

# Acquisition of Communicative Competence

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**Abstract**—Communicative competence plays an important role in language teaching and learning. In this paper, the author makes a tentative effort to explore the children's acquisition of communicative competence in order to help FL learners have a better understanding of the formation of this ability.

**Index Terms**—communicative competence, acquisition, children

## I. DEFINING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

As Hymes points out native speakers who could produce any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language would be institutionalized if they tried to do so. Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have to enable them to use and interpret linguistic forms.

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to give commands, etc. in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings. It needs to be pointed out that cross-cultural differences can and do produce conflicts or inhibit communication. For example, certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in conversation, while the native English speakers they may be talking to have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking, and find silences embarrassing. In this way, the concept of communicative competence must be embedded in the notion of cultural competence or the total set of knowledge and skills which speakers bring into a situation. In fact, all aspects of culture are relevant to communication, but those that have the most direct bearing on communicative forms and processes are the social structure, the values and attitudes held about language and ways of speaking, the net work of conceptual categories which results from shared experiences, and the ways knowledge and skills are transmitted from one generation to the next, and to new members of the group. All in all, communicative competence refers to knowledge and skills for contextually appropriate use and interpretation of language in a community; it refers to the communicative knowledge and skills shared by the group, although these reside variably in its individual members. The shared yet individual nature of competence reflects the nature of language itself.

## II. CHILDREN'S ACQUISITION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

All human infants are born with the capacity to develop patterned rules for appropriate language use from whatever input is provided within their native speech community. Children are essentially participant-observers of communication learning and inductively developing the rules of their speech community through processes of observation and interaction. So input is very important in the process of acquiring communicative competence. Sources of input for children vary depending on cultural and social factors. For example, mother's talk is often assumed to be universally the most important source of early input, but wealthier social classes in many cultures delegate most caretaking tasks to servants, while in some other cultures, older siblings have major childrearing responsibilities.

### A. Nursery School.

In some countries, like China, family members may have a relatively minor role in child care, with primary responsibility residing in a collective nursery. But this is not necessarily so, especially in recent years, when parents have paid more and more attention on children's caretaking. Anyway, the importance of nursery school can never be underestimated. According to Spiro, if main sources of input come from nursery school, children's syntactic and phonological development appear to be about the same in both rate and sequence, but the vocabulary learned may reflect differences in experience from home care.

### B. Caretaker.

Studies also show that among upper classes where the primary caretaker is not a parent, but a servant who is a speaker of a low prestige variety of the language or even another language entirely, it is interesting to note that children still acquire the more prestigious language of their family. Conversely, when a caretaker is perceived to speak a prestige language, such as a French governess in an English speech community, her language is frequently acquired and

maintained by children even if it is not used by their parents.

### C. *Family Structure and Residential Pattern.*

Linguistic input is affected by family structure and by residential patterns, including who lives in the same house and what their role is in the caretaking process. For example, the presence of a grandparent in the home of immigrant families in the United States may be a primary determinant of what language young children will learn first. Even in monolingual English-speaking families, the proximity of one or more grandparents influences the type of linguistic input to children, particularly in the degree to which traditional lore is transmitted in the form of stories, proverbs, songs, and rhymes.

One more thing need to be pointed out is that when children have limited input from any source, communicative development may indeed be retarded, though this may be overcome in later childhood. Saville-Troike's experience can illustrate this point. She has worked with girls from Mexican American migrant labor families, who were restricted to the house until they entered school. They were found to have limited ability to express themselves in either Spanish or English upon school entry, whereas boys from the same families, who had been allowed to have a broader range of social contacts, were far more fluent in Spanish. So in order to improve the children's communicative competence, we should give them more opportunity to communicate with people, i.e. to get more linguistic input. This also leads to our next topic: social interaction.

## III. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Although language acquisition is generally considered to be primarily a cognitive process, it is clearly a social process as well, and must take place within the context of social interaction. Our following discussion will focus on the interaction between adult and children.

Halliday claims that children learn the meaning of language because of the systematic relation between what they hear and what is going on around them. While all language is learned in the process of social interaction, different linguistic forms are considered 'typical' or appropriate between adults and children. For example, English-speaking mothers regularly use questions to stimulate interaction with children, and then react to the children's answers as if they were worthy of interest and further verbal response. In contrast, Javanese mothers often use question forms with children, but furnish the answers themselves. This is a way of teaching a child to respect an older person; the child learns to control his behavior, to be quiet in the presence of someone who is older and respected. In China, we also teach children to respect older people, but we use questions to stimulate interaction with children and let children themselves to answer the question, even if the initiator is an older person.

