

## The Importance of Communicative Competence Assessment and Measurement in Language Teaching and Learning

Sumawartini<sup>1\*</sup> & Himayatinnisa Septiyana<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>STIKes Kusuma Bangsa, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Institute Teknologi Lombok, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author: [sumawartini21@gmail.com](mailto:sumawartini21@gmail.com) , [septiyana@lit.ac.id](mailto:septiyana@lit.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** The concept of communicative competence and recent issue on this specific language is explored here, with the emphasis on the assessment and measurement of communicative competence from language teaching objective. Several assessment methods and research on the communicative competence is presented as well. Relating the theoretical context to the conceptual issues in learning and teaching of English as second language, it is revealed that there has been many methods and strategies used by researchers in order to measure learners' communicative competence. Furthermore, among the four competences categories, grammatical competence is revealed to be assessed most frequently. The assessment of communicative competence help learner to activate their learning to communicate effectively in real-life social interaction when situated to the context of language teaching. With basic knowledge of communicative competence, the learners will be able to function effectively in communication within the society. Hence, educators are challenged to redesign the teaching context where all types of communicative competence can be adequately taught and measured to give learners knowledge and learning experience on communicative competence as this is one of the salient skills in learners' lives.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, strategic competence, discourse competence, language assessment

## INTRODUCTION

The globalization of English creates a situation where English is recognized as an international language and a lingua franca in which the importance of English in almost all aspects of human life become more prominent. It is evident that the use of English for communication is one of the most crucial needs of the current communities. Despite this necessity, however, the study of English as foreign or second language in formal education setting commonly focused on the accurate language form or the grammatical competence. Other types of communicative competence such as sociolinguistics competence, discourse competence and strategic competence, which also play an important role in language use of communication, on the otherhand, are not yet the major focus of ongoing education in formal education setting.

In communication, in fact, people do more

than using language to understand interlocutor thought and feelings. While communicating, both speakers are using language in a subtle way to understand their relationship, their identity in the social group, and to establish the kind of speech event they are involved in (Fasold, 1990). Thus, what learners need to achieve in order to effectively conducted communication is not only the grammatical competence that is linked to language systems but also all competencies of communication. The aim of this paper, therefore, is describing the importance of communicative competence in general and how communicative competence can be assessed on language teaching and learning context. To achieve this goal, this study will first provide definition of communicative competence based on several experts on this subject. Next, issues regarding communicative competence will be presented to justify the importance of communicative competence. Several proposed method and

technique to assess and measure communicative competence in language teaching and learning context will be discussed after. At last, the paper will be concluded with implication for this study and the suggestion for further research.

## METHOD

### Communicative competence

Communicative competence, if it is simply defined word by word means the competency that someone has to communicate effectively. However, the key word competence itself, as seen by Chomsky (1965, in Chambers, 2002) is a mere system of linguistics or a grammatical knowledge in its abstract form. However, many scholars argue that linguistics system only is not enough to describe communicative competence. Hymes (1972) believes that the competence in communication is dependent to knowledge of communication and the ability to use that language. He argues that, the communicative competences are not limited to grammatical concern; it needs to be elaborated to the entire sphere abilities manifested in communication.

Hymes believes that unlike linguistics view, what communicative competence should focus on is the individual's ability and skill that include the knowledge of social communicative rules as well as to perform an act of communication in appropriate manner in that society.

Similar to Hymes's views that the communicative competence is more than the use of language, Allen and Brown (1976) argued that sociolinguistics competence that is included in communicative competence is different from bare linguistics competence as it is involve the speaker's awareness of transaction of meaning that occurs within the communication. In this perspective, the competence in communication is linked to the actual performance of the language in any social situation that the speaker may encounter. Cazden (2011) argues that Hymes's view of communicative competence is believed as the idea that makes this issue a major topic of today's linguistics and sociolinguistics area. In agreement with Hymes, Chambers (2002) come up with a remark that a speaker will be able to communicate effectively if she/he knows not only how to produce any and all grammatical utterances of a language

but also know how to use them appropriately. He added that a speaker must have the ability to know what to say to whom, in what time (when) and in which location (where). If a speaker has mastered this ability, it is only then that a speaker can be able to show the mastery of communicative competence in its entire category.

