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Interpersonal Competence and the Communicative Approach

Ronald Schmidt-Fajlik

Current foreign language methodology based on communicative methods stresses the importance of developing language skills as a way to communicate effectively, as may be found in the statement “The aim of language teaching worldwide is to enable learners to use the language they have learned in school or college to communicate confidently and effectively with other users of English in the world outside” (Willis & Willis, 2009, p. 3). Although it is obvious that communicating effectively in a foreign language depends on developing one’s language skills, developing the ability to communicate effectively resides not only in one’s language ability, but also in one’s use of interpersonal competence. Foreign language teaching methodology should not only concentrate on developing language skills for effective communication, but should also include developing interpersonal competence, as communication generally takes place in a social context. If students lack interpersonal skills or lack confidence in communicating interpersonally, they will not be able to put to effective use the foreign language they are learning. To become a competent communicator requires both language and interpersonal skills.

Proponents of Communicative Language Learning (CLT) and the use of communicative tasks in language teaching such as Nunan (1991), Littlewood (1981), and Widdowson (1978) describe the importance of language use in terms of its communicative function. This view is evident in Littlewood’s statement that “We must therefore provide learners with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes. We must also remember that we are ultimately concerned with developing the learners’ ability to take part in the process of communicating through language” (1981, p. xxi). The methodological objectives of CLT and Task Based Learned (TBL), which incorporates the communicative framework of CLT (Willis & Willis, 2009), stresses the use of language as a means of communication where “Learning activities are consequently selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than merely mechanical practice of language patterns)” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 161).

Communicative language teaching grew out of Hymes’ (1972) critique of Chomsky’s (1965) theory of transformational grammar where competence and performance are based on a somewhat idealized use of language. Hymes placed the emphasis on performance within a sociocultural perspective, where the use of language is dependent on social context. This paved the way for communicative competence to be based on the way language is used in a particular social context.

CLT and TBL often require that communicative competence be developed through communicative activities which take place in a social context with other class members. Such communicative activities include opportunities to use language meaningfully through interactive activities such as role plays, interviews, information gap, pair work, and group work. Although CLT and TBL often incorporate activities which involve real or meaningful communication as a way to develop language skills through social interaction, developing the language skills of students through such socially interactive activities may not be a sufficient basis for developing communicative competence. If communicative competence depends on the social context which determines the proper use of language within a particular social context, it is apparent that in order for communication to take place, engaging within a social context is important. Communicative competence presupposes that communication will take place in a social context, particularly so in terms of oral communication. Certainly, language facility is an important factor in being able to communicate effectively, with the appropriate use of language being based on a particular social context as pointed out by Hymes, but engaging in a social context requires not only linguistic competence, but also interpersonal competence.

If a student does not have appropriate social or interpersonal skills, or does not feel confident in
using such skills, he or she will not achieve a successful learning experience as a lack of these skills will impede progress in whatever the linguistic objectives are of a lesson based on a communicative approach. The objectives of the communicative approach in developing the confident ability to communicate with someone in a meaningful manner, may not be adequately achieved solely based on the objective of developing linguistic skills unless those skills also incorporate the social skills necessary to communicate effectively with others. The goal of this paper is to determine how Japanese university students feel about their interpersonal skills and to interpret the results in terms of the importance of developing interpersonal skills in the language classroom.

Interpersonal Survey

The survey (Appendix 1) was originally written in Japanese in order to avoid any language difficulties. A translation in English is provided in Appendix 2. The students were permitted to answer either in Japanese or English if they wished to give answers other than those provided in the multiple choice, or to clarify their answers. All such responses by students were written in English (probably as they were aware that they would be read by their English teacher). The survey was administered to 197 Japanese students at two different Japanese universities. The students ranged in age from 18 to 21. Females comprised 54% of the total. The survey consisted of questions related to how students felt about their interpersonal skills, to which they self-reported. The use of self-reports in determining feelings about interpersonal skills is supported by Spitzberg, & Cupach in that “Clearly the most common approach to assessing interpersonal competence (or its components) is the use of self-reports. The most significant advantage of self-evaluation is that an individual knows more about him– or herself than does anyone else” (1989, p. 57). The purpose of the survey was to determine how students felt about interacting with others socially as well as how confident they felt about their interpersonal skills. A lack of confidence in such skills would certainly make them less confident in attempting to take part in social intercourse in that “Knowledge of interpersonal communication leads to greater interpersonal ability leads to a greater number of available choices or options for interacting leads to greater likelihood of interpersonal effectiveness” (Devito, 2008, p. 15).

Survey Results

Responses to survey questions were as follows:

1. Do you enjoy speaking with other people?
   Responses to this question indicate that 68.5% of students enjoy speaking with other people while 24.9% of students are not sure of their enjoyment of speaking with other people. Written responses where students were asked to explain why they dislike speaking with people include statements such as “I am shy of strangers,” “I don’t like talking with other people,” “I’m afraid talking with people I don’t know well,” and “It’s very troublesome to talk with other people.”

