



# Developing Students' Communicative Competence Through Interaction in Oral English

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**Supported by** the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (SWU1909531).

Received 17 January 2019; accepted 1 April 2019

Published online 26 April 2019

## Abstract

Under the influence of traditional teaching methodology, an English teacher puts emphasis on feeding students with linguistic knowledge, ignoring the fact that, for students, the real significance of learning a foreign language lies in developing communicative competence in it. But the question here for us is : how can we develop students' communicative competence, which is a complicated problem. Communication can be conducted in both oral and written channels, and this research paper will focus on oral English.

Developing students' communicative competence in oral English is not a project to be finished within a short period of time. It must entail a lot of innovative efforts from both teachers and students, and also requires a shift of their roles in class.

**Key words:** Communicative Competence; Interaction; Strategies; Cultural awareness

Zheng, C. (2019). Developing Students' Communicative Competence Through Interaction in Oral English. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 18(2), 34-37. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10935> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10935>

## INTRODUCTION

Language learning and teaching can be an exciting and refreshing interval for students and teachers. There are so many possible ways of stimulating communicative

interaction, yet all over the world, one still finds classroom where language learning is a tedious,dry-as-dust process, devoid of any contact with real world in which language use is as natural as breathing.Grammar rules are explained and practiced; vocabulary and paradigms are learned by heart. The “book”is “covered” and students move on.

Fortunately, there are also classrooms where students are comprehending, communicating and creating language that is meaningful, even original and stimulating. In these classrooms, students are interacting in the language, perhaps painfully at first, but with great improvement as they acquire confidence. In this sort of classroom, students' communicative competence is under full development with the teacher taking the role of a coordinator, guide, and on-spot helper of students, who are the learning center. Finally, an atmosphere of excitement and trust can be created where students cooperate in imaginative activities, sharing with each other real messages in authentic and exhilarating interactions.The question put here is: how can we develop students' communicative competence, a complicated problem for research. Communication can be conducted in both oral and written channels, and this paper narrows its focus on oral English.

A goal expressed in terms of communication means classroom teaching based on communication. Hence a number of techniques developed that evolved into two styles, which we shall call here “social communicative style ” and “information communicative style” which is to be discussed in another article. The social communicative style has its main emphasis on the joint function of two people in a situation, what Halliday(1975)terms the interpersonal function of language. In a social communicative style, language is defined as communication between people, rather than as texts or grammatical rules or patterns; it has a social purpose. Language is for forming relationships with people and for interrelating with them. Using language means meeting people and talking to them. The teaching syllabus is primarily a way of listing the aspects

of communication the students will find most useful, whether functions, notions or processes. It tries to develop the students' ability to communicate fluently rather than in grammatically flawless sentences.

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## 1. A BRIEF SURVEY OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Before American sociologist D.H.Hymes put forward his idea about communicative competence, Noam Chomsky's viewpoint on "linguistic competence" and "linguistic performance" was unchallenged in the linguistic circle: on Chomsky's part, competence was beyond the reach of ordinary people, because it did only exist in the ideal speaker-listener pattern with a completely homogeneous speech community and performance, as it was concerned with a record of natural speech, would show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course and so on, represented both an incomplete and degenerate reflection of the ideal speaker-listener's competence.

Chomsky's tone faced the challenges from D.H.Hymes, who called linguists to attach great importance to "linguistic performance" as the actual use of language in a concrete situation, in other words, a non-homogeneous speech community, and regarded Chomsky's narrow concept of competence as a "Garden of Eden view" (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979, p.4)

D.H.Hymes put forward the concept of communicative competence in linguistic theory, and initiated a new approach of second language teaching and acquisition, expanding people's vision from the ideal "linguistic competence" to "communicative competence", the latter concerning with the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language use which the speaker-listener possessed in heterogeneous speech community with diversified linguistic and socio-cultural features as follows: grammaticality, feasibility, appropriateness, accepted usage.

Grammatically in Hymes' words, "rules of use without which the rules of grammar could be useless" (ibid. 14) Indeed, if a speaker were to produce grammatical sentence without regard to the situation in which they are being used, he would certainly be considered deranged. The second factor is feasibility. A sentence like "the mouse the cat the dog the man the woman married beat chased ate had a white tail" is grammatically possible, but is hardly feasible. Due to our restricted power of processing, such a sentence cannot be in any real sense being said to form a part of our competence. The third factor is appropriateness. The learning of a language includes the ability to compose correct sentences, but it also involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or part of sentences are appropriate in a particular context (Widdowson, 1978). For example, it is, though grammatically suitable, yet inappropriate to give such an answer "I have taken the umbrella with me" to the question "When will the bus arrive?" The final factor refers to the area, which we

commonly refer to as "accepted usage." It concerns whether or not occur in any normal communication. In summary, the goal of a broad theory of competence can be said to show the ways in which the systematically possible, the feasible and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behaviors.

