

The Evolvement of the Term ‘Communicative Competence’

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Abstract: This paper briefly discusses existing models of communicative competence. Theory of communicative competence, which started in the late 1960s, originates from Chomsky’s distinction of competence and performance. Chomsky’s term ‘linguistic competence’ was found narrow and inadequate so Hymes, Canale and Swain, and Bachman and Palmer elaborated on this term and introduced broader definitions.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Communicative Competence Models, Communicative Language Ability

1. Introduction

Hymes (1972) is the first to use the term ‘communicative competence’. He challenged Chomsky’s notion of ‘linguistic competence’ because he found the term inadequate. Hymes (1972) suggests that the theory of communicative competence should include four elements. Canale and Swain (1980) divided communicative competence into three categories: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) proposed a new model and he divided communicative competence into four categories: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence. Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a new comprehensive model and coined the term ‘communicative language ability’ and divided it into two categories: language knowledge and strategic competence.

2. The Evolvement of the Term ‘Communicative Competence’

The concept of competence was proposed by Noam Chomsky into applied linguistics. In his famous book “Aspects of the Theory of Syntax” (1965) Chomsky differentiates between competence and performance. While his concept of competence refers to language knowledge possessed by an idealized native-listener speaker; the concept of performance comprises the real use of language in concrete situations. Hymes (1972) is of the opinion that Chomsky’s distinction is not broad enough to describe behavior of language so he (1972) elaborated on Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence and coined the term communicative competence by adding language use and grammatical rules. Communicative competence is inherent grammatical competence and the ability to use it in different communicative situations for a range of purposes (Hymes, 1972). According to Hymes (1972) communicative competence is “what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings” (p.15). Hymes (1972) suggests that people have different language knowledge and abilities so a linguistic theory should address a real speaker-listener in a diverse speech community. Linguistic theory is integrated with communication theory and culture. In other words, communicative competence is a combination of language knowledge and other aspects of language use with skill essential for communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). Hymes (1972) concluded that theory of

communicative competence should include some elements and he put forward four levels of analysis in the use of language:

1. Whether (and to what extent something is possible (p.12)
2. Whether and to what extent something is feasible (p.14).
3. Whether and to what extent something is appropriate (p.16)
4. Whether and to what extent something is in fact done (p.18)

In the first level whether an idea can be conveyed through available linguistic knowledge is sought. In the second level what a learner can generate in a limited time and process is explored. In the third level the aim is to find out whether language is correlated with the setting it is used. In the final level, reality aspect of language use is investigated.

Widdowson (1978) in his attempt to define the term ‘communicative competence’ suggests that language learning is not merely the acquisition of grammar rules but also the acquisition of the ability to use language for communication. In a similar vein, Savignon (1972), who conducted a well-known study on the concept of communicative competence, offers the following definition: “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (p.8). She summarizes the characteristics of communicative competence as:

1. Communicative competence underlies meaning negotiation between people using the same coding.
2. Communicative competence comprises spoken and written form of language.
3. Communicative competence strives for comprehension of an individual's ability to effectively convey meaning within given contexts.
4. The difference between competence and performance should be clearly elucidated.
5. Communicative competence relies upon all individuals immersed.

A number of educators have examined the term communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) made an ultimate definition of the term as “the underlying systems of knowledge of vocabulary and skill in using the sociolinguistic conventions for a given language” (p.15). They both underpin the notion that communicative competence embraces skill and knowledge to process acquired knowledge. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a communicative competence model and included grammatical competence, sociolinguistic model and strategic competence in their model.

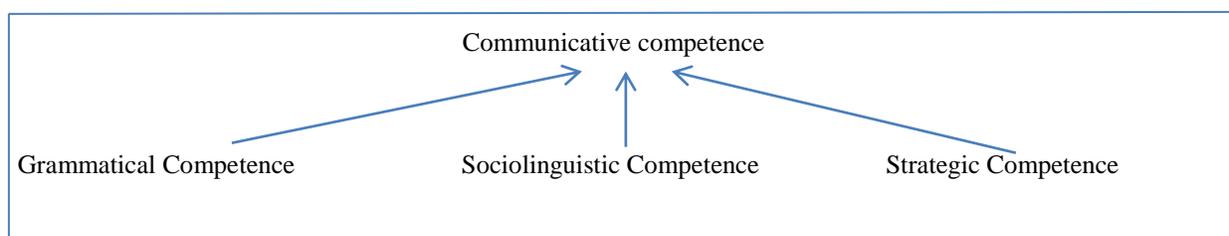


Figure 1: Communicative Competence Model Proposed by Canale and swain (1980).

Afterwards, the model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) was restructured by Canale (1983). He added discourse competence into the model and developed a four-dimensional model.

