Developing Communicative Competence through Language Activities: Focus on Young Learners

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The term communicative competence has been used to refer to the rules of language use (Jacobovits, 1970; Widdowson, 1971; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1972; Munby, 1978). Canale and Swain use the term to refer to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence (a knowledge of rules of grammar) and sociolinguistic competence (a knowledge of' rules of language use). Canale's (1983) definition of communicative competence encompasses four different components. They are (i) grammatical competence, (ii) discourse competence, which is the ability to connect sentences in discourse to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances, (iii) sociolinguistic competence, which refers to knowledge of sociocultural rules of the social context in which language is used, and (iv) strategic competence, which refers to communication strategies which speakers use when communication breaks down as a result of imperfect knowledge of the language. These strategies include correcting, paraphrasing, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance and guessing (Savignon, 1983).

However, in developing communicative competence, the rules of grammar cannot be discounted. Although, according to Hymes (1972) there are rules of' grammar which are useless without the rules of language use, there are also rules of language use that would be useless without the rules of grammar (Canale and Swain, 1980). Without some minimal level of grammatical competence, one is not likely to be able to communicate with a monolingual speaker of the language one is learning. According to Allwright (1985), grammatical competence is part of communicative competence and it can be developed after communication has been achieved.

Studies on conversational interactions of all sorts (Michaels and Cook-Gumperz, 1979; Collins and Michaels, 1980) are based on the assumption that communicative competence is demonstrated daily and achieved as speakers engage themselves in verbal communication. It refers to more than the application of rules or norms for appropriate speech: 'it is the interactive realisation of communication within contexts that are themselves coded as part of that communication' (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1982). It includes, among other skills, the ability to obtain the floor (Elder, 1982), in other words, taking turns to speak.

Language as communication

Language exists for the purpose of communication, and communication is purposeful. We use verbal utterances to express our intentions and in doing so we are guided by the linguistic principles of our language. The verbal utterances we use in an interaction are forms (linguistically acceptable expressions of meaning) expressing certain communication functions (what we achieve in an interaction through the use of language).

Even at an early age children exercise certain language functions. Halliday (1973) has identified a set of language functions as 'those functions in which, a child first learns to mean' (p.37). A child develops the different language functions as he grows up. First is the instrumental or 'I want' function which the child uses to fulfill his needs. Next is the regulatory or 'Do as I tell you' function through which the child gets others to do what he wants them to do. The third function is the interactional or 'Me and you' function which the child uses to interact with someone. Fourthly is the personal or Here I come' function. The child uses this function to express his self-awareness. The fifth is the heuristic or 'Tell me why' function through which he explores his environment and wants to know what is happening around him. The sixth is the imaginative or 'let's pretend' function. At this point the child creates his own environment. At a later stage the child develops the informative or 'I've got something to tell you' function through which the child conveys information to someone.

On entering kindergarten or elementary school, children will experience different types of communication events. They could be involved in certain types of discourse such as arguments and question-answer sequences. Genishi and Paolo (1982) made a study of arguments of seven 3 to 5-year-old English speaking children to see what they showed about the children's knowledge and learning in an informal preschool. They concluded that the children learned some academic facts but a large part of their learning was social. They learned to negotiate through arguments. This according to Genishi and Paolo is socially valuable. Research in linguistics tends to show that children are very competent at using speech to meet social demands (Shuy and Griffin, 1981). Dickson (1981) points out that there is a developmental trend for the development of specific competences. It is then important for the teacher to understand the various stages in which the child develops communication behaviours necessary for performing the various language functions (Seiler et al., 1984:53. See appendix A).

In any language community, a child will learn to communicate as he becomes aware of his environment and the people around him. As the child learns to mix with different people, he will encounter different social situations. He is exposed to more varied styles of socially appropriate speech. When he enters school, the child will be in contact with many children of various backgrounds, a variety of adults and a variety of settings (playground, classroom, field trips). Communication is important in all these situations. However, Lindfors (1980:306) explains that the child's language is influenced by age, familiarity, status of participants, number of participants; time and place; type of communication event; formality, level of interaction; the spirit of interaction; the channel; topic and purpose of communication. As the child's social contacts expand, he will be able to adapt his language to suit the situation once he finds out the rules.