A learner's communicative competence is assisted by communicative language teaching methodology. With this teaching method, language function is stressed as much as form. Appropriate use of the language is a part of communicative competence. It is not simply a matter of the correct manipulation of different structures, but more of the ability to use language appropriately. Language fluency is just as important as accuracy. The discourse structure of our language use is as significant as the sentence structure and should be included in the teaching process. The teaching materials should be as authentic as possible. The activities should be as communicative and authentic as the language we are attempting to teach and learn. The interactive nature of language use should be stressed not only in the language materials but in the teaching and learning activities. Learner needs should be considered as central to the whole process. Acceptance of communicative views suggest a number of changes that would be required from more traditional approaches. The first one is that a teacher can no longer be the source of knowledge and truth about the language. The teacher's role has more to do with initiating activities. The second is that a learner can no longer be passive. A learner must actively take part in the speaking activities. The third is that the features of authentic instances of language use should be preserved. The fourth is that oral tasks not drills should be performed and skills are to be practiced. The ideas behind communicative approaches come from much the same kinds of thinking as lie behind functional language teaching. In addition to the very communicatively central ideas of language functions and semantic notions, communicative approaches draw on work in discourse analysis. Work on textual cohesion and coherence provides many useful insights into the possibilities of language structuring above the level of sentence. Similar work in discourse analysis into the structuring of conversations and exchanges is also drawn into the teaching of language. Sociolinguistic views about the nature of linguistic competence have also been highly influential. In general terms, anything to do with the study of language in the process of communication should be relevant in principle to communicative language teaching.

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## 2. STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN ORAL ENGLISH: STRUCTURED INTERACTION AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

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Language is not used in the abstract detached from people and place. On the contrary, language is always used among

people in particular situations. Teaching language should involve the presentation of the new language in relation to the people involved in particular situations. Language structures should not be presented in the abstract but in situations. Linguistic forms are to be taught in relation to meaning in a specific context. People can learn language that is appropriate to their needs by predicting the type of situations that they are likely to be in. The course designer, the teacher can list a set of situations and the kinds of expressions appropriate to those situations.

Learning and teaching oral spoken English involves speech events. In exploring what it is what we know about taking part in conversation or any other speech event, we quickly realize that there is enormous variation in what people say and do in different circumstances. In order to begin to describe the sources of that variation, we should take account of a number of criteria. For example, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer and their relationships, whether they are friends, strangers, young, old, of equal or unequal status, and many other factors. All of these factors will have influence on what is said and how it is said. We would have to describe what was the topic of the conversation and in what setting or context it took place. Even when we have described all these factors, we will still not have analyzed the actual structure of the conversation itself. As language-users in a particular culture, we clearly have quite sophisticated knowledge of how conversation works.

All that we can teach students in a second language is how to construct the appropriate framework for expression of meaning. We cannot teach students to express their own meaning, but we can provide opportunities that catalyze their desire or motivation for the participation in oral activities in design for enhancing their communicative competence, moreover, we can help the students to improve the framework so that it can better carry the intended message. John R. Searle calls language "rule-governed internal behavior" (Searle, 1969:16). We can help students internalize the rules by contriving situations and encounters. At first, we help students try our frameworks of varying degrees of complexity and subtlety, in other words, perform "speech acts" (Ibid. 16) by providing practice in pseudo communication. This is communication, in which the context is structured by the learning situation, rather than springing autonomously from the mind and emotions of the students. In this way, students can reinforce foundations of linguistic knowledge through communicative framework; develop their cognitive competence in English learning, and most importantly, acquire their confidence in their ability to reach the stage of autonomous communication.

The concept of individualization of instruction has to be very carefully analyzed in relation to the development of communicative competence: it can be pair or group interaction, but not independently study, because communication by definition involves more than one person.

Pragmatic competence is generally considered to involve two kinds of ability. In part, it means knowing how to use language in order to achieve certain communicative goals or intentions. This has also been called illocutionary competence (Hedge, 2000:48). An example would be "It is so hot today." This statement could have a number of illocutionary forces. It might be a statement about the physical atmosphere, a request to open the windows or an attempt to elicit the offer of a cold drink.

