

## ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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**Summary.** *When referring to the academic literature regarding foreign language teaching, the most relevant methodology is the communicative one since it helps the student develop the necessary competence for an efficient communication when interacting in real environments. This competence is known as communicative competence and has been discussed by various authors. The definition used in this paper is based on the one by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) and comprises structural competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and intercultural competence. The purpose of this paper is to propose different strategies for the assessment of each of these competences in an international university context.*

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, communicative approach, communicative competence, assessment in language teaching

### Introduction

In the 1970s, foreign language teaching underwent an important change of paradigm. Until then, most language teaching approaches studied language as a system of structures<sup>1</sup>. The rise of Pragmatics, a linguistic discipline that studies language as a system of human interaction, led to a different consideration of language itself. Language was not primarily a system of structures any more, but a tool for communication<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the method derived from this linguistic theory, the Communicative Approach, sought to enable students to be able to communicate in a

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<sup>1</sup> The dominant language approaches up to that moment were the Grammar Translation Method, the Natural Approach or the Audiolingual Approach, which are all based on a structuralist curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the Speech Act Theories developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) were of decisive impact.

foreign language. The knowledge of grammar structures had, in this context, a subsidiary function.

The objective foreign language teaching and learning aims at is the acquisition of the so called communicative competence, which measures the students' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. The term was introduced by Hymes in 1966<sup>3</sup>. The definition used in this paper is based on the one by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), but has slightly been adapted to our own teaching and evaluation circumstances. We distinguish between structural competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and intercultural competence and will provide a definition for each of the different subcompetences even though boundaries may not always be clear-cut. Furthermore, we are going to suggest different tools for the assessment of these competences that have been tried out in our own language teaching practice.

## **1. Structural competence**

Structural competence is probably the best defined and most studied subcompetence of communicative competence. It refers to mastery of the linguistic inventory of a language, i.e. the rules that govern its grammatical structures, word-formation, its lexical resources, its pronunciation and spelling (Canale 1983). In previous decades, structural competence was at the centre of second language teaching, proof of which can be found in textbooks based on the grammar-translation-method or the audiolingual method.

When we talk about structural competence it is necessary to distinguish between declarative knowledge (what students know about the language, e.g. using the auxiliary verb *do* for negation) and procedural knowledge (if students can use linguistic structures)<sup>4</sup>. The ultimate purpose of any teaching of language structures in a communicative context must be the acquisition of procedural knowledge.

This can be achieved by integrating grammar and lexical structures in meaningful teaching units that serve a communicative purpose, i.e. grammar and lexical units must be selected according to the communicative function or speech act that students should acquire and not viceversa as it still occurs in many language courses. We as teachers should start by asking what we want our students to be able to do with the language (e.g. order in a restaurant, talk about past experiences, etc.) and select language structures accordingly. This also implies that the same linguistic unit is taught more than once in different contexts, which helps students to retain it better<sup>5</sup>. Retention is also enhanced by taking an inductive approach to grammar-teaching, i.e. guiding students to discover patterns by themselves in a text or a set of structures instead of just presenting grammatical paradigms.

In keeping with these ideas, assessment must take place in a communicative context and should test students' linguistic performance rather than their linguistic knowledge. Adequate linguistic performance can only be assessed by taking into account the four language skills which should be tested in an integrated and not an isolated way and assessment tools must be selected accordingly. Multiple choice tests, for example, are

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<sup>3</sup> There are different definitions for communicative competence. Cf. Hymes (1966), Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990).

<sup>4</sup> cf. Anderson 1980 (*apud* Llobera 1995: 18)

<sup>5</sup> These ideas are based on the task-based approach to language teaching. For more information, see Sánchez (2004).

not the most appropriate tool to test linguistic performance although they can provide limited information on performance in receptive skills. A better option is cloze tests<sup>6</sup>. As students have to combine receptive and productive skills, these tests assess structural knowledge in an integrated way. The best option, however, are communicative tasks that combine performance in various skills like reading a text and writing a response (e.g. en e-mail, an argumentative essay, etc.) or listening to a text and summarising it in oral or written form.