A second language can be acquired in everyday communication. In order to communicate, a learner must learn the language and to learn the language, the learner must use it in communication. Initially he may resort to nonverbal means. This means of communication allows him to start learning and learning in turn allows him to make progress in communication (Klein, 1986).

Children acquire communicative competence in an interactive environment by engaging in meaningful communication (Lindfors, 1980). Children learn language in the context of communicating and conversely learn communication strategies while they are learning the

fundamentals of language and connected speech (Seiler et al.1984: 45). Hopper and Naremore (1978) describe five methods by which children learn to communicate:

1. **Operant conditioning** A behaviour is repeated. If the child finds speaking in class a pleasurable experience, then he is likely to repeat the behaviour.
2. **Imitation** - The child imitates what he hears.
3. **Modelling** - The child emulates the communication the adults produce.
4. **Self-motivated practice** - The child practises sounds because he finds it enjoyable.
5. **Rule induction** - The child forms certain rules after hearing a number of sentences that use similar syntactic constructions.

Language functions that can be taught in the classroom

Five main categories of language functions have been identified by the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competence as those used in communication (Allen and Brown, 1976). Human beings develop varying degrees of competence in using them. They represent the interactive nature of communication.

1. **Controlling** - This is expressed by the language functions such as commanding, offering, suggesting, permitting, threatening, warning, persuading and their responses.
2. **Feeling** - This includes expressions of feelings or attitudes such as commiserating, claiming and their responses.
3. **Informing** - This includes asking for and giving information, justifying, questioning, naming, explaining and their responses.
4. **Ritualising** - This act serves to maintain social relationships. It includes greeting, leave-taking and turn-taking.
5. **Imagining** - This includes creative behaviours such as role- playing, fantasising and theorising.

All the five categories are used by children every day. They use persuasion in getting things from others; they express their feelings when they are happy or sad; they ask each other questions when they interact; they exercise turn-taking rules; they greet their teacher every day, and sometimes when they play they take on different roles. The children use various language forms in expressing these language functions in both their first and second languages. Therefore, the teacher can reinforce those forms and functions and teach them new ones in the classroom. The teacher who is sensitive and aware of how a child's communication abilities develop can provide a richer diversity of interactive experience for the child than his home and out-of-school environment can. By offering the child many opportunities for practising language used in various ways for various purposes, the teacher will help the child expand his repertoire of the language functions as well as the forms used in expressing each function.

Language activities for developing communicative competence

In selecting activities for children, it is important that they are within the children's own experiences. The children's needs and interests should be taken into consideration. According to Lindfors (1980), to plan communication for children without their active participation and without reference to their

interests and concerns is to miss the whole point. Thus the activities must be meaningful and purposeful and so must the coimnunication the children are engaged in. For communication to be meaningful and purposeful, there must be an information gap. There is something one person knows that the other person does not. There is then a real reason to communicate. The interactive activities should provide the children with information about how language is used as well as about how it is structured. For example, requesting can be accomplished by a variety of forms (Ervin-Tripp, 1977):

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an imperative          : Get me a drink
an imbedded imperative : Would you get me a drink?
a need statement       : I need a drink
an interrogative       : Do you have a drink handy?
a statement            : Tennis sure makes you thirsty.
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Just as one function can be expressed by several forms, one form can indicate several functions depending on the social context. For example the statement "It's cold" uttered by different people in different situations would serve different functions.

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Situation                                        Language function

a.      Teacher to pupils. It is a rainy day
        and the fan in the room is on.           command

b.      Customer to waiter as soup is served     request

c.      Stranger to stranger at a bus-stop       greeting

d.      Mother to son who is wearing a short-
        sleeved transparent shirt and is about
        to go out of the house. It is a cold day. advice
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Children need to learn the relations between form and function although there is no one-to-one correspondence between them.