Language is tied to cultural contexts and social situations. One element of pragmatic competence is knowing how to perform a particular function or express an intention clearly, a successful communication is conducted appropriately to the social context in which they are produced. The social context is composed of different layers of social conventions, which are internalized rules of the people who speak the language in the society. A student who is a non-native speaker of the language is easy to cause misunderstanding in the communication with the native speaker, because he makes pragmatic errors unacceptable to the social conventions of such language. Students' cultural awareness plays key role in reinforcing students' pragmatic competence and it can be cultivated through introducing cultural contrasts into dialogues. In many textbooks, the dialogues for oral practice are neutral. We can introduce the cultural contrasts into dialogue for arousing students' awareness of the cultural factors in spoken English close to real communication. Constructing the dialogue with cultural contrasts is experimental, and still a lot of dialogues remain as neutral. The problem is how we can design the new type of dialogue.

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### 3. ACTIVITY-BASED LEARNING STRATEGY

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There are three basic reasons why it is a good idea to give students oral tasks which provoke them to use all and any language at their command. The first one is about rehearsal. A teacher gives students an opportunity to have a free discussion in order to rehearse, for example, having them take part in a role-play at an airport check-in desk allows them to rehearse such a real-life event in the safety of the classroom. This is not the same as practice in which more detailed study takes place; instead it is a way for students to "get the feel of" what communicating in the foreign language really feels like. The second one is about feedback. Speaking tasks where students are trying to use all and any language they know provides feedback for both teacher and students. Teachers can see how well their class is doing and what language problems they are having and students can also see how easy they find a particular kind of speaking and what they need to do to improve. Speaking activities can give them enormous confidence and satisfaction, and which sensitive teacher guidance can encourage them into further study. Good speaking activities can and should be highly motivating. If all the students are participating fully, and if the teacher has set

up the activity properly and can then give sympathetic and useful feedback, they will get tremendous satisfaction from it. Many speaking tasks( role-playing, discussion, problem-solving etc) are intrinsically enjoyable in themselves.

It is worth noticing that the method of correcting is vital for activity-based strategy. It is important for teachers to correct mistakes made during speaking activities in a different way from the mistakes made during a *Study* exercise. When students are repeating sentences trying to get their pronunciation exactly right, then the teacher will often correct appropriately every time when there is a problem. But if the same teacher did the same thing while students were involved in a passionate discussion about whether smoking should be banned on tourist beaches, for example, the effect might well be to destroy the conversational flow. Constant interruption from the teacher will destroy the purpose of the speaking activity. Many teachers watch and listen while speaking activities are taking place. They note down things that seemed to go well and times when students could not make themselves understood or made important mistakes. When the activity has finished, they then ask the students how they thought it went before giving their own feedback. They may say that they liked the way student A said this and the way student B was able to disagree with her. They will then say that they did hear one or two mistakes and they can then either discuss them with the class, write them on the board or give them individually to the students concerned. In each case, they will ask the students to see if they can identify the problem and correct it. As with any kind of correction, it is important not to single students out for particular criticism. Many teachers deal with the mistakes they heard without saying who made them. Of course, there are no hard and fast rules about correcting. Some teachers who have a good relationship with their students can intervene appropriately during a speaking activity if they do it in a quiet non-obtrusive way. But it is a risky enterprise. The general principle of watching and listening so that you can give feedback later is usually much more appropriate.

## CONCLUSION

Developing students' communicative competence in spoken English is a long-term task, yet very important in second language acquisition. Aimed at exploring students' communicative competence instead of merely feeding them with linguistic knowledge and skills, a communicative classroom can gradually take shape from the traditionally unimaginative and conventional one. The foregoing strategies, mainly structured interaction and autonomous interaction have developed students'

communicative competence from the initial level of internalization of new language rules for acquiring linguistic knowledge and cognitive competence to the advanced level of using the absorbed knowledge to interact freely with classmates, creatively in the imaginative setting, and adapt the thinking mode of English to produce appropriate utterances in communication in the social context.

The communicative classroom has benefited students in many ways and they are no longer passive listeners in class, but become its center. Various kinds of interaction provide them channels to participate in the goal-oriented activities and tasks, forge a strong interpersonal tie with each other as well as bring individual characteristics into full play.

In conclusion, students are expected to adopt a range of roles in the class which require them to be adaptable, creative, inventive and most of all independent. Students can learn linguistic knowledge through interactive way. Interaction does not preclude the learning of the grammatical system of the language. We interact better if we can understand and express utterances of meaning that require careful syntactic choices. Learning grammar, however, is not listening to expositions of rules but inductively developing rules from living language materials and then performing rules (Rivers, 1981:194-196) as we can see from grammar-demonstration dialogue.

The teacher helps students evaluate their success in interaction, with particular attention to the types of errors that hinder communication. Teachers can use their knowledge of the errors of weakness of a number of students as a basis for special emphasis in instruction and in review. In this way, the teacher helps students focus on what are problem areas for them as they learn from their mistakes.

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