2. Do you feel comfortable speaking with people?
   Responses to this question indicate that 53.8% of students feel comfortable when speaking with other people, 13.7% of the students do not feel comfortable while speaking with other people and 26.4% of students are not sure whether they feel comfortable when speaking with other people. Other responses to the question include statements such as “it depends on the person,” “sometimes can and sometimes can’t,” “I’m shy of strangers,” and “I’m a little nervous when meeting someone for the first time.”
3. Do you ever feel disappointed, angry, or dissatisfied after speaking with someone?

Responses to this question indicate that 73.1% of the students feel disappointed, angry, or dissatisfied after speaking with someone; 17.8% of the students feel that they do not get disappointed, angry, or dissatisfied after speaking with someone.

4. Do you feel nervous speaking with someone for the first time?

Responses to this question indicate that 60.4% of the students are nervous when speaking with people for the first time, 25.4% of the students said that it depends on the person whom they are speaking with and 12.2% of the students said that they are not nervous when speaking with people for the first time.

5. Do you generally feel comfortable in social situations?

In answer to this question 32.5% of the students responded that it depends on the situation, 28.4% of students do not feel comfortable in social situations, 29.9% of the students feel comfortable in social situations and 9.1% of the students are unsure whether they are comfortable in social situations.

6. Are you satisfied with your interpersonal skills?

Responses to this question indicate that in terms of their interpersonal skills, 45.2% of the students are satisfied, 41.6% of the students are not satisfied, and 13.2% of students are not sure of their interpersonal skills.

**Survey Conclusions**

Responses to question 1 indicate that a majority of students (68.5%) enjoy speaking with others, but 24.9% are not sure and 6.6% do not enjoy speaking with others. Although a majority of students do enjoy speaking with others, responses to question 2 indicate that only just over half of students (53.8%) feel comfortable speaking with others and that it depends on with who they are communicating with. With regard to question 4, few students (12.2%) answered that they do not feel nervous speaking to someone for the first time. As the use of a foreign language often depends on communicating with someone for the first time, such as when traveling abroad, or in business situations, being nervous when speaking with someone for the first time may hinder the ability to communicate comfortably and effectively. Lack of comfort in social situations is further indicated in responses to question 5 in that only 29.9% of students indicated feeling comfortable in social situations, with a large part of feeling comfortable in such situations depending on the situation (32.5%). Effective communicators should feel comfortable in most situations, which demonstrates that students need to develop their comfort level in a variety of social situations.

With regard to question 3, a large number of students (73.1%) come away with negative feelings after speaking with someone. If students do not feel that their experience was enjoyable in speaking with others, then future desire to communicate with others may be affected. These feelings may be based on a variety of reasons including not being open to others opinions, being a poor listener, or having certain ideal expectations about communicating with others. Ultimately such negative feelings may be based on how students feel about their interpersonal skills as indicated by responses to question 6. Less than half of all students surveyed (45.2%) indicate satisfaction with their interpersonal skills.

Overall the results of the survey indicate that students do not feel comfortable in social situations and lack confidence in their interpersonal skills, although they do value communicating with others.
Conclusion

The topic of interpersonal skills in the language classroom is important as such skills are required to take part in pair work and group work activities which are part of communicative methodologies. If students lack confidence in their interpersonal skills, it is likely that they may be reluctant to take part in activities which require social interaction which is the basis of many activities used in a communicative approach. If a student does not have appropriate social skills, or does not feel confident or experiences anxiety in terms of their interpersonal skills when interacting with others, the student will not have a successful learning experience as a lack of these skills will impede progress in whatever the linguistic objectives are of a communicative based language teaching approach. The objectives of the communicative approach, which is the ability to communicate with someone in a meaningful manner, may not be adequately achieved solely based on the development of linguistic skills unless those skills incorporate the social skills necessary to communicate effectively with others. Developing both language skills as well as interpersonal skills should be the basis of any communicative language teaching approach.

References

Appendix 1

「対人関係についてのアンケート」

年齢：
性別：男 女

１．あなたは、他人と話すことが好きですか？
   a. 好き  b. 嫌い  c. どちらでもない
   b. の 嫌いを選んだ方は、なぜですか？

２．あなたは、他人と快適に話しをす ることができますか？
   a. できる  b. できない  c. どちらでもない  d. その他

３．あなたは、誰かと話した後、不満を感じたり、失望させられたりした感じたことがありますか？
   a. ある  b. ない  c. わからない  d. その他

４．あなたは、誰かと初めて話しをする時、緊張しますか？
   a. する  b. しない  c. どちらでもない  d. 相手による

５．あなたは、社交的な場で、快適に感じることができるですか？
   a. できる  b. できない  c. どちらでもない  d. 場所による

６．あなたは、自分の対人関係において、満足していますか？
   a. 満足している  b. 満足していない  c. どちらでもない  d. その他
Appendix 2

Interpersonal Questionnaire

Age: ______
Sex: Male  Female

1. Do you enjoy speaking with other people?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure
   If you chose b. please briefly explain your answer:

2. Do you feel comfortable speaking with people?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure  d. other:

3. Do you ever feel disappointed, or dissatisfied after speaking with someone?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure  d. other:

4. Do you feel nervous speaking with someone for the first time?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure  d. It depends on who I’m speaking with.

5. Do you generally feel comfortable in social situations?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure  d. It depends on the situation.

6. Are you satisfied with your interpersonal skills?
   a. yes  b. no  c. not sure  d. other: