language" and performance "the actual use of language in concrete situations" (p. 4). Chomsky related competence to the linguistic theory while performance was viewed as concerning with discovering the mental reality underlying the actual behaviour which, according to him, "surely can't constitute a subject matter of linguistics" (p.4). As a reaction to this, Hymes (1972) introduced the term communicative competence where he argued that what we need for communication is not merely the linguistic competence but an overall competence called 'communicative competence' whose framework can be viewed in four levels:

1. *Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;*

2. *Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of means of implementation available;*

3. *Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;*

4. *Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what it doing entails.* (Hymes, 1972, pp. 281)

By introducing this framework, Hymes (1972) referred to the linguistic competence as one element of the communicative competence and raised the significance of the sociolinguistic competence as well as the ability to actually perform communicative functions as components of the communicative competence. To Hymes (1972), the term 'communicative competence' is 'the tacit knowledge' of the language and 'the ability to use it' for communication. This leads us to the fact that the communicative competence is not only about grammatical knowledge but a combination of several competencies or skills of which grammatical competence or linguistic competence represents merely one element of this communication system. This was later on emphasized by Rivers (1973) who considered communicative competence as a synonym of "spontaneous expression" (p. 26) which means an ability to express oneself spontaneously and automatically in any interactive situation and Savignon (1972) who viewed communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" (p. 8); i.e. a

comprehensive system that allows us to communicate and it should include all what we need for communication.

Since the emergence of the term 'communicative competence' by Hymes (1972), several models have been proposed for this competence, each of which has been viewed as a further development for the previous ones. These models aimed at making communicative competence more comprehensive to include all competencies and skills required for communication. Among these models, the most common one is the model introduced by Canale and Swain (1980) and then developed by Canale (1983). Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence included three components, namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence whereas Canale's (1983) model was developed to include discourse competence as a fourth component of the communicative competence. The grammatical competence here includes students' knowledge of lexical items, grammatical rules, syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology and it seems to be similar to Hyme's (1972) and Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence while sociolinguistic competence is made up of the sociocultural rules of language use. It refers to the knowledge of what, when, why, to whom and how to say something in a given situation. The discourse competence refers to the rules that relate structures and meanings to form a larger discourse in oral or written language or the rules of coherence and cohesion in the terms of Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 8). The strategic competence refers to the verbal and non-verbal compensating strategies that may be called into action to compensate for the lack of language knowledge. These strategies were raised before in Tarone (1978; 1980) as strategies that are used by the individual to overcome communication problems when his language structures or vocabulary are not adequate to convey his thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, other models have also been proposed later on to include other components for such an ability required for communication. Bachman (1990) proposed a model for communicative ability in language assessment that was later on developed by Bachman and Palmer (1996). In this model, the pragmatic competence was conceptualized as a component of the communicative competence or what was called 'communicative language ability'. This model consists of three components, namely language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. Language competence includes organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence or knowledge was viewed in this model as a competence that comprises grammatical competence, as in Canale and Swain (1980) and textual competence which is similar to Canale's (1983) discourse competence. On the other hand, the pragmatic competence was conceptualized in two parts, namely illocutionary (functional) competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence refers to the competence of expressing or perceiving the intended meanings or functions, and comprises four macro functions, namely ideational functions "use of language to express propositions or to exchange information about knowledge or feelings" (pp. 92-93) such as descriptions, presenting knowledge in a lecture, expressing feelings…etc.), manipulative functions "those in which the primary purpose is to affect the world around us" (p.93) and comprise three types of functions, namely instrumental functions (using language to get things done such as requests or suggestions), regulatory functions (controlling others' behaviour as stating rules, laws, and norms of behavior) and interactional functions (using language to maintain interpersonal relationships like greetings, exchanging compliments, apologies, …etc.), heuristic functions (using language to extend the knowledge of the world such as learning and teaching, problems

solving, conscious memorizations…etc.) and imaginative functions (using language to create or extend our knowledge of our environment for humorous or esthetic purposes such as telling jokes or creating figurative language and metaphors). These functions constitute a major part of language and communication and they seem to be similar to those language functions presented by Halliday (1975, pp. 11-17). The second component of the pragmatic competence is the sociolinguistic competence which refers to "the sensitivity to, or control of the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use context; it enables us to perform language functions in ways that are appropriate to that context" (p. 94). This sensitivity can be related to variety in dialects, register or cultural references. The second component of this model was 'the strategic competence' which somehow differs from Canale's (1983) strategic competence because it refers to a broader ability of assessment, planning and execution strategies. The last component of this communicative language ability is the psychophysiological mechanisms which refer to performance skills. (Bachman, 1990, pp.81-108)

