

The “Communicative Competence” Controversy

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Biography:

Ahmet Acar is a research assistant at Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey, where he earned his M.A. degree and is currently a doctoral student. He has been to Syracuse University with a Fulbright scholarship, where he studied TESOL, theoretical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and taught Turkish as a foreign language to students at Syracuse University, Cornell University and Colgate University at the same time through multipoint videoconferencing, which was carried out the first time in the USA and was accepted as a successful pilot project. Acar's research interests are the role of culture in language teaching, bilingualism, foreign and second language teaching methods, teaching languages from distance, ELT syllabus design and textbook evaluation.

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to question Hymes' theory of communicative competence as developed in his paper “On Communicative Competence” (1971) and to critically examine the implications it had for the field of foreign and second language teaching. The article examines the model of language presented by the theory of communicative competence with the claim that the theory is based on highly unsound and unidealized evidence. The impact of such a theory of language in the foreign and second language teaching field will be critically discussed in broad terms at the level of goals and the specification of the language content to be taught and learned. In the treatment of this topic, no specific reference to Asia is made since the debate is relevant in all contexts.

Key words: communicative competence, theory of language, communicative approach, competence for use, competence for grammar, acquisition of language.

Introduction

While there has already been much debate about linguistic competence and communicative competence in the foreign and second language teaching literature, the result has always been the consideration of communicative competence as a superior model of language following Hymes' opposition to Chomsky's linguistic competence. This opposition has been adopted by those who seek new directions toward a communicative era by taking for granted the basic motives and the appropriacy of this opposition behind the development of communicative competence.

Munby, for example, in his development of “Communicative syllabus design” refers to Hymes' effect both on his work and the foreign and second language teaching field:

The upsurge of interest in the content of the language syllabus, following the concern with communicative competence generated by Dell Hymes, reflects inter alia a

feeling that we ought to know much more about what it is that should be taught and learned if a non native is to be communicatively competent in English (Munby 1978, p. 1).

However, those who adopted and applied Hymes' linguistic theory, namely, communicative competence, to the foreign and second language teaching field gave justification to this new linguistic theory without questioning the basic premises underlying the theory of communicative competence.

As a contrast to this trend, I intend to show that Hymes' theory of communicative competence is based on quite misleading assumptions and that it led the foreign and second language teaching field to adopt a rather controversial model of language in the specification of teaching and learning goals and the selection of the language content to be taught and learned. I think that it is relevant to raise this debate again now at a time when we are moving into a so-called "post-communicative" era, because the profession might need to ask itself whether it has treated Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence with due respect.

A critical look at the basis of communicative competence

In this section, I intend to explore the basis on which Hymes develops his theory of communicative competence. It is pointed out that the basic premises underlying the theory of communicative competence are sketchy and they lack any idealizations. Much of Hymes' justification for the development of his theory of communicative competence is based on his criticism of Chomsky's linguistic competence. In other words, communicative competence was developed as a contrast to Chomsky's linguistic competence.

Hymes begins his justification for his new theory by criticizing a quotation from Chomsky about linguistic theory:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3).

Hymes criticizes such a statement of linguistic theory as irrelevant as far as the language problems of disadvantaged children are concerned:

From the standpoint of the children we seek to understand and help such a statement may seem almost a declaration of irrelevance. All the difficulties that confront the children and ourselves seem swept from view (Hymes, 1971, p. 270).

Hymes delivered his paper 'On Communicative Competence' at the Research Planning Conference on Language Development among Disadvantaged Children and with his statement above he probably implies the need for the consideration of the problems of such children for the development of a new linguistic theory. Besides his claim of irrelevance, Hymes considers such a linguistic theory in Chomsky's statement a limited conception of linguistic theory which presents an image of a child with just an ability of producing and

understanding only the grammatical sentences of language. It cannot, Hymes states, explain the communicative differences among children:

The limitations of the perspective appear when the image of the unfolding, mastering, fluent child is set beside the real children in our schools. The theory must seem, if not irrelevant, then at best a doctrine of poignancy: poignant, because of the difference between what one imagines and what one sees; poignant too, because the theory, so powerful in its own realm, cannot on its terms cope with the difference. To cope with the realities of children as communicating beings requires a theory within which socio-cultural factors have an explicit and constitutive role; and neither is the case (Hymes 1971, p. 271).