## **2. Sociolinguistic competence**

Sociolinguistic competence can be defined as the capacity to use the rules and conventions that govern communication in a specific target culture. These rules and conventions do not only relate to form (how a message should be expressed in a specific context) but also to contents (which topics are appropriate in a given context in the target culture)<sup>7</sup>. Students have to show that they are able to master these culture-specific aspects and behave appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts. Difficulties in the acquisition of this subcompetence will depend on the distance between the target culture and the student's original culture.

Sociolinguistic competence can be taught by presenting students with a variety of communicative situations like introducing people, telephone calls, formal and informal meetings, letters of application or complaint, CVs, etc. drawing their intentions to the phrases and expressions used in these contexts as well as other aspects like treatment (formal and informal *you* in many languages), courtesy, conversation rules, non-verbal communication and culture-specific text organisation.

As well as structural competence, sociolinguistic competence should be tested in as authentic a way as possible. So we would discourage again the use of multiple choice tests as they only test recognition but provide no information if students actually are able to *act* appropriately in a communicative situation. Sociolinguistic competence is heavily linked to productive skills and should be tested through these. Therefore, a good tool would be role-plays where students have to show how they perform in a semi-authentic context<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, students can be asked to produce written texts that require specific sociolinguistic behaviour, like private or formal correspondence.

Furthermore, we would suggest combining assessment of sociolinguistic and structural competence as these two subcompetences can be tested in the same communicative tasks.

## **3. Discourse competence**

Discourse competence can be viewed both as a productive or a receptive skill. As a productive competence, it is the ability of organising conversation and written text

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<sup>6</sup> Texts where certain words have been removed.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Canale 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Classroom simulations will never be fully authentic as they lack an authentic context.

logically and understandably, or as Trujillo and Ortega (2010) define it: “the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language.” Its receptive aspect, sometimes also called rhetorical competence, is defined by Sánchez and García (2008) as “the skill of profiting from multiple discourse markers that guide readers in the text interpretation process”.

A proficient discourse/rhetoric user would therefore be able to distinguish between topic and focus, given and new information (use of deictics, for example), as well as use time, sequence, cause and effect and other markers, and vary style and register according to context etc.

It is the teacher’s role to provide classroom activities that promote both written and spoken discourse in meaningful contexts, providing a rising degree of complexity and increasingly fomenting student autonomy. As students progress, activities should be moving from linguistically simple exercises like gap-fill or multiple-choice (written discourse) or reading or acting out of dialogues (oral discourse) to activities eliciting more complex skills, such as debate or narration.

As an example, when teaching paragraph writing, we could sequence activities as follows<sup>9</sup>:

1. Identification of topic sentence, body and concluding sentence in given paragraphs
2. Identification of discourse markers
3. Categorising discourse markers
4. Ordering jumbled sentences to form a coherent paragraph
5. Adding topic sentence and conclusion to a given paragraph
6. Writing a paragraph, revising, rewriting

It is important to make sure students learn through meaning-focussed activities, i.e. to inform them of the objectives of the activity and the expected outcomes, and to relate the activity to other content areas, either from study or daily routines. Therefore, aspects like coherence and cohesion, thematic development and structure, flexibility, turn-taking etc. should be assessed in the contexts previously defined as relevant for the student. We strongly recommend a continuous assessment of students’ performance, taking into account the progress made from simple to more complex tasks, and assigning a higher value to more complex activities that integrate several subskills.

An excellent option for continuous assessment would be e-portfolios, i.e. digital environments where students can display their oral and written work. According to Heng-Tsung, D. and Shao-Ting, A. (2010), “a combined approach [...], with traditional methods operating as the primary assessment vehicle and e-portfolios acting as the secondary evaluation procedure”, would integrate formative and summative assessment methods of oral and written discourse competence, as the student would be encouraged to evaluate his/her progress by a drafting, error correction, revising and resubmission process. This process could also then feed into the subject programming, as teachers would be able to focus on specific weaknesses detected.

