

HISTORICAL VIEW ON CLIL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT OF LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

The term communicative competence captures the notion that the ability to use language in interaction requires not just control of linguistic form but also awareness of rules of use in different contexts. Communicative competence is a slippery term: different actors in second language (L2) research, education, and assessment interpret the term in a variety of ways and use it for a range of purposes, perhaps particularly in the field of languages for specific purposes (LSP). This is unfortunate because it is a key concept in LSP, as in applied linguistics more generally. Communicative competence can be considered to be the target of second language acquisition, a main goal of second or foreign language teaching and learning, or the object language testers seek to measure via performance tests. In addition, current interpretations of communicative competence may be somewhat questionable adaptations of Hymes' concept, modified and often simplified to reflect current approaches in both formal and functional linguistics, and to respond to practical concerns in language teaching and testing. This paper seeks to re-examine communicative competence from three perspectives - L2 research, teaching, and testing - highlighting problems in terms of theory and practice with respect to LSP. Drawing on recent research on indigenous assessment criteria, the paper concludes with a revised model of communicative competence for LSP, offering a richer interpretation closer to the original concept and to current concerns in the field.

Keywords: Language for specific purposes (LSP), communicative competence, language education, second language (L2) research, second and foreign language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence is one of the most important notions in languages for specific purposes (LSP) teaching and learning. Many key texts in LSP focus on language users' abilities to communicate effectively, or simply 'get things done' in particular contexts of communication. LSP is related to "the communicative needs of speakers of a second language in facing a particular workplace, academic, or professional context", and these needs include "not only linguistic knowledge but also background knowledge relevant to the communicative context in which learners need to operate". English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focuses on "the demands placed by academic or workplace contexts on communicative behaviors" and "the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English". The importance of contexts and goals for communication is clear, creating a natural connection between LSP and the notion of communicative competence (2. p. 672; 12. p. 371).

The origins of the term communicative competence

This concept was first proposed by Hymes in an essay where the sociolinguist argued for a linguistic theory which could focus on "the capacities of persons, the organization of verbal means for socially defined purposes, and the sensitivity of rules to situations". Hymes was

reacting to Chomsky's famous distinction between the competence of "an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly," on one hand, and "errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance," on the other. Hymes recognized this distinction as a contemporary interpretation of a tradition leading back to Saussure and even Humboldt, and questioned the prioritization of linguistic competence, that is, "tacit knowledge of language structure" over performance, or "imperfect manifestation of underlying system" (7. p. 3).

Hymes saw the restrictive view taken by Chomskyan linguistic theory as "almost a declaration of irrelevance" of sociolinguistics, and one which "omits almost everything of socio-cultural significance". Hymes sought to rehabilitate a sociolinguistic interest in rules of use, since these, he argued, "are not a late grafting" in child language acquisition processes, but are instead acquired at the same time as structural knowledge. He pointed out that even Chomsky admitted "the possibility of stylistic 'rules of performance'": since rules imply competence and thus contradict the competence/performance dichotomy, Hymes took up the challenge of modeling what he termed communicative competence.

This richer conception of competence includes four types of knowledge together with an "ability for use" which is related to each of the four dimensions. These are shown in Table 1, whose wording derives from Hymes' text.

For Hymes, communicative competence thus includes speakers' knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic rules as well as their ability to use this knowledge in interaction. It is distinct from actual language use in interaction, which depends not only on speakers but also their interlocutors and unfolding events, and comes under the heading of performance. This view thus calls into question Chomsky's competence/performance distinction between linguistic knowledge and language use. Where Chomsky set up a binary opposition, Hymes proposed three categories covering speakers' knowledge of language rules, their ability to use rules to interact, and actual language use during events involving others.

In the five decades since its initial formulation, the concept of communicative competence has evolved in different directions in different areas of applied linguistics. These include work on genre theory and academic literacy, for example, which focus on written language and are no doubt less central to our concerns with communicative competence in L2 education and assessment. The field of LSP has historical ties with three areas of applied linguistics which are arguably of most relevance here. Second language (L2) research, a relatively young discipline usually dated to Corder and Selinker, has traditionally often adopted an LSP perspective. LSP is also demonstrably a practitioner-led field with particular interest in addressing issues of teaching and learning. The field of language testing, too, is commonly involved in LSP due to the importance of language tests in many forms of institutional gatekeeping. How has the term communicative competence influenced these different disciplines? (8. p. 161-170).