Various activities can be carried out in the classroom for various purposes. It is important that children enjoy these language activities so that their level of anxiety is low and they are able to internalise the language items taught. They can be given some expressions to use to communicate with one another. Beginners are often able to internalise 'chunks' of language which allow them to participate in social situations (Richard-Amoto, 1988). Richard-Amoto maintains that during the initial stages of language development pupils often have the desire to communicate but do not have the necessary skills. So by having a repertoire of ways to be communicative they will be able to communicate. Teachers then will have to provide the language forms which are appropriate to the proficiency level of the pupils and which the pupils can use meaningfully.

The following are some activities which can be used:

1. Games
Children enjoy playing games. Though games are fun, they can also be used for teaching language forms and functions. Their most important use is to enable pupils to practise their communication skills. Some games can be played quietly while others give rise to noise. Some games are competitive but competition should not be the focus. Games which would embarrass pupils in front of their peers should be avoided. It is important that the rules of the game are few and are clearly explained.

2. Songs
Songs too provide fun to pupils. Songs can help to lower the pupils' anxiety and make them feel comfortable. Songs can also be of pedagogical value. Pupils can sing and perform actions described in the song.

3. Describing pictures
Pupils can practise language used for describing things. They can also learn how to provide and get information. Pupils interact meaningfully when they are given different pictures and try to get as much information about the picture or pictures their peers, have.

4. Poetry reading
Poems can be used to express feelings and attitudes. Pupils can learn how to express themselves as they read a poem.

5. Discussion
Children often argue among themselves. They agree and disagree over several things. What they have been doing can be more systematically done in the form of a discussion or debate.

8. Role-playing
Children go through the imaginative stage as they develop their language. They often fantasise and assume roles which are different from their real self. In role-playing, children should be allowed to take on roles which they like so that they can express themselves well.

7. Miming
What one does every day becomes a ritual and no verbal language is used. Children can be asked to perform what they normally do every day without saying anything. An information gap is created as those observing are not really sure of what is being performed. In order to know the answer they have to ask questions.

8. Story telling
Children enjoy listening to and telling stories. Children will be able to practice "narrating" when they tell stories. The stories can be real ones or those fantasised. A story which can be used to teach beginners is 'The Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly.' The children can read it and act out the verbs. Stories told to children should contain structures which are repeated. Children can internalise these structures as they say them out aloud each time they are mentioned in the story they are listening to.

9. Problem solving
Problem solving activities make children think. They make use of language in offering possible solutions to the problem. Studies of children in problem solving situations show that as they work in an interactive context they internalise the help received from their teacher and thus are able to accomplish the task which they may not have been able to do on their own (McNamee, 1979; Cazden, 1983; Greenfield, 1984).

The list of activities given is not exhaustive. The examples given (Appendix B) are meant to guide teachers in developing activities to teach various language functions. The teacher will have to provide the language forms to express a certain language function. This will depend on the proficiency level of the pupils.

Conclusion

The communicative activities developed should foster functional communicative competence among the children taught. The teacher should serve as a model for communication learning and use language to get things done. A variety of situations can be created in the classroom for children to practise the different language functions. In teaching the children the teacher should be aware of the cognitive and communication developmental stages of the children so that what is taught is not beyond their grasp.

