

Communicative Competence

In 1980, the applied linguists Canale and Swain published an influential article in which they argued that the ability to communicate required four different sub-competencies:

- **grammatical** (ability to create grammatically correct utterances),
- **sociolinguistic** (ability to produce sociolinguistically appropriate utterances),
- **discourse** (ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances), and
- **strategic** (ability to solve communication problems as they arise).

Strategic competence refers to the ability to solve problems during communication.

Communicators must have the ability to "repair" the inevitable miscommunications that frequently arise during interaction.

In your opinion, which of the four competencies as defined by Canale and Swain receive the most attention in foreign language education? Why? Think about your own communicative competence in a second or third language. Are you equally strong in all four competencies?

Canale, M. and Swain, M. 1980. *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*. Applied Linguistics 1 (1), 1-47.

Communicative competence is a term in [linguistics](#) which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of [syntax](#), [morphology](#), [phonology](#) and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately.

The term was coined by [Dell Hymes](#) in 1966,^[1] reacting against the perceived inadequacy of [Noam Chomsky](#)'s (1965) distinction between [competence](#) and [performance](#).^[2] To address Chomsky's abstract notion of competence, Hymes undertook [ethnographic](#) exploration of communicative competence that included "communicative form and function in integral relation to each other".^[3] The approach pioneered by Hymes is now known as the [ethnography of communication](#).

Debate has occurred regarding linguistic competence and communicative competence in the second and foreign language teaching literature, and scholars have found **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 appropriateness of this opposition behind the development of communicative competence.^[4]

Use in education

The notion of communicative competence is one of the theories that underlies the [communicative approach](#) to foreign language teaching.^[3]

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components:^[5]

1. **grammatical competence: words and rules**
2. [sociolinguistic](#) competence: appropriateness
3. strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies

Canale (1983) refined the above model, adding discourse competence: [cohesion](#) and [coherence](#)

A more recent survey of communicative competence by Bachman (1990) divides it into the broad headings of "organizational competence," which includes both grammatical and discourse (or textual) competence, and "pragmatic competence," which includes both sociolinguistic and "[illocutionary](#)" competence.^[6] Strategic Competence is associated with the interlocutors' ability in using communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Lin, 2009).

Through the influence of [communicative language teaching](#), **it has become widely accepted that communicative competence should be the goal of [language education](#), central to good classroom practice.**^[7] This is **in contrast to previous views** in which **grammatical competence was commonly given top priority.**

Grammatical competence differs from sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies **because it does not presuppose interaction.!!??**

Canale and Swain defined communicative competence as a global competence that subsumed four separate but related competencies: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse*, and *strategic*. The concept of *communication competence* **emerged as a reaction to earlier approaches to language that focused exclusively on grammatical competence.**

The understanding of communicative competence has been influenced by the field of [pragmatics](#) and the [philosophy of language](#) concerning [speech acts](#) as described in large part by [John Searle](#) and [J.L. Austin](#).

Levelt's Psycholinguistic Model

One of the most influential psycholinguistic models of oral production comes from Levelt (1989). This model breaks speech production into four separate cognitive processes:

1. conceptualization;
2. utterance formulation;
3. speech articulation and
4. self-monitoring.

Speaking as a communicative activity requires all four processes. **However, much oral practice in the classroom merely requires the repetition of prefabricated phrases that does not entail the first two cognitive processes.** Levelt's (1989) psycholinguistic model focuses on speech production, that is, the cognitive steps required to produce a spoken utterance, from intention to articulation.

Lee's Classroom Model

In the book *Tasks and Communicating in the Language Classroom* (2000), Lee outlines criteria for operationalizing communication, that is, **creating a workable pedagogical activity based on real communication.** These criteria make a handy *checklist* for **distinguishing**

An information gap is a requirement of all communicative tasks.

- 1.) The basic need to communicate arises to express information that others may not know, e.g., our feelings, our experiences, our beliefs, etc. Therefore, real communication typically includes the exchange of some new information that the listener does not already know.
- 2.) However, this doesn't mean that ALL the information must be brand new to the listener. Rather, when people communicate, they build on common knowledge of mutually established information.
- 3.) Communicative tasks for beginners should be highly structured and relatively concrete. Lee (2000) claims that communicative tasks for beginners are more effective when they are tightly structured and include concrete subtasks (e.g., making a list).
- 4.) "Linguistic support" refers to
 - vocabulary that a student is likely to need in order to perform the task.
 - grammatical structures that a student is likely to need in order to perform the task.