Early inter-language research

The notion of competence in L2 research comes from understanding that learner language is more than the sum of its parts, not learned by piecing together words according to rules, but rather consisting in a subconscious, abstract system which informs real-time language processing. It is different from performance, which contains mistakes due to processing constraints such as memory. Corder was the first to note the systematic nature of L2 learner errors, and to view this as "evidence that the learner uses a definite system of learning at every

point in his development”. Corder’s L2 “system, or ‘built-in’ syllabus” led Selinker to coin the term inter-language as “a separate linguistic system” resulting from “the learner’s attempted production of a target language norm.” L2 researchers took up the challenge of describing this system, in terms of divergence from native-speaker norms, and with respect to development in linguistic accuracy, complexity and fluency over time. Originally under the banner of Chomskyan generative SLA, this cognitivist approach to interlanguage research has been perhaps most forcefully defended by Kevin Gregg with emphasis on “three key words: explanation, not description or prediction; acquisition, not use; competence, not behaviour”. Gregg rejects variationist approaches to L2 research, sociocultural theory, and complex dynamic systems theory on the same basis, reiterating an exclusive focus on the “linguistic competence(s) of an individual - the standard view in theoretical linguistics” and dismissing “what everyone likes to call ‘communicative competence’” out of hand (8. p. 11).

Theory underpinning communicative language teaching

As noted in the introduction, sociolinguists and applied linguists have historically taken a wider view of the domain of language study. Hymes famously claimed that “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless,” though his own work focused on sociolinguistic aspects of first language use. An early interpretation for L2 research of these wider dimensions of communicative competence was proposed by Canale and Swain. Concerning the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), these authors recommend giving priority to opportunities for “meaningful communicative interaction” in order to provide learners with “the information, practice and much of the experience needed to meet their communicative needs in the second language” (6. p. 27-8).

This model gives grammatical knowledge greater prominence than Hymes did, since here knowledge is restricted to the main categories of linguistic analysis (phonology, syntax, semantics), and seen as separate from sociolinguistic awareness. Critics like Widdowson have contested the priority accorded this kind of knowledge of the linguistic code in instrumentalizations of communicative competence in CLT. In real-world contexts, he argues: appropriateness is determined by variable contextual factors, and so communicative function is not inscribed in particular encoded forms. To suppose otherwise is to confuse the semantics of the language code with the pragmatics of its use, and so to misrepresent the very nature of communication.

This objection is at least partially answered in Canale and Swain’s model, which in addition to knowledge and use, provides for “compensatory strategies.” Strategic competence helps speakers to circumvent problems caused by insufficient mastery of grammar. The authors’ formulation implies the existence of a final state where such strategies are no longer needed, and the authors suggest knowledge of how to use such strategies may be particularly helpful at the beginning stages of language learning, and it is to be expected that the need for certain strategies may change as a function of age and second language proficiency (6. p. 31).

The possibility that some kinds of strategic ability may remain important for all L2 users is left open, and since this point is particularly important to LSP, we will return to it in discussion of native speaker (NS) norms.

Instructed second language acquisition

Since much L2 research is conducted in classroom contexts, and pedagogical implications are frequently drawn from its findings, the subfield of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) is receiving growing attention. Long defines ISLA as language learning “when the

learning processes are influenced, or at least intended to be influenced, by teachers, classmates, or pedagogic materials”. The objective is to understand how “different kinds of intervention” exert “objectively measurable effects on interlanguage development” and on “learners’ ability to perform real-world tasks”. The performance of tasks is given new theoretical importance: “whereas interlanguage development has traditionally been viewed as leading to improved communicative abilities,” the reverse is now thought to be true: “it is improvement in the ability to perform progressively more complex communicative tasks that drives language learning”.

