

## Linguistic Or Communicative Competence — Which Wins?

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Every system needs a structure, and so it is too with the business of foreign-language learning. As teachers, we must structure a system of imparting the skills of a language which may be alien to our learners in key concepts and in its form. It is obvious that our success or failure depends on and is measured by our objectives. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the inseparable twins, linguistic and communicative competence, two aspects of language proficiency related respectively to the form and the content of information exchange.

Generally, we must impart the skills of speaking, understanding, reading and writing in the target language. But in view of the limited time available for teaching foreign languages, we must in effect emphasise those aspects which will help us attain our objective most thoroughly and quickly. Since linguistic and communicative competence are interdependent, there is no question of excluding one in favour of the other. When students come to us for the first time, we must rightly assume that they have had no, or negligible, previous exposure to the target language. We are, as it were, presented with a clean slate, but only apparently. Everyone brings with him — to a greater or lesser extent — the ways of thinking and formulating which collectively are termed "culture". Methodology and curriculum must take the background of the learners into account, and this in itself distinguishes foreign-language teaching from the exact sciences. In communications terms, we may say that the teacher can be successful as a transmitter only if the signals which he sends out are satisfactorily received. Not only must his impulses be received, they must be interpreted and internalised. Only then, to take the analogy a step further, can we say that teacher and learner are on the same "wavelength". It is the teacher's duty to facilitate this compatibility of cultures. While we are bound to expect a reasonable standard of diligence on the part of the learner, we must ensure that our signals are capable of being internalised by the learner. In short, the teacher must transform his learners into a responsive and appreciative audience.

In practice, we may have to sacrifice something of the "purity" of the target language for the sake of our audience. But we should remember that even native speakers often do not use their language in quite the way prescribed in the textbooks. Even more importantly, it is virtually impossible to be fully conversant with every aspect of every branch of a language. Our daily lives are so organised that we actively use only a minuscule portion of the wealth of vocabulary and syntax which is theoretically at our disposal. Even our passive knowledge of language falls far short of the theoretically possible range. An astonishingly meagre number of words and patterns forms our basic, day-to-day vocabulary. This has been variously estimated, but certainly would not exceed 2000 words. Increasing specialisation in society does not encourage

or justify an extension of our basic mode of expression. While most have access to their own rarified word-fields, all others outside the circle of the initiated cannot understand them because they have little or no significance to their daily lives

This is in effect a linguistic selection process based on the needs and realities of different sections of the community. All inherit the common pool of basic language patterns which characterise a language bloc. As it is a prerequisite for normal communication between people of a particular culture, indeed as it is the most obvious manifestation of a cultural identity, it could be called a language infrastructure. The rarification of language occurs in specific, goal-oriented pursuits, and is evident in not one, but numerous superstructures. For example, the terminology of businessmen, doctors, farmers and carpenters has evolved over the centuries into clearly definable word-fields. There are now virtually secret codes which one must adopt and be familiar with in order to be effective in one's chosen field. If one were to remain on the level of the language infrastructure, one would be reduced to expressing banalities.

We must next examine the value to the learner in concentrating all his efforts on mastering the infrastructure of the foreign language. At some stage, a native speaker of the target language also had to learn it. He did this first by emulating his parents and others whom he encountered and assimilating what he copied, then his formal education directed and concretised his learning approach. As a rule, no native speaker ever attains perfection in applying the basic linguistic patterns with which he has been equipped by his home and school environment. Progressively, over the years, his ability to understand, and to be understood by, others around him is intensified. Especially in the formative, pre-school years up until about six years of age, the child makes various, increasingly complex attempts to assert himself linguistically in the adult world. This results in the familiar type of speech known as child's language. With this experimental mode of communication, the child displays his inability at that stage of development to master the intricacies of the adult language infrastructure. Usually, however, the child succeeds in getting his message across. Typically, the child is thus linguistically incompetent as compared to an adult, but is to a varying degree communicatively competent. All the *formal* errors of language which the child may commit in expressing his needs and wants, are secondary to the transfer of information which comprises the *content* of the child's utterance.