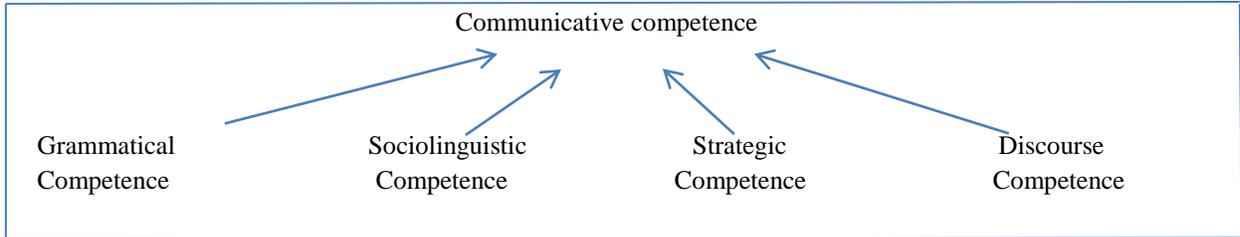


Figure 2: Communicative Competence Model Proposed by Canale (1983).

Grammatical competence refers to have a good command of language rules. It is the correct application of vocabulary rules, word and sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics. Simply put it refers to knowledge about language code. Learners skillfully manipulate these rules to construct meaningful sentences. Sociolinguistic competence is to use language appropriately in a communication situation. Discourse competence is the ability to combine ideas and to understand and express oneself in a specific language. Strategic competence is the use of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies skillfully when breakdowns occur in communication process. Building on Canale and Swain's theory of communicative competence, Bachman and Palmer (1996) developed a new model known as communicative language ability which is much more comprehensive. Bachman and Palmer (1996) argue that many characteristics of language users affect their communicative language ability.

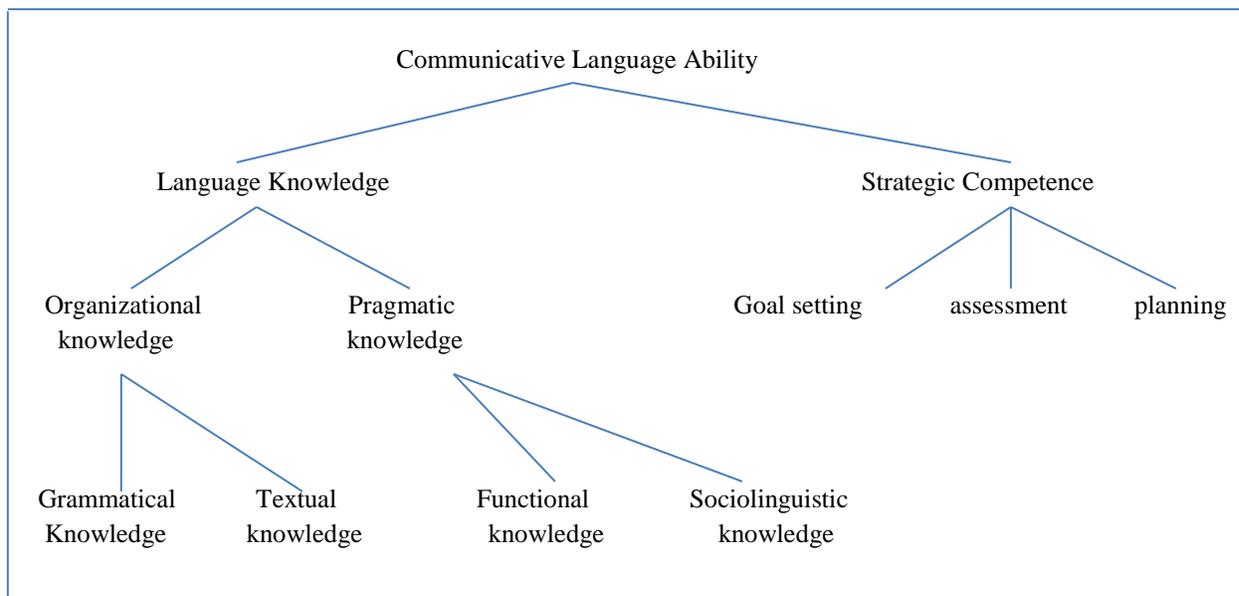


Figure 3: Bachman and Palmer's Model (1996).

In Bachman and Palmer's model (1996) grammatical knowledge includes several components: vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology. These elements enable learners to produce grammatically correct sentences. Textual knowledge in their model focuses on cohesion and rhetoric and allows learners to understand and generate spoken and written texts. Pragmatic knowledge concentrates on the link between language forms and it refers to abilities to create and interpret communication. Pragmatic knowledge is divided into two subcategories. Functional knowledge, which is also known as illocutionary knowledge, emphasizes the use language in order to express ideas. Sociolinguistic knowledge on the other hand is the appropriate use language utterances.

3. Conclusion

Communicative competence which started with the distinction of Chomsky's between competence and performance evolved over time. This paper briefly discusses the evolvement of the term 'communicative competence' and introduces the existing communicative models proposed by different linguists. Communicative competence stemmed from a challenge to the term 'linguistic competence' and became a complex model known as 'communicative language ability'.

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