The field draws on L2 theory as well as empirical findings to motivate research and the main goal is to identify causal relationships between language teaching and learning in order to improve L2 learning or teaching. Long supports a cognitive-interactionist theory of SLA which informs communicative instructional programs “such as immersion, TBLT, and CLIL” and, as noted, views communicative language use as an important trigger for L2 development. In such programmes, teaching and learning focus on “the non-linguistic syllabus, with the L2 in theory learned incidentally through being used communicatively as the medium, not the object, of instruction.” Long argues against “explicit instruction and a focus on language as object” since this kind of teaching disrupts the learning of “crucial non-linguistic syllabus content,” and suggests that “focus on form, with its temporary brief switches to intentional language learning during otherwise communicative lessons, is a major improvement in this regard.” Long goes on to argue that SLA researchers agree on the central position of “incidental and implicit L2 learning in adults” but that this is “still a minority position in the world of language teaching”. His approach also faces criticism from L2 researchers outside instructed contexts.

Sociocultural and intercultural approaches

As suggested earlier, Widdowson is not the only critic of SLA models of interlanguage development and definitions of communicative competence. In a seminal paper marking what has been called a ‘sociocultural turn’ in L2 research, Firth and Wagner also contest what they see as a consistently reductive view of L2 communicative success. These authors reject SLA’s emphasis on “the foreign learner’s linguistic deficiencies and communicative problems”, and resist the suggestion that the L2 user is “in a phase of transition”, to be viewed as a “deficient communicator struggling to overcome an underdeveloped L2 competence, striving to reach the ‘target’ competence of an idealised NS”.

Second language teaching: Common European Reference Framework (CEFR)

The field of second and foreign language education both predates L2 research and takes a wider perspective. It has been dominated in recent decades by communicative approaches, often justified with reference to SLA theory. In a paper which documents inappropriate applications of SLA findings to classroom practice, Spada acknowledges the influence of Hymes while also denouncing the excesses of strong CLT in effecting the “pendulum swing that took place in L2 teaching in the late 1970s and early 1980s”. Also drawing heavily on the concept of communicative competence, a key development in language education in the past twenty years involves competence-based frameworks for evaluation. I focus on the extremely influential Common European Reference Framework for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), which Widdowson sees as “the functional equivalent to the formalist concept of interlanguage.”.

Notions and communicative functions: the CEFR

A cross-linguistic competency framework based on fine-grained ‘can do’ statements, the CEFR shares with interlanguage research a concern to identify stages of approximation of native-speaker competence. Since its inception, much work has been devoted to refining the six level descriptors of the CEFR and its success has been ascribed to its combination of what is familiar (the traditional distinction between ‘beginner’, ‘intermediate’, and ‘advanced’ levels) and what is new (an elaborate system of descriptors giving communicative content to the levels beginner/basic, intermediate/independent, and advanced/proficient).

The CEFR grew out of notional-functional approaches dedicated to communicative goals, based on the conviction that “what people want to do through language is more important than mastery of language as an unapplied system”. Linguistic knowledge is not “an end in itself,” rather, the goal of CLT is “the ability to use language, to do with language the kinds of things ones needs or wants to do with it”. Wilkins provided early groundwork on what he termed a “situational syllabus” to rationalise language teaching by addressing “first what is grammatically necessary” and “secondly what constitutes a speaker’s communicative competence”. His paper lists notional categories (time, quantity, space, matter, case, and deixis) and categories of communicative function (modality, moral discipline, suasion, argument, rational enquiry, and personal/emotional/interpersonal emotions). This work informed the first formulation of the CEFR, which is explicitly predicated on action-based CLT and thus important for LSP teaching and learning.

Empirical and theoretical justifications of the CEFR

Although a supporter of the humanist ideals behind its conception, Hulstijn points out that the CEFR is built on rather “shaky ground” both in empirical and theoretical terms. He notes that “its empirical base consists of judgments of language teachers and other experts with respect to the scaling of descriptors” and that “the CEFR scales lack empirical support of what L2 specific knowledge and skill is minimally required for performance considered adequate in terms of communicative functioning”. He calls for “empirical support based on performance data of L2 learners” but also queries the theoretical underpinning of the framework: “we do need to know first what language proficiency means in the case of NSs before we can consider the case of NNSs”.