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APPENDIX A

Communication Capabilities: Pre-Kindergarten through Adolescence

	Code behaviours	Adaptation to Culture	Functional Communication
Age 3 to 5	Uses nonverbal behaviour appropriate to situation	Responds differentially to verbal communication . regarding gender signals, degrees of emotion, degrees of treat	Integrated verbal and nonverbal strategies
	Responds appropriately to facial expressions		Responds to persuasive probes
			Uses opinion to support claims
	Uses most linguistic rules accurately	Uses silence as a communicative strategy	Is somewhat adaptive to listener (for example, speaks differently with younger children than with adults); uses conversational skills that are spontaneous, are mutually interactive, and follow conventionalized patterns
		Identifies self in communication roles	
		Uses dialect in productive and receptive language	
			Engages in dramatic or symbolic play alone, with peers, or with toys
			Tries on roles to see what it would be like to be someone else

	Code behaviours	Adaptation to Culture	Functional Communication
Age 5 to 9	Provides non-verbal feedback in conversation with prompting	Produces bidialectal utterances, if the base dialect is nonstandard	Perceives incongruous facial expressions in social interactions
	Uses complex syntactic structures	Responds in the classroom in ways appropriate to dialect of own language community	Controls facial expression to mask feelings
	Produces all phonemes accurately		Demonstrates ability to empathize
	Recognizes semantic nuances as well as denotations	Demonstrates leadership roles and competition if culturally appropriate	Distinguishes another's point of view when prompted
		Responds to status and power relationships in the communication situation	Makes abstract (in addition to concrete) associations
			Reads and supplies verbal feedback
			Uses interpersonal communication roles to further personal goals
			Describes, explains, and makes inferences regarding the unexpressed thoughts and feelings of others
			Creates more unified dramatic improvisations
			Classifies objects on a "part-whole" basis
			Formulates hypotheses and explainations about concrete matters

	Code behaviours	Adaptation to Culture	Functional Communication
Age 9 to 12	Responds appropriately to nonverbal messages about personal space Expresses complex syntactic structures in writing as well as in speaking	Elaborate responses to questions Answers questions from a variety of perspectives Retells a story rather than relating only parts of it Identifies differences of social dialect and perceives the significance of these differences	Uses a variety of arguments in persuasion and plays a variety of persuasive roles (for example, hard sell, soft sell) Plays games with carefully prescribed rules and regulations Represents imagined objects symbolically
Age 12 to 18	Evaluates emotional states from verbal and nonverbal communication Uses body language to express sexual role	Uses a variety of communication roles styles in the peer culture or own language community	Analyzes persuasive messages in relationship to source Evaluates a message critically Plays a variety of communication roles

Source: Seiler et al. 1984.

APPENDIX B

1. A Game
Title : **Collecting Your Possessions**
Language Functions: Requesting things; thanking; apologising.

Other communicative aspects : Turntaking.
Materials required:

> 4 (or more) sets of cards in a pack. A set comprises 4 cards: one shows a book, one a ruler, one a pencil and one an eraser. They are all of one colour, e.g. b1ue. Produce 3 or 4 more sets, but each set is of a different colour.

Rules:

1. Players must not show their cards to each other.
2. Each player should ask for a card in a polite manner e.g. "Please may I have the blue book?" If a player does not do this, he loses a turn.
3. The person addressed must hand over the card asked for, if he has it. If he does not, he has to say "I'm sorry, I don't have it". If he does not say it, he loses a turn.
4. The person who receives the card must say "Thank you". If he does not, the person who gave the card to him can ask for it back, and then say "Thank you".
5. Once a player has collected a set, he can put that set down. The player with the most sets wins.

Procedure:

1. Players are placed in groups of 3 or 4. They are seated in a circle.
2. A player starts the game by asking for a card from any player in the group.
3. Each player is given a turn.
4. The turns can be allocated in a clockwise manner or anti-clockwise manner. But only one direction is followed in one game.

2. A Song
Title : **Good morning, good morning**
Language Functions: Greeting; responding to greeting; leave-taking.

Other communicative aspects: turntaking; gestures.

Procedure:

1. Children form 2 concentric circles. Those in the inner circle face those in the outer circle.
2. As they sing the first line, they shake hands with each other.
3. They hold hands and skip around the circle as they sing the line "I'm fine, you too, I hope so," and then stop.
4. They wave to each other as they sing "Goodbye, I must go". The children in the outer circle then move on to another partner.
5. The song is sung again and the procedure is repeated.