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1995) also proposed a model of communicative competence for language teaching purpose in which they added actional competence to Canale's (1983) model to become five components, namely linguistic competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, and actional competence. The actional competence here refers to learner's ability to perform speech acts. It was then developed in Celce-Murcia (2007) to become interactional competence which refers to three competencies, namely actional competence (performing speech acts such as apologizing, blaming, requesting…etc.), conversational competence (how to begin and close conversations, how to establish and change the topic…ect.) and non-verbal/paralinguistic competence (such as body language and other non-verbal signs and non-linguistic utterances like time fillers) (pp. 48-49). One more component was also added in this model called 'formulaic competence' which refers to "fixed and prefabricated chunks of language that speakers use heavily in everyday interactions" such as routines (how do you do?/ I am fine, thanks. How are you?), collocations (spend money, statistically significant) ….etc. (p. 46).

Communicative competence, as shown above, refers to an ability to communicate rather than merely the underlying system of language. Even if some models might create some confusion regarding the term *competence* itself and the position of language four macro skills in this competence, the researcher thinks that this term should refer to a broader ability that includes language knowledge and performance skills. In this regard, Alcón, as cited in Jordà (2005) and Belmonte and McCabe (2004), proposed a model of communicative competence in which the language four macro skills (listening, speaking reading, and writing) were conceptualized as a component of the communicative competence called psychomotor skills. In this model, two other components, namely discourse competence and strategic competence are there to interact with these skills to constitute the communicative competence. The discourse competence comprises linguistic competence, textual competence and pragmatic competence while the strategic competence refers to the strategies used for compensating linguistic or sociolinguistic deficiencies. Usó-Juan and Martiníz-Flor (2006) also proposed a model of communicative competence appealing for integration of the four skills in communicative competence. Their model is composed of five components, namely discourse competence, linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence and intercultural competence. Prior to this, Littlewood (1981) summarized four domains that make up students' communicative competence,

namely a. linguistic competence, b. communicative functions, c. skills and strategies for using language for communication and d. sociolinguistics. The researcher hereby highlights the importance of the language four macro skills as a major component of the communicative competence that should be developed simultaneously with the other competencies. He believes that grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge has nothing to do if a learner does not have the skills to use such knowledge in communication. Therefore, these macro skills should be considered as a part of learner's communicative competence if such competence is viewed as an ability to communicate.

It can be highlighted here that the term 'competence' has created some confusion among linguists due its widespread interpretations as some linguists conceptualized it in an absolute sense while others conceptualized it in a relative and dynamic sense equating it to an ability or proficiency (Taylor, 1988, p.148). Chomsky (1965) ignored some aspects of the communicative competence but he did not ignore the performance skills as he conceptualized competence in an absolute narrow sense that means linguistic competence while he perceived performance as something different from competence. Other linguists like Widdowson (1978), for example, considered language usage (knowledge of rules) and language use (skills to use this knowledge for communicative purposes) as two sides of the performance. On the other hand, Wiemann & Backlund (1980) argued for incorporating competence and performance under one term named communicative competence. The researcher hereby emphasizes that since the communicative competence has become the main goal of language learning and it refers to an ability to communicate; it should include both the underlying knowledge and the performance skills required for functioning in communicative settings. He also prefers to use the term 'communication proficiency' to refer to such an overall ability that includes both the underlying knowledge and the performance skills as a way to avoid the confusion related to the concept 'competence'.

2. COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCY

To avoid the confusion above-mentioned, this section suggests a model for the ability that EFL users need to communicate effectively in English. The previous discussion on communicative competence and performance skills led the researcher to suggest a model that integrates language skills and competencies under one concept called 'communication proficiency'. Communication proficiency refers to language user's ability for communication. It includes all the competencies and skills required for communication whether oral communication or written one. The communication proficiency model introduced by this study has its roots in Nunan's (1999), Shumin's (2002), and East's (2016) arguments which highlighted that all the various components of the communicative competence are considered as abilities underlying speaking proficiency; in addition to Alcon as cited Belmonte and McCabe (2004), and Ahmed and Pawar (2018) who considered language macro skills as a part of learners' communicative competence. It seems that some scholars highlighted the relationship between competence and performance and viewed competence as the underlying knowledge of the performance skills while some scholars highlighted communicative competence as an ability to communicate which includes both knowledge and skills. To this end, East (2016) considered the components of Canale' (1983) communicative competence as underling competencies of the

communicative proficiency. The communication proficiency construct he proposed consists of the three elements, namely a. underling communicative competence, b. four similar proficiencies namely, grammatical proficiency, sociolinguistic proficiency, discourse proficiency and strategic proficiency which refer to learner's skills to use the communicative competence in communication, and c. automaticity (pp. 26-27).

Hence, this study emphasizes that for enabling EFL learners to communicate well in English, we should help them develop a good level of communication proficiency in English. This communication proficiency comprises all the elements of the communicative competence in addition to the performance skills as shown in the fig. 1 below.
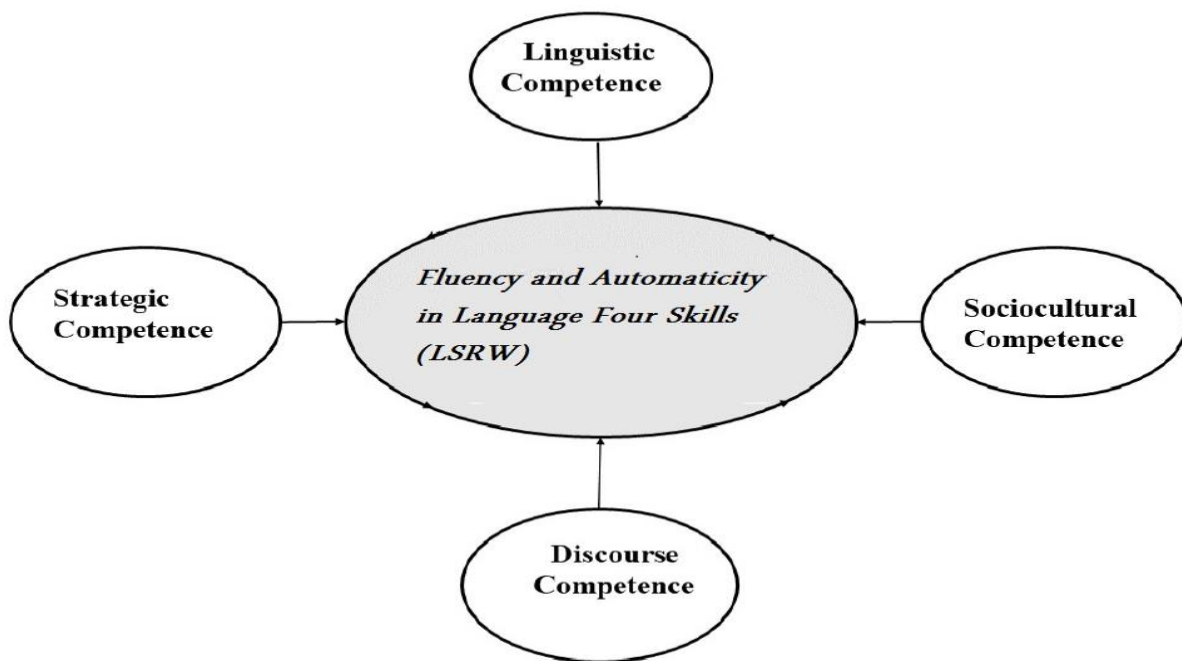

Fig. 1. Communication Proficiency

Communication proficiency in this model can be defined as an ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in English. It is a proficiency to function in real-life situations and achieve communicative needs. This proficiency includes all the components of the communicative competence suggested by Canale's (1983) model together with fluency and automaticity skills; i.e. the skills of using the underlying communicative competence effectively in communication through the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Fluency and automaticity skills stand at the heart of the communication proficiency of this model. The researcher hereby emphasizes that learner' acquisition of grammatical and sociocultural knowledge does not guarantee his ability to use it in communication unless he has acquired a good level of fluency and automaticity skills that enables him to access, retrieve and

use his underlying linguistic and sociocultural knowledge smoothly and rapidly in communication. Each of these components of communication proficiency represents a crucial part of EFL user's system of communication without which the system will not work properly to achieve communicative purposes. These components will be explained briefly in the following lines.