In the real world, it matters little whether a verb is wrongly conjugated, an adjective incorrectly inflected or a noun is given the right gender. What does matter, is that the signal transmitted is substantially the same as that which is intended, that the receiver interprets the signal in the way that the transmitter intended, and that the signal refers to something in the real world. Unfortunately, the process of osmotic learning by children does not have an exact equivalent in adult learners.

First, adults tend to be mentally less flexible than children and usually have got out of the habit of learning, as such, with the end of their formal education. Secondly, adults tend to apply to the target language many of the deeply-ingrained language patterns of their mother tongue. These can prove to be a constant source of frustration for student and teacher alike. Thirdly, and most importantly, the child is immersed from the time of his birth in his

linguistic/cultural environment where the acquisition of language is the child's top priority for social survival. By contrast, the adult learner has periodic, superficial encounters with the target language and culture. Short of packing all our students off to Europe, say, for a few years, there is nothing to be done about this. The closest we can come to immersion in the new linguistic environment, are superintensive courses conducted away from interference by the learner's own linguistic environment. Practicalities and logistics make this method all but impossible. Likewise, the "direct method" of foreign-language teaching, i.e. conducting the class solely in the target language, falters on the need for massive amounts of backup materials, technical aids and appropriate textbooks. It is often expedient to resort to a bare minimum of the learner's own language to clarify particularly complex subject matter in the target language.

We are all too often confronted with the student's relying overly on his mother tongue to come to grips with the foreign language. Sometimes, he even enlists the aid of a third language, so we end up with a string of translation exercises like: bahasa Malaysia to English to German. This would be no problem if it were not for the fact that he then automatically limits his proficiency in the target language to his ability as a translator. His proficiency in the language which he uses as his medium is a further limiting factor. The dogged tenacity of many students to cling on to patterns more appropriately found in, say bahasa Malaysia or English, is the root of the problem. It should be pointed out that the learner's tendency to translate occurs spontaneously, and becomes more pronounced and more heavily relied on as he gets older. Regardless of whether we see this tendency as an exploitable tool, or as a constant irritation, we should in any event recognise its existence and make provision to deal with it in our syllabus.

As with all old habits, we must devise a programme which either destroys this tendency, or which attempts to make the best of a bad situation. If we choose the former approach, we run the real danger of alienating and/or confusing our learners. They come to regard the translation technique as a personalised study aid in the mastery of syntax and vocabulary. Even so, grammatical errors still occur and that vital spark of spontaneity is removed from the classroom setting. Besides, most students rightly assume that native speakers will allow them a generous margin of error and that the quest for formal perfection is both time-consuming and tortuous. So our question remains. How can we make the best of a bad situation? The question almost answers itself, if we acknowledge that "switching over" from one language to another is the learner's objective, and that this process involves translation both into and from the target language. It then becomes the teacher's job to equip the learner with the appropriate "labels", i.e. the approximate equivalents in terms of content and meaning between the learner's language and the target language. Expressed more starkly, the teacher should compromise on grammatical finesse, and concentrate on basic communication, by playing down many of the things which inhibit the learner's feeling of achievement in the target language. To use an analogy, we should concentrate on the building, rather than on the individual building-blocks. We may indeed end up with a somewhat shaky structure, but a structure nonetheless.

The results will be of immediate practical application to the learner; he can spend less time breaking his head on what for him are essentially meaningless intellectual exercises, and surge ahead on language superstructure connected with his work, hobbies and other aspects of his life. It is undeniable that a certain licence to make formal mistakes, serves an important motivational function for the learner, who is spared the embarrassment and interruption of being continually corrected by the teacher. While learners should ideally be equally proficient in the linguistic and communicative modes of the foreign language, the communicative approach bears more fruit, more quickly for a general audience of learners.