CEFR as standard for L2 proficiency testing

Considering only the empirical side of these criticisms, recent work in relation to the CEFR has tackled questions of the reliability and validity of CEFR-based tests, and proficiency correlates of CEFR levels for specific languages. Deygers, Van Gorp, and Demeester compared the interpretation and operationalisation of CEFR descriptors in two tests of oral proficiency in Dutch which are used to certify B2 proficiency for international student admission to university in Flanders (Belgium). The two tests, the ITNA (created by a Flemish consortium of university language centres) and the STRT (an international test developed by the Dutch Language Union), employ similar speaking tasks: a 25- minute oral interview with a trained examiner, involving a presentation based on graphs or tables and an argumentation task. Candidates are scored on five linguistic criteria (vocabulary, grammar, coherence, pronunciation, and fluency) by two raters using A2, B1, B2, and C1 band descriptors. The authors note differences in rating conditions: the ITNA tests are scored immediately after the test, while STRT are recorded. Rater profiles also differ across the two tests: ITNA examiners are generally experienced Dutch L2 teachers who train and test several times a year, while

STRT raters tend to be younger students of linguistics or communication who have initial training including a single trial session.

The researchers compared the scores of 82 students on both tests (taken one week apart, STRT first) and found significantly lower scores on the ITNA. Examination of the criteria used in each test found departures from the CEFR wording, and thus limited overlap between descriptors in the two tests. The remainder of the study involved statistical tests of components of oral scores obtained by students on each exam. Detailed comparison of the five scoring criteria which were common to the two tests revealed that there is a consistent significant difference between the probability of attaining a score of at least B2 on the ITNA or one of the STRT tasks ($p < .05$). This indicates that the B2 threshold is interpreted or operationalized differently on the STRT and on the ITNA test (10. p. 9).

The authors conclude that “this study has yielded no data to indicate that corresponding CEFR-based criteria used to measure the same candidates in near-identical tasks can be considered equivalent” and that therefore “the CEFR may be a useful inspiration for test developers to reflect on language proficiency levels, but it is not a standard that can simply be applied to reach equivalent scores” (10. p. 12-13).

Criteria features in the English Profile Project

Another attempt to shore up the empirical foundations of the CEFR is the Language Profile Project, which aims to produce “reference level descriptors” specific to each national language (Council of Europe, 2005). The English Language Profile (EPP) involves the analysis of learner corpora compiled from Cambridge test data in order to identify “criteria features” characteristic of learner performance in L2 English at different CEFR levels. In this project, researchers assume that “in addition to whether a learner fulfils the communicative functions required by the task,” it is possible to identify “certain linguistic properties that are characteristic and indicative of L2 proficiency at each level, on the basis of which examiners make their practical assessments”. One outcome of the EPP is the English Vocabulary Profile and another the English Grammar Profile (EGP). Both aim to relate the general CEFR level descriptors to specific features of competence in English L2. The latter is described in some detail by O’Keeffe & Mark.

The authors worked with a CEFR-calibrated learner corpus culled from Cambridge written exams taken over 13 years (1999-2012) by learners with 143 first languages. Some 55 million words (64 million tokens from 267 000 passing scripts) were annotated using the corpus tool Sketch Engine; the British National Corpus (written) was used for comparison where necessary. In keeping with the overall project goal of developing practical tools for teachers and learners, the EGP search inventory was based on what the authors refer to as the “ELT canon” or established approach to English language teaching apparent in textbooks and discussion with teachers. O’Keeffe and Mark accordingly searched the corpus for examples of language use in 19 superordinate grammatical categories (e.g., adjectives, negation, present time) using a criteria-based approach. To be considered characteristic of a certain CEFR level, a form must meet frequency, accuracy, and dispersion criteria. Table 3 shows how the authors operationalized these criteria:

O’Keeffe and Mark applied these criteria iteratively for each grammatical form at each CEFR level (using pass scripts to ensure correlation with examiners’ judgments), writing “can-do” statements “to represent the use of a grammatical item with a particular form and/or use, at a given level” and checking for other uses of the same form. In keeping with their focus on “the

development of grammar competence” as opposed to error analysis or fossilization, their work highlights the increasing lexico-grammatical complexity and pragmatic subtlety of learner production at higher levels. They show, for example, that a pattern involving a pronoun followed by a linking verb, optional adverb, adjective and that clause is instantiated in increasingly sophisticated ways from lower to higher CEFR levels: I am sure (A2 Norwegian), it seems obvious that (B2 French), it is highly unlikely that (C1 Russian). In contrast to claims about a ceiling effect where learners no longer progress, these authors discern “greater complexity of meaning” and “greater dexterity of use” with advancing levels, including pragmatic development. The study is an example of a corpus linguistics approach to learner data which is perhaps more compatible with traditional L2 research than other CEFR-related developments (1. p. 478).

Language for specific purposes testing

Much has been written about the challenges of designing communicatively appropriate and effective tests of languages in specific purposes contexts. LSP testing is justified by “the need to describe minimum levels of performance for work in high-stakes areas, such as speaking in air traffic control;” L2 users must therefore be able to “communicate efficiently in contexts where a failure to do so would put others in danger”. Many would agree with Lockwood that professional communication is often “still very under-researched”. In his book on language testing, Fulcher also addresses the use of tests for perhaps more controversial gatekeeping functions, stressing the burden on language testers to consider the validity of “all possible uses” of their tests. With this in mind, a number of recent studies of LSP testing have questioned the validity of performance tests used in a range of professional contexts. A recent paper by Elder and her colleagues considers LSP testing research in medicine, veterinary science, air traffic control, as well as academic settings such as scientific research presentations and university entrance tests. Douglas has argued that while the language content and method of LSP tests (i.e., test tasks) are “fairly well understood”, the same cannot be said of assessment criteria. The following studies of LSP tests focus on what has been termed indigenous criteria, that is, the views of occupational experts, non-language specialists, or linguistic laypersons. LSP studies of such assessment criteria are reviewed in the following subsections (11. p. 21; 15. p. 550).

Naturally occurring scientific communication and professional language tests

One of the first studies to take an indigenous perspective on LSP use involved the observation of research physicists at an American university during regular lab meetings. With the goal of characterizing academic talk involving both L1 and L2 speakers, Jacoby used conversation analysis and grounded theory to analyze these speech events, which typically involved a conference paper rehearsal and ensuing feedback. She found that the focus of the group’s attention was exclusively on content, that is, the effective presentation of scientific material. The criteria used by these researchers to evaluate presentations were timing, newsworthiness, and visual coherence, and clarity, economy of expression, argumentation, content accuracy, technical delivery, and overall quality. Only “a tiny subset of comments” concerned L2 users’ errors (spelling, prepositions, irregular past), and then only when these occurred in written presentation material. The authors argue:

One might object that the English requirements for research physicists and medical practitioners are likely to be somewhat different, yet closer analysis reveals a number of communicative functions which are common to the two contexts. Further research on the OET was conducted by Pill, also reported in Elder et al. The impetus for Pill’s study came from concerns among medical professionals about the validity of the OET, specifically that it was

failing to identify those international medical graduates (IMG) who were best able to benefit from preparation courses for professional certification to practice medicine in Australia. Like Jacoby's study, this research involved the gathering of opinions on specialized communicative competence from domain experts as opposed to language professionals. This researcher's data included medical educators' commentary on video recordings of consultation scenarios with simulated patients, as well as their actual written feedback to trainees in real medical consultations. Based on the comments of these experts, Pill concluded that the four existing OET criteria - intelligibility, fluency, appropriateness of use, and resources of grammar and expression - while relevant, nevertheless represented a "somewhat restrictive view of language as a de-contextualized set of elements". The medical experts noted that IMGs lacked pragmatic awareness, for example, asking directly "Do you want to harm yourself?" instead of the more circumspect "Sometimes when people feel down, they feel like escaping/hurting themselves. Do you ever feel like that?". They also identified failings in strategic competence: IMGs were found to be "scared of open questions because they think they'll lose time [...] it always works the other way round". The inclusion of two new criteria in the OET to reflect these points - clinician engagement and management of interaction - now allows the test to cover a wider interpretation of interactional competence thus increasing validity. Elder and her colleagues interpret this study as an example of real-world consequences of LSP testing: where the views of applied linguists alone produced an original OET based on narrow linguistic criteria which resulted in poor admission decisions, a revised test including the indigenous criteria arising from Pill's research seems likely to prove a more valid indicator of LSP communicative competence (15. p. 18).

DISCUSSION

In the final section of this paper, I return to the notion of communicative competence in an attempt to synthesise the different positions described in the three domains of interest to the teaching and assessment of LSP: L2 research, L2 teaching, and LSP testing. From the foregoing discussion, it seems clear that questions of native-speaker norms and indigenous assessment criteria are of particular importance, motivating a return to a richer understanding of communicative competence. I examine each in turn before concluding with a proposal for a revised model of communicative competence to inform ongoing practice in LSP teaching and testing.

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