Linguistic competence in this model is similar to Canale's (1983) linguistic competence which includes learner's knowledge of linguistic aspects such as grammar, morphology, lexis, phonology, semantics...etc. Linguistic knowledge is very crucial for language users. It represents the fuel that language users need to function. Learners cannot communicate through a foreign language unless they have mastered good linguistic knowledge. They should be aware of what vocabulary and grammar they need to express meanings they have in mind. They should also know the rules of phonetics as spoken language cannot achieve its purpose well unless it is well uttered according to the phonetic rules. All these aspects of linguistics knowledge constitute the backbone of the language without which communication will not be possible. Such importance of linguistic knowledge sometimes makes some teachers and students overestimate its value in teaching and learning process at the account of the other competencies and skills. It should be highlighted here that linguistic knowledge is very important component of language user's ability for communication but it is not all what language users need to communicate. Linguistic knowledge alone does not allow language users to function in real life as other components such as sociocultural knowledge for example is very important and languages user's lack of such knowledge may make him face serious difficulties while communicating with native speakers of English. In the same time, having linguistic knowledge without having the automaticity and fluency skills that enable languages users to use this knowledge through the four language skills is meaningless as it will be just a knowledge in language learner's mind that can be used only in pencil and paper examination, and not in communication.

The second component of the communication proficiency is sociocultural competence. Sociocultural competence in this model refers to learners' knowledge of sociocultural rules in general, including sociolinguistics and pragmatics (language functions). Sociolinguistic competence refers to learner's knowledge of the social rules of language use. Each language has its social rules which can be different from other languages. These rules includes the rules of how to start interaction, how to close interaction, manners of communication with people of different ages or social statues as well as rules associated with communication settings such as interaction in street, TV meeting, friendly meeting, formal meeting …etc. The other element of this competence is the pragmatics which refers to learner's knowledge language functions or the pragmatic use of language, i.e. using language to express functions such as apology, requests, invitations…etc. A linguistic form usually has semantic and pragmatic meanings. The semantic meaning usually refers to the literal meaning expressed through the words used while the pragmatic meaning refers to speaker's intent from the linguistic form.

Discourse competence refers to learner's knowledge of coherence and cohesion rules. These rules are very important for forming a text whose phrases and sentences are well connected linguistically and logically. In other words, cohesion means tying words, phrases and sentences together in a good manner to form a larger text through using different linkers that express the relationships between these phrases and sentences. On the other hand, coherence

refers to tying ideas of a text or an article in a logical and consistent manner that makes it interesting to readers or listeners. This type of discourse technique is very important as putting ideas randomly in a text or an article makes it lose its meaning and boring for readers. Therefore, it should be highlighted here that a text or speech will achieve its function only when it is coherently and cohesively interconnected.

Strategic competence refers to the compensating strategies that a language user calls upon to compensate insufficiency of linguistic or sociocultural knowledge and to keep his communication channel on. They play a crucial role in communication and in language learning as well. They do not only help learners to pass meaning in their communication but also help them to participate in classroom interaction and activities regardless of their linguistic background. There are various types of these communication strategies such as paraphrasing, body language, asking your interlocutors for help, using time fillers, repetitions, asking interlocutor for repetition or clarification …etc.

So far as fluency and automaticity are concerned, the two terms are used in this research to refer to the smooth and automatic use of the language in communication through the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). However, the researcher views fluency as a broader term that includes automaticity. These terms 'fluency and automaticity' were discussed by the cognitive and developmental theorists and they have been considered as major issues in any skill acquisition including language acquisition (Segalowitz, 2003). Fluency was defined by Crystal (1987) as the "smooth, rapid, effortless use of language" (p. 421). It was also viewed by Schmidt (1992) as an "automatic procedural skill" (337); i.e. a skill for using the underlying language knowledge automatically. Therefore, fluency and automaticity skills in using language orally and in writing are a major part of our communication proficiency. Learners should not develop only language knowledge in terms of grammar, lexis, sociocultural rules… etc but they should practice language as a whole to develop their fluency in the language four skills.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper revisits the term 'communicative competence. It attempts to survey briefly some of its models. Then, it shows the source of confusion associated with the term 'communicative competence' and introduces the term 'communication proficiency' as a broader and more accurate term that refers to the ability EFL users need to communicate and fulfill communicative needs.

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