#### **4. Strategic competence**

The process of communication is referred to as “the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning” (Frey *et al* 1991, p. 344). In the case of Second Language

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<sup>9</sup> These activities will enable students to learn how to organise discourse in English-speaking countries. As discourse organisation is culture-specific, the teaching strategy needs to be adapted to each context.

Learners, the individuals sometimes use strategies that compensate their lack of structural competence in order to communicate. This is known as strategic competence. In this process linguistic and extralinguistic reference resources are used for the purposes of solving communication problems. These strategies can be verbal and non-verbal and they generally come into action for two reasons: “to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence; and to enhance the effectiveness of communication” (<http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kurazumi/peon/ccmodel.html>). In order to assess this competence, students can be asked to carry out computer based tasks. The following activity has proven to be very effective: students are paired up and asked to collaboratively describe a picture or situation using an online chat. It is very interesting to study the strategies that affect the content of the message; since students do not seem to focus on structure related competences and this is “why a non-native speaker can sometimes sound vague is possibly the fact that he or she is replacing the original meaning, the original goal, with a simpler message” (Mariani, 1994). These strategies can affect modality (ie: markers of politeness in English by Spanish students...) or whole speech acts: if the student can or cannot “use pre-topics in opening a telephone conversation” (Mariani, 1994). When a student is faced with a lexical problem, one of the easiest things to do is to borrow words from the L1, ie: *tiburons*, or use the generalization or approximation strategy, synonyms or antonyms, definitions and descriptions; ie: “*those disgusting black animals, insects*” meaning cockroaches.

## **5. Intercultural competence**

Closely linked to sociolinguistic competence is intercultural competence – also referred to as intercultural communicative competence, transcultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation. It can be defined as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini 2006: 12). The main difference with the abovementioned competence is the “ability to step beyond one’s own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds”; therefore it does seem to have a wider scope. The emergence of intercultural competence based research started -according Norris *et. al.* 2007- in the 50’s through the analysis of situations experienced by Peace Corp volunteers that were working abroad. It was “motivated by perceived cross-cultural communication problems that hampered collaboration between individuals from different backgrounds” (Norris *et. al.* 2007:1). Nowadays “the contexts for intercultural competence research expanded to include study abroad, international business, cross-cultural training, expatriates living overseas, and immigrant acculturation”(Norris *et. al.* 2007:2).

There are a wide range of options to assess Intercultural Competence. Due to lack of space only the ones that have proven to be most useful for Second Language (and Culture) Learners will be outlined:

The Behavioural Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Koester & Olebe, 1988; Ruben & Kealey, 1979) assesses individuals on the following dimensions: display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behaviour, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity. According to these authors there are three types of participants: Types I, II, and III. Type I participants are what Ruben called “competent cross-cultural communicators” and Type

III “were described as individuals who might face difficulties when attempting to communicate cross-culturally”.

The Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) (Fantini, 2000; 2006) includes the following dimensions: characteristics and domains of intercultural competence (relationships, communication, collaboration), dimensions of intercultural competence (knowledge, attitude), and language proficiency.

Assessing this competence is much easier nowadays than in the 50’s since teachers can rely on free popular IT applications (such as Facebook, Twitter or Messenger) to induce students to communicate and even carry out collaborative tasks with students from different countries or cultures. It is also useful in order to collect corpora that can be analysed in depth, since most of these applications allow data storage.

## **Conclusions**

To assess communicative competence as a whole, all its subcompetences must be taken into account, including those that have most been neglected in the past, like the strategic and intercultural competences. There are many different ways to assess and evaluate performance of the different skills that make up communicative competence and assessment tools must be selected according to the specific teaching context. Therefore this paper is intended to give language teachers ideas about how to approach assessment of communicative competence and is meant as a starting point for the development of further assessment tools.

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