The concept of communicative competence in teaching foreign languages

Sangin Boboev, Technological University of Tajikistan, Tajikistan
sanginboboev@gmail.com

Abstract

The article deals with a study and analysis of communicative competence in foreign languages teaching. It presents the historical overview and development of the notion of communicative competence, which include its establishment, stages of its development, and its components. Discussed are ideas of different linguists who were trying to determine whether communicative competence can serve the goals and aims in FLT or to what extent it is effective and useful for FLT.

In addition, it shows what methods and materials must be used in communicative language teaching to perform language activities leading to building components of communicative competence in FLT.

Keywords

communicative competence, competence, discourse, emphasize, to acquire, controversial, definition, communication, interaction

To define the concept of the communicative competence in teaching a foreign language, it is necessary to conduct linguistic-terminological analysis or to study its structure. The term communicative competence consists of two words "communicative" and "competence", which are widely used in teaching English language since the mid-twentieth. This term, i.e. communicative competence, is still remained controversial and is being under discussion of many linguists. Jelena Mihaljevic in her article (Defining communicative competence) emphasized that the central word in the syntagm "communicative competence" is "competence", but preferably it would be more appropriate to find the definition of both words, i.e. "communicative" (or communication) and "competence" separately.

Communication

The word communication is generally understood as giving information or sharing ideas. However, it is defined differently in most of dictionaries and by various linguists. For example, according to Longman Contemporary English Dictionary, it is brought as "communication is the process by which people exchange information or their thoughts and feelings" or "the way people express themselves so that other people will understand them". Stekauer (1995) defines

communication as an activity in which information of some sorts is transferred from one 'system' to another by means of some physical embodiment. Passov in his book "The Basis of Communicative methodology" agrees with Parigin (1971) that the communication   is a versatile process, which comes out at the same time as the process of interaction of individuals, and as a relationship of the people, and as a process of their interaction.

Supporting the ideas of Breen and Candlin (1980), Morrow (1977) and Widdowson (1988), Richards and Schmidt (1983) characterized the nature of communication as follows: communication

a) is a form of social interaction, and is therefore normally acquired and used in social interaction;
b) involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in form and message;
c) takes place in discourse and social contexts which provide constraints on appropriate language use and also clues as to correct interpretations of utterances;
d) is carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions such as memory constraints, fatigue and distractions;
e) always has a purpose (for example, to establish social relations, to persuade, or to promise);
f) involves authentic, as opposed to textbook-contrived language;
g) is judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes.

Moreover, Richards and Schmidt (1983) define communication as the exchange and negotiation of information between at least two or more individuals through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols.

Having looked through all the definitions made by various linguists, it is necessary to emphasize that the main concept of communication is exchanging information between individuals or expressing thoughts to each other which is considered the purpose of the language teaching.

Competence

Generally the word competence comes out not of the field of linguistics; however it has been brought to linguistics or become the central word for linguists and teachers of foreign languages in the middle of 1960s or beginning of 1970s. The use of competence in applied linguistic was introduced by Chomsky (1965), who made distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations). In addition, the word competence generally refers to the ability to do something in a satisfactory or effective way (Macmillan English

Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2007), the ability or skill to do something well or to a satisfactory standard (Longman Business English Dictionary, 2007) and the ability to do something successfully or efficiently (Oxford Dictionary of English, Revised Edition, 2005). Moreover, in reference with language or linguistics, competence is defined as: competence refers to one's underlying knowledge of system of a language – its rules of grammar, its vocabulary, all the pieces of a language and how those pieces fit together (Douglas Brown, 2000); competence is what we intuitively know about a language in order to be able to use it. It is the kind of internalized knowledge that allows us to distinguish well-formed from ill-formed sentences (Thornbury, 2006); competence – the term linguists use to describe roughly what we have so far rather ponderously been calling knowledge and skill (Jonson, 2001).

Communicative competence

In the last three decades of the twentieth century applied linguists were concerned with finding a new methodology of teaching foreign languages that focuses less on individual development and more on the effect of learners' interactions with each other, which is the goal of communicative language teaching. Foreign languages acquisition started to be understood as a creation of meaning through interactions among foreign languages learners. Since then, there appeared a new term known as "communicative competence" that has earned popularity amongst applied linguists and foreign languages teachers, who made communicative competence a predominant term in teaching foreign languages which remained as an appropriate term in applied linguistics that captures current issues in teaching English. Communicative competence consists of phonology, grammar (morphology and syntax), lexis, pragmatics, discourse and communication strategies (Yalden, 1987).

Moreover, the term communicative competence with its components started to be a controversial topic amongst applied linguists. For example, Hyme and Halliday disagree with linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky. Hyme opposes Chomsky's view about linguistic competence which is "ideal speaker-listener". Hyme looks at the real speaker-listener in that feature of language that Chomsky gives no account: *social interaction* (Savignon, 1983). In addition, both applied linguists and foreign language teachers found Hyme's concept of communicative competence particularly useful in teaching languages.

Components of communicative competence

To achieve their goals in teaching foreign languages, applied linguists divided communicative competence into components that identify the model of

communicative competence as a basis of curriculum design and the practice of language teaching. For example, following Hyme's theory and concept of communicative competence, Savignon (1983), Canale and Swain classified four components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence.

Grammatical competence

Grammatical competence is a mastery of linguistic code, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences.

Sociolinguistic competence

Sociolinguistic competence is an interdisciplinary field of enquiry dealing with social rules of language use. Sociolinguistics requires an understanding of social context in which language is used: the role of participants, the information they share, and the functions of interaction.

Discourse competence

Discourse competence deals with connection of series of sentences or utterance to form a meaningful whole and to achieve coherent texts that are relevant to a given context. The theory and analysis of discourse bring together many disciplines, for example, linguistic literary criticism, psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, print and broadcast media.

Strategic competence

Strategic competence is considered the most important component of communicative competence. It is a competence underlying our ability to make repairs, to cope with imperfect knowledge, and to sustain communication through "paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, and guessing as well as shifts in register and style".

Moreover, communicative competence in the CEFR (2001) is defined in term of knowledge and ability to use a language. It comprises three components: language competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence. However, the strategic competence is not included in the CEFR definition of communicative competence, but some of its subcomponents can be found in pragmatic competence of CEFR (chapter 5). In CEFR document each component of communicative competence has its subcomponents, for example, pragmatic competences subcomponents are discourse competence and functional competence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the analysis and studies conducted to define the concept of communicative competence has shown that at the present

moment communicative competence is considered an important and key component in the teaching and learning foreign languages. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine foreign language acquisition without becoming communicatively competent. The issue is that it is not enough to become knowledgeable about a foreign language, i.e. *to be aware of rules how the language functions,* but learners must be able to use the language in real communication. In the current condition of Tajikistan, all the linguists and foreign language teachers also began to pay special attention to the use of communicative competence in teaching foreign languages. For example, it is widely used at the secondary and university level, and also in the scientific-research pedagogical priority directions.

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Contact
Sangin Boboev, Technological University of Tajikistan,
Ul. N. Karabaeva 63/3, 734061 Dushanbe
Tajikistan
sanginboboev@gmail.com