Much of the earlier research on acquisition in the process of adult-child interaction focused on the importance of children's repetition of adult speech. There are speech communities where mimicry is very common, and considered the most appropriate form of social interaction between adults and young children. For instance, Tallensi children in Ghana learn social behaviors primarily by looking and copying. This belief within the speech community influences the linguistic behavior of adults toward a child; they frequently mimic its babblings and expect repetition in return. In my opinion, mimicry is a good way in children's early language acquisition. Through repetition of adult's language, children can obtain the rules of speaking in their speech community.

There are also influences which children themselves have on adult communicative behavior. According to Von Raffler-Engel and Rea, much of the interaction between adults and children is nonverbal, or paralinguistic; children often confirm understanding with facial expressions or head nods, which suggest the need to expand the scope of interaction.

## IV. LANGUAGE AND ENCULTURATION

We must admit that language is mainly learnt rather than inherited. Language learning for children is an integral part of their enculturation from three perspectives: 1) language is part of culture, and thus part of the body of knowledge, attitudes, and skills which is transmitted from one generation to the next; 2) language is a primary medium through which other aspects of culture are transmitted; 3) language is a tool which children may use to explore the social environment and establish their status and role-relationships within it.

Hall distinguishes three kinds of learning, which are *formal learning*, *informal learning* and *technical learning*. Formal learning takes place through precept and admonition, and transmits those aspects of culture which are not to be questioned. Verbalizations of formal aspects of culture often include the expression of the traditional wisdom of a community in the form of proverbs or other aphorisms. The behavior which adults expect of children may be determined at least in part by their language development, and not corrected until adults believe children can understand formal verbal directives. For example, English-speaking adults may say 'No, no' before they believe more complex directives or explanations will be understood, but this is disapproved of in speech communities where adults feel such commands are useless, or may frighten a young child.

Informal learning takes place primarily through nonverbal channels of communication, with the chief agent a model used for imitation. Language-specific grammatical structures are learned primarily by informal means in early

childhood through imitation, since any correction usually focuses on errors in lexical choice, or improper speech. Pragmatic competence is also acquired informally: English-speaking children are not told explicitly that a surface-form question such as 'Wouldn't you like to put your toys away now?' is not asking for information. Appropriate indirect responses are also learned and these same children soon develop the competence to respond 'Can I finish this first?' as a strategy to avoid complying with such a question.

Technical learning is at an explicitly formulated, conscious level, and includes all that children find out in school about the grammar they have already acquired informally; rules are explained by adults and deviations usually corrected without emotional and moral involvement. Written language skills are most likely to be taught in a technical mode, and more advanced oral rhetorical skills may also be developed at this level.

All cultures make use of all three of these modes of enculturation to some degree, but formal learning tends to be prominent where authority in the family is strictly ordered in a hierarchy, and where there is a great respect for tradition. On the other hand, children are more likely to be taught on a technical level in a knowledge-oriented society. Cultural and social information is encoded in all channels of communication, and in all dimensions of each channel. One of the most obvious carriers of differential experiences within a language group is *vocabulary*, especially in the relatively limited lexicon of young children. Vocabulary development reflects to a significant degree the ordering of priorities within a culture. For example, in the USA, schools generally do not introduce *north*, *east*, *south*, and *west* until the fourth or fifth grade level, but the terms have been mastered by Navajo children before they come to kindergarten.

In short, the role of language in enculturation is both for personal growth and for socialization. From the perspective of the community as a whole, creating conformity and effecting transmission of the culture are the primary functions of language learning, i.e. successful socialization.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have talked about the acquisition of communicative competence. The most important thing is communication, i.e. through early imitation or repetition, social interaction and enculturation, children can obtain the rules of speaking in their speech community, thus become a member of their society. There are some specific stages or processes for children's language acquisition, such as formulaic expression, nonverbal communication and peer influence, which are omitted in this paper, not because they are unimportant, but because their basic concepts have been involved in our discussion. Although this paper may not be adequate in presenting the process of children's language competence, it is a summary of the most basic and important points in the field of acquisition of communicative competence.

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