A broader and more detailed definition of communicative competence was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), where they proposed communicative competence to contain four different types of abilities such as grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. According to Canale and Swain (1980), grammatical competence refers to the ability that learner has to use lexical items, rule of morphology, the sound system and the structure of sentences. Meanwhile, the second types of competence, sociolinguistics competence, refer to ability that a learner has in interpreting the social meaning of an utterance. This means, a learner should be able to gather information on the appropriateness and intended meaning in an utterance, considering the intended meaning might not be the same as the literal meaning that it conveys. The next types of communicative competence is discourse competence, which refers to learner's ability to combine his/her grammatical knowledge and the knowledge of words meaning to produce unified spoken or written text that is cohesion in its form and has coherence meaning in various genres such as narrative, scientific essay and business letter. The last type of communicative competence, strategic competence, refers to a learner ability to compensate breakdowns in communication. In other words, the acquisition of this ability will assist the learners in situation where they do not know the accurate form to express something or when they cannot interpret the social context to use appropriate language.

After Canale and Swain (1980) formulation of communicative competence, some researchers have tried to redefine the term communicative competence from different perspectives and paradigms (Yano, 2003; Balint et al., 2013). However, as the communicative competencies that proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) will be the one that is use to describe what the authors mean in reference to communicative competence through

the paper, these other work on communicative competence term and definitions will not be discussed further.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Issue on Communicative Competence**

From the early date, Wiemann and Baclklund (1980) have discussed in their articles that the issue on communicative competence in language learning and teaching context has been shifting from content matter to identification of certain abilities or skills. They argue that the concern within the communicative competence area place emphasize on what student need to learn to be able to function better in different environments and in different situations. However, the identification of certain communicative abilities is not receiving the same amount of attention. Larson et.al. (1978) convey that among the categories of communicative competences, the ability to use correct form of language (grammatical competence) are often the main topic of teaching and assessment of communicative competence issue.

Supporting Larson et.al., Liao (2000) argues that in traditional classroom, the proportion of attention given to grammatical features are not balance with other types of communicative competence. She believes that one possible reason that leads to this issue is the presumably common assumption that when the linguistics competence in the form of grammatical knowledge has been acquired, the skill of communication (communicative competence) will follow or be acquired in an automatic consequence. However, evidence from Widdowson (1978) study suggests that the assumptions above are not the case for many language learners. He stated that the acquisition of linguistics competence does not guarantee the occurrence of consequent acquisition of communicative competence in a language. On the other hand, overemphasizing on activity to acquire linguistics competence such as drill and exercises on sentences production can lead to the inhibition of communicative communication development. That is, to be able to communicate effectively, a speaker have to have balanced input on the linguistics and sociolinguistics competence. Furthermore, it is found that in many research and

study that have been done in the issue of communicative competence assessment and communication, the focus of scholars' concern were given in assessing second language learners' grammatical comprehension rather than other abilities in the categories of sociolinguistics competences.

Sociolinguistics competence, on the other hand, despite getting less attention are not less important than the grammatical competence as the mastery of this ability also include mastery of speech act and stylistics appropriateness norms which is needed in maintaining social relation that closely related to the use of language (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Moreover, Geeslin and Long (2014) argued that the acquisition of communicative competence, i.e. sociolinguistics, discourse and strategic competence, is salient to the creation of effective communication. The knowledge of sociolinguistics competence gives a chance for a speaker to better understand the choice that speaker make in producing an utterance. They further argued that comprehension of communicative competence will help the speaker to decide which form of an utterance is appropriate to produce considering the listener and the social context. In a more specific area such as learning and teaching, the teacher understanding on this issue will contribute to the teaching method, material, activities and for almost all aspect of teaching and learning setting.

### **Assessment and Measurement of Communicative Competence**

As has been discussed in previous section, the ability to use language effectively in communication is as important as mastering the rules and system of that language. Thus, in order to provide improvement for the study on language teaching, an assessment on that language becomes a necessity factor. To be able to assess and evaluate the technical skills related to communicative competence, Wiemann and Baclklund (1980) proposed three types of measurement, third-person observations, vicarious participations, and actual participation (including self-report). They argued that these three measurement types, regardless of their shortcomings, can be used to gather a large and more real data to be used as judgments for the communicative competencies that students have.