Once we accept the validity of the communicative model, we open up interesting and rewarding new paths. That much-maligned mode, colloquial language, comes within the learner's grasp. Arguably, the true richness of a language is contained in its idioms, proverbs and colloquialisms. And unlike the literary tradition of a culture, it is readily perceived as being living and enlivening. With colloquialisms, the learner can more closely approximate the normal speech patterns of the native speaker, and can in some measure compensate for his lack of mastery of the formal elements. No matter how good his textbook knowledge of a language, the learner needs colloquialisms to transcend the jaded style of grammar-based subject matter. To the native speaker, it appears that the learner has captured something of the substance and feel of the language, notwithstanding

he may make. Colloquial usage is of practical application in the four areas of skills which we endeavour to impart. Such proficiency is clearly of most use in speaking and listening, where there is real, or at least simulated, human interface. Situational modules are probably the best form for practising everyday language, be they dialogues, debates or imaginary situations set in the foreign country. However, colloquial knowledge is not without its uses in reading and writing, given that most language is written as it is spoken. This is especially the case in private correspondence with native speakers, a most valuable learning tool, in which person-to-person contact in the target language intensifies its relevance and immediacy.

Communicative competence is clearly people-oriented. But it cannot by itself solve all the problems created by the fact that there are hundreds of languages in the world. Sometimes, we must be very explicit and precise in what we express, and it is useless trying to "gloss over" deficiencies in our knowledge. At other times, we merely need to reinforce our communicative competence with a selection of words and expressions which we can be reasonably expected to know in our employment and daily lives. In such cases, we can start looking at language for special purposes. This is a valid attempt to define more rigorously the goals of any specific language programme. For foreign languages, a skeleton knowledge of language infrastructure is an adequate basis for specialist vocabulary. After the acquisition of rudimentary formulas for sentence construction, development of the superstructure goes hand-in-hand with consolidation of the infrastructure. True, the learner's language proficiency would be generally classed basic, but this is outweighed by its usefulness in a specific field. In relatively few fields need linguistic competence gain the upper hand in the superstructure, most notably in the precise disciplines such as engineering and mathematics in which students are basically

presented with a one-way flow of information, and syntax acts as indispensable elements of a mathematical equation. And in even fewer fields need there be a balanced mixture of communicative and linguistic competence. The notable example is translation, where the translator is duty-bound to provide a faithful version of the original plausibly phrased in a second language. But even here, we can make distinctions in the objectives of particular programmes, depending on the genre in question. To say otherwise, would be tantamount to saying that one needs exactly the same skill in translating Shakespeare as in translating Einstein.

There is still vast potential for the development of communicatively-based, special-purpose foreign language programmes in Malaysia. Such programmes would instil skills which could be applied in the country itself, or with appropriate adjustments, in the foreign country. For example, goodwill is generated from the investment of time and energy in learning a few hundred words and expressions liable to be used in the tourist industry. Similarly, vocational training abroad would become more meaningful if students were to have a survival kit of basic, applicable patterns before they left Malaysia for a country in which a foreign language is spoken. While such a course would present organisational problems, the results would justify the effort.

In my opinion, learning a foreign language is a worthwhile exercise in its own right. It raises the learner's horizons and is a further step in understanding our fellow human beings. But to ensure that all the effort we make in teaching and learning is fully justified, we should consciously experiment to find the mix of linguistic and communicative competence which is best suited to our objectives. In any event, we should not presume that grammatical forms should predominate, nor should we dismiss communicatively-oriented usage as imprecise, and hence inferior. My rhetorical question "Linguistic or communicative competence — which wins?" is loaded, in that it already presupposes a specific objective. If we find that our objective is a very general one, then we should be scrupulously careful to weight them equally. And as a general rule, we can say that linguistic competence has little meaning if it does not foster the learner's ability to communicate in a foreign language.