Song:

Good morning, good morning, How are you this morning? I'm fine, you too, I hope so, Goodbye, I must go.

3. Describing Pictures
Title : **Compare and contrast**
Language functions: describing; agreeing; disagreeing; interrupting.

Materials required:

Two similar but not identical pictures. There are some similarities and some differences between the pictures.

Procedure:

1. Pupils are seated in pairs. Each pair is given a set of pictures (2 similar pictures, A and B).
2. Teacher tells the pupils that there are certain things which are the same and certain things which are different between the two pictures.
3. The pupil with picture A starts describing his picture. The pupil with picture B looks at his picture and then agrees or disagrees.
4. The pupils mark the differences.
5. When they have completed the task, they compare the differences that they have discovered.

4. Poetry reading
Title : **Put your hands in the air**
Language functions : giving instructions.
Other communicative aspects : responding to instructions.

Procedure:

1. Pupils stand in front of the classroom.
2. They read the poem and perform accordingly.

Poem: Put Your Hands in the Air by Jack Prelutsky.

Put your hands in the air
Put your hands down on your nose
Put your hands up in the air
Now bend down and touch your toes

Put your right hand in the air
Put your right hand on your lips
Put your left hand in the air
Now put both hands on your hips

Everybody turn around
Now let's jump up and down
Walk back quietly to your seat
Don't let the teacher hear your feet.

5. Discussion / debate
Title : **Television shows**
Language functions : inquiring; suggesting; agreeing; disagreeing.

Materials required : TV programme/schedule.
Task:

You have only one TV set at home. You and your sister/brother have your own favourite programmes. Talk to each other to find out what both of you can watch this evening.

Procedure:

1. Pupils work in pairs. Each pair is given a TV programme.
2. Pupils talk about the shows they want to watch.

Variation: Pupils can talk about the shows which are good and those which are bad for them to watch.

6. Role-playing
Title : **Watching television**
Language functions: requesting; advising; giving permission; denying permission.

Materials required: TV programmes.

Task:

> You want to watch some TV shows tonight. You ask your mother whether or not you can watch those shows.

Procedure:

1. Pupils work in pairs. One is the mother and the other the child.
2. Teacher can provide guidelines for the conversation or teacher can write down the lines each pupil has to read on role cards.

7. Miming
Title: **All sorts - a story, an event etc.**
Language functions: inquiring; suggesting; explaining.

Procedure:

1. The teacher or a pupil perform an action without saying anything.
2. The other pupil guesses what is being done.
3. The performer then explains what was done.

Variation : Pupils can work in groups.

8. Story telling
Title : **All sorts**
Language functions : informing, explaining, inquiring.

Procedure:

1. Teacher tells what happened to her one day. Teacher can provide words and phrases which pupils may be able to use. Teacher can also show pictures as she tells the story.
2. Teacher then asks each pupil to tell the others what happened to her/him one day.
3. The pupils can tell real stories or those fantasised by them.

9. Problem solving
Title : **Crossing the river**
Language functions : informing; explaining; suggesting; agreeing; disagreeing.

Materials required : figurines.
Task:

A man wants to cross a river. He has with him a dog, a chicken and a bag of rice. The boat that he has is too small to carry all of them together. The dog is capable of eating the chicken and the chicken loves to eat rice. How can the man, the dog, the chicken and the bag of rice get across the river?

Procedure:

1. Teacher explains the task to the pupils using the figurines prepared.
2. Each pupil can be asked to explain how the man, the dog, the chicken and the bag of rice can be brought across the river by moving the figurines.
3. The other pupils can judge whether or not the answer is correct.

Examples of language functions and forms.

Language function: Language forms:

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Requesting              May I have ......please?
                        Can I have .....please?
                        Could I have .....please?
                        Please give me ......
                        Please let me have   .....
                        Can/could you   give me .....  please?
                        Can/could you let me have......?
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