Paulston and Bruder (1976) also propose several communicative activities that can be used by teachers to assess students' communicative ability where two of these activities are problem-solving activities and role-plays. They believe that role-plays and problem-solving activities can create a condition for students to improvise some strategical competencies on how to behave toward other speaker, and also finding solution by administering their sociolinguistics and linguistics competencies through debate and discussion. On a more specific manner, Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) suggest four tasks to evaluate and train learner to use and develop their strategic competencies. Here, the learner will be given four conditions where they need to use their strategic competence to help them creating a successful and effective communication. Those four tasks are nonsense dialogues and fillers, going of the topic and avoiding giving information, paraphrasing and circumlocution of explanation and definition, and appealing for help or interruption.

On actual research for the past decades, there has been many measurement methods developed and used by educators and researchers in measuring learners' communicative competence. One of these language assessment for English as specific purposes (ESP) for health professional (McNamara, 1997) which is currently use in Australia and New Zealand is the Occupational English Test (OET). In more detailed explanation on Elder, Mcnamara, Woodward-Kron, Manias, McColl, Webb and Pill (2013) it is found that OET is designed to assess language readiness of non-native health professional for the demand of communication for entry-level healthcare practice in New Zealand and Australia. Here, the health professional candidates were rated based on their performance in unscripted role-play speaking test where the candidates need to do simulations of clinical interactions with a patient or a carer (interlocutor) within the time allocation of five minutes. The recorded role play performances were then scored by the assessor (health professional) based on the rubric designed for this particular test. For this kind of assessment, the candidates/learners need not only the grammatical competencies but also strategical competence and overall communicative competences as they need to understand how to express the medical situation in a correct structural

form as well as understand when to speak, to interrupt, to stay silent or to give apologize or convey utterance to show sympathy during the interaction with the patient/interlocutor.

### **Implication for Language Learning and Teaching**

The research and assessment on the communicative competence, may give implication to the identification of communication abilities that can be teach in the classroom for students from various level of ages and grades. Increasing the researcher and educator interest on this issue, may lead to the awareness of the importance of communicative competence to be taught in the classroom becoming more salient not only for education purpose, but also for other purposes where students need to function effectively in their communication in the society. Chamber (2003) in his books, stated that the linguistics competence that student gain in the classroom, require a real-world social interaction and communication that gives the students chance to activate their acquired abilities, and thus, the communicative competence should be implied in the language learning and teaching context.

Furthermore, as stated by Kramersch (2006) language learner in the present time have higher chance to possibly encounter a multilingual and multicultural individual who grown up in different ethnic cultures, nationality and supranational environment, which is unlikely applicable in 1970s when the communicative competences theory first emerges. These speakers of multilingual and multicultural background are likely to have many kind of values and ideologies with them, and thus not all communicative ability that learners have are amenable to talk straightforwardly in a concise and sincere manner to gain information or negotiating meaning because in many cases, the communication purpose fails not because of lack of linguistics comprehension but because of lack of understanding and trust of interlocutors' intention. Thus, he argued that in designing task on the study of communicative competences, the tasks need to represent not only how learners are able to negotiate how to achieve a task but also to pay attention to the nature and purpose of that task.

More research on how to assess and measure the learners' communicative competence can give

insight on the students' comprehension on this certain ability. By doing this assessment, the students will be able to learn how to use appropriate language in different types of situation, to use language efficiently in completing different tasks and to use language for more complex activity such as social interaction with other people (Holmes, 2001). Instruction of assessment tools that learners' receive in process of measuring their communicative skill will open an opportunity for the learners to learn and experiences communication that is used in real- life situation. Therefore, the score and feedback from these experiences will help them to be better in the actual communication. For language teaching and learning, more research on this matter will increase the awareness of educator to include the sociolinguistics competence and other types of competences into the classroom learning activity.

To sum up, this study has shown how all types of communicative competencies based on Canale and Swain (1980) is in fact a crucial factor for people in conducting effective communication and that it is important to teach and assess not only certain competence but all competencies among these categories in language teaching and learning process. Moreover, the view on the proposed methods of assessment and measurement of communicative competence shows that many researchers have long been recognizing the importance of assessment on this matter. However, although many methods have been used and many research have been conducted to assess the communicative competence, a continuing study that consider the need and trend of current community should be done in the future as the situation where learner need these communicative competence become more variant.

## CONCLUSION

The assessment of communicative competence help learner to activate their learning to communicate effectively in real-life social interaction when situated to the context of language teaching. With basic knowledge of communicative competence, the learners will be able to function effectively in communication within the society. Hence, educators are challenged to redesign the teaching context where all types of communicative

competence can be adequately taught and measured to give learners knowledge and learning experience on communicative competence as this is one of the salient skills in learners' lives.

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