- transcripts or models of the task performed successfully.

"Linguistic support" refers to language examples for the student to follow that are included within the task itself. The linguistic support may target all levels of linguistic structure: vocabulary items, phrases, discourses.

Communicative tasks are characterized as **synthetic or holistic because they synthesize the many parts of a lesson (vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical structure, pronunciation, etc.)** into a whole. For this reason, **these kinds of tasks are often found at the end of a chapter or pedagogical sequence.**

Task Demands

To help judge the difficulty of a task, teachers should consider the following demands placed on the student:

- **Linguistic complexity** (vocabulary, grammar, textual/genre conventions)
- **Communicative stress** (face-threatening topic or task; number of people involved; relationships of those involved)
- **Cognitive demands** (familiarity with topic; memory requirements; processing demands)

Task Structure

The way a communicative task is structured (or not) has a great deal to do with its ultimate success in the classroom. When considering how to structure a task, Lee (2000: 35-36) suggests that designers ask themselves these four questions:

1. What information is supposed to be extracted from the interaction by the learners?
2. What are the relevant subcomponents of the topic?
3. What tasks can the learners carry out to explore the subcomponents? (e.g., create lists, fill in charts, etc.)
4. What linguistic support do the learners need?

Have you ever attempted to teach a communicative task only to find out that your students are lacking the linguistic resources to complete the task? Have you ever come across a task that is too unstructured or too complicated?

Brandl, K. 2009. Chapter 8 Developing oral communication skills. In *Communicative Language Teaching in Action*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Review the guidelines for implementing communicative activities (Brandl 2008) and consider how you could incorporate these into your classroom.

- Make the goal clear from the beginning.
- Involve all participants equally.
- Make sure students are adequately prepared.

- Provide clear instructions and examples.
- Make an effort to mix groups.
- Assign activities that are relevant and interesting to students.
- Circulate, circulate, circulate.
- Teach group interaction skills.
- Hold group accountable for completing task on time.

The original narrative task casts the students as passive spectators who take turns performing an oral narrative to the group. Students rarely negotiate meaning in such a task because they don't want to interrupt each others' performances.

The redesigned task was more communicative because it required students to listen to each other's stories, to comprehend what was narrated and to respond.

Teachers should make an effort to mix groups so that no one feels "stuck" in an unsuccessful group the entire semester.

Lee (2000:74-75) discusses implementing a communicative task as an instructional event. He claims that teachers need to pay attention to three "points of encounter" during the instructional event: framing, executing and concluding.

This module on speaking began by emphasizing the difference between guided practice and communication; that is, the difference between apparent communication and real communication. The reason for this emphasis is obvious: the goal of communicative language teaching is "communicative competence," which is achieved through the use of the foreign language for actual communicative purposes. Common pedagogical practices such as reading dialogues aloud or performing oral drills (e.g., "I like to play tennis. She likes to play tennis. We like to...") all have their place, but should never be confused with oral communication. Guided oral practice simply doesn't possess the *sine qua non* for communication: communicative intent and creative use of the language.

If teachers are going to help their students to communicate in the foreign language, they must carefully design and implement oral tasks. Teachers may begin by developing a repertoire of communicative activities that follow the design principles discussed in Lessons 3 and 4. In fact, our participating teachers demonstrate and discuss activities that they developed based on a set of activity templates found in the portfolio section of this module. These flexible templates are easily adapted to different topics, different languages, and different student populations.

Instructor's Final Comments

"When people meet me for the first time and find out that I am a French professor, many recount their own failure at learning to speak the language. They typically confess that they studied French for "umpteen" years, but that they never really developed much proficiency at speaking. For most of them, French is a long-forgotten academic subject. I take these common anecdotes as evidence that teachers and students still spend too much of their time talking about the foreign language and precious little time actually talking in the foreign language.

I would like to encourage teachers to create more opportunities in their classrooms for students to develop oral communicative competence. Don't delay your students' gratification. Help them experience how motivating it can be to express their own thoughts and feelings in the foreign language."