So far, Hymes' criticism of Chomsky's linguistic theory depends on the inefficiency of Chomsky's linguistic theory in explaining the language problems of disadvantaged children and the communicative capacity of normal children. Neither, however, is Chomsky's concern in his specification of the linguistic theory. Such a theory, Chomsky claims, in the first quotation, would require methodological and theoretical limitations. Such a limitation in perspective is necessary since the system of language or linguistic competence has distinct characteristics specific to itself like phrase structure and inflectional system. Language clearly exhibits grammatical relations of which systematic structure or the language system can be studied in its own right. As to the use of language, it relates to both linguistic and nonlinguistic data. Thus, while Hymes considers Chomsky's study of the language system a limitation and attempts to form a communication theory, he puts the language specific processes in the same scale as the communication processes, which show characteristics different from the language system.

Hymes' criticism of Chomsky continues with his claim that Chomsky's linguistic competence does not include a social aspect of language. To Hymes, linguistic theory must also account for performance since it is the only sector which can be related to the social aspect of language:

The concept of performance will take on great importance, in so far as the study of communicative competence is seen as an aspect of what from another angle may be called the ethnography of symbolic forms, the study of the variety of genres, narration, dance, drama, song, instrumental music, visual art, that interrelate with speech in the communicative life of a society and in terms of which the relative importance and meaning of speech and language must be assessed (Hymes, 1971, p. 284).

Hymes' statement reveals his other justification for his development of communicative competence, the study of the ethnography of symbolic forms. Communicative competence developed thus partly on the basis of the study of the ethnography of symbolic forms, which refers to the amalgam of linguistic and nonlinguistic factors with different characteristics, and his attempt to contrast such a theory to Chomsky's linguistic competence, which draws a clear demarcation between the language system and non linguistic factors, underlie crucial controversies.

Hymes' other statement underlying his attempt to indicate the necessity of the ability of use as part of competence is:

The specification of ability for use as part of competence allows for the role of non cognitive factors, such as motivation, as partly determining competence. In speaking of competence, it is especially important not to separate cognitive from affective and volitive factors, so far as the impact of the theory on educational practice is concerned; but also with regard to speech design and explanation (Hymes, 1971, p. 283).

To Hymes, the consideration of the ability for use as part of competence necessitates a consideration of non cognitive factors such as motivation as partly determining competence and in the specification of competence, cognitive, affective and volitive factors should be considered together. Besides, Hymes considers the necessity of the inclusion of ability for use as part of competence for educational purposes, which reveals another controversy since linguistic theory is not a theory of education but a theory of language. Hymes' attack on Chomsky with such an assumption underlying the theory of communicative competence is also inappropriate since Chomsky did not intend to develop linguistic competence for educational purposes but for the study of the language system.

Furthermore, Hymes' consideration of the ability for use as part of competence necessitates a consideration of non cognitive factors such as motivation. The same is, Hymes claims, true of the consideration of the cognitive, affective and volitive factors in the specification of competence. How Hymes correlates motivation, affective, volitive factors on the one hand, and language description on the other hand, is vague in the consideration of the communicative competence as a new model of language.

Hymes' justifications for his development of the theory of communicative competence discussed so far are based on the language problems of disadvantaged children, communication capacity of normal children, the study of ethnography of symbolic forms, noncognitive factors such as motivation, cognitive, affective and volitive factors and educational practice. Hymes' theory of communicative competence developed on these assumptions lacks a specific basis and it lacks scientific idealizations. Hymes' following statement may illustrate the point most clearly: "I should take competence as the most general term for the capabilities of a person" (1971, p. 282).

Competence for use and competence for grammar

Hymes' other motive for his development of the theory of communicative competence on the criticism that Chomsky's linguistic competence is a limitation in perspective is his consideration that the acquisition of competence for use can be stated in the same way as the acquisition of competence for grammar. Hymes (1971, p. 279) states that competence for use is part of the same developmental matrix as competence for grammar.

There is, however, good evidence that competence for use is not part of the same developmental matrix as competence for grammar and that the acquisition of the competence for use cannot be stated in the same terms as acquisition of competence for grammar. The evidence is that while the acquisition of the grammatical knowledge of language, what Chomsky calls linguistic competence, is complete in a certain period of time, is acquired unconsciously, and once it happens in childhood, shows almost no change

throughout the life of an individual, the ability in the use of language appropriately in appropriate situations and contexts develops throughout the life of an individual. It is not complete in the same acquisition period as that of the competence for grammar and hence may involve conscious learning or learning through life experience. This ability develops as the individual becomes more conscious about the status of the people, the formality of the situation, the importance of the occasion he/she is in, etc.

Consider an English child, for example, at the age of ten who is in an embassy with his/her parents and goes into a room and asks a diplomat a question. In such a case he/she may not know how to speak in an appropriate manner to the diplomat but his/her parents would be more successful than the child about the relevant appropriateness. As to the grammatical knowledge of the child and his/her parents, there is no difference. They both form, for example, the yes/no questions or relative clauses in the same way.

What does the evidence imply then? It implies that the acquisition of the competence for grammar and the competence for use do not occur in the same way and under the same conditions. Thus, Hymes' (1971, p. 279) proposal that the acquisition of competence for use, indeed, can be stated in the same terms as acquisition of competence for grammar is not so valid. It implies that Chomsky's notion of perfect competence indicating a person's perfect grammatical knowledge of his/her language has a basis: The ten-year-old English child has no problem in forming grammatical sentences. It implies that the notion of a homogeneous speech community is a necessary idealization at least in terms of a grammatical description, in that English community, the child's and his/her parents' or another person's knowledge of how to form relative clause constructions or yes/no questions do not change from one person to another. Their grammatical knowledge is the same. It implies that the competence for grammar can be studied in itself as it shows distinct characteristics specific to itself.

Implications for foreign and second language teaching

Presentation of such a theory of communicative competence has had a great impact on the second and foreign language teaching field. The theory of communicative competence has been taken as an aim within the communicative approach, an aim of making a non-native communicatively competent in the target language.

It also presented an understanding of the language content to be used in the selection and grading of language items to be taught and learned. It put the language use, however it is selected and sequenced, in the center and shadowed or ignored the essential role of grammatical knowledge just because the theory of communicative competence was developed as a contrast to linguistic competence.

Chomsky considers linguistic competence to carry specific characteristics of its own which are different from other communication elements and specifies linguistic competence as a study in itself. The model of linguistic competence, however, was not developed with pedagogical motivation or for a pedagogical aim but for the description of the language system. Hymes' motives for the development of communicative competence as discussed in this paper, however, are not consistent with each other. Perhaps the most significant inconsistency is the consideration of the pedagogical reasons to put forward a

model of language for linguistic theory. While the motivation behind linguistic competence generated by Chomsky was the description of the language system, the motivations behind communicative competence ranging from educational practice and linguistic theory are complicated and vague.

Thus, a very broad hypothesis of communicative competence which was developed on an unsound basis and which emerged out of an inappropriate opposition has become the main focus of the foreign and second language teaching field, and slogans like “There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar are useless” (Hymes, 1971, p. 278.) have had the foreign and second language teaching field pursue this very general and complicated theory of communicative competence about the real content of which we know very little.

Notes

1 This paper is a revision and an extension of my article “A Critical Review of Hymes’ on Communicative Competence” “Acar 2003”. In my first paper, I critically examined the theory of communicative competence as developed by Hymes without any reference to foreign and second language teaching. This article questions both the underlying assumptions of the theory of communicative competence and critically examines its implications with special reference to the foreign and second language teaching field.

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