Teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence through the Four Skills

Esther Usó-Juan and Alicia Martínez-Flor
Jaume I University
euso@ang.uji.es / aflor@ang.uji.es

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the most accepted instructional framework in second or foreign language (L2) programs is Communicative Language Teaching, whose main goal is to increase learners' communicative competence. This theoretical term means being able to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately in the target language and culture. However, the implementation of a communicative methodology is not an easy task since it requires an understanding of the integrated nature of the theoretical concept of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2005). Therefore, it is the main goal of this paper to help language teachers better understand such a theoretical concept for improving their classroom practices. In so doing, we first provide an explanation of the theoretical concept of communicative competence. Then, a current framework of communicative competence, which aims at highlighting the function of the four macro-skills to build discourse competence for communicative purposes and reflects our conceptualization of language teaching is briefly discussed (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a). Finally, on the basis of this framework, and taking the intercultural component as the point of departure, a variety of activities in the four language skills are presented for teaching learners intercultural communicative competence.

1. Introduction

The last five decades have witnessed vast changes in our understanding of how languages are learnt, and subsequently taught. Empirical results from linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics have better established the complex nature of language learning: it has become evident that linguistic, psychological and sociocultural factors play a key role in this process. Furthermore, these results have also shown that communication is a pivotal point in language learning and that the degree of success achieved in this process depends much on how meaning is negotiated in communication. This concept of language learning explains the emergence of Communicative Approaches to L2 teaching over the last decades, whose pedagogical goal is to develop learners' communicative competence, i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system in an effective and appropriate way. However, the implementation of a communicative methodology is not an easy task. In fact, it represents a challenge to language practitioners since it requires an understanding of the complex and integrated nature of the theoretical concept *communicative competence* (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2005). The main goal of this paper is therefore to help language teachers better understand such a theoretical concept for improving their classroom practices. In so doing, we first explain the term communicative competence. Then a current framework of communicative competence that considers recent developments in how language learning and teaching processes are conceptualized is discussed (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a). Finally, on the basis of this framework, and taking the intercultural component as the point of departure, sample exercises that focus on each of the four language skills are given in an attempt to help language practitioners make L2 instruction more effective and appropriate.

2. The term communicative competence

The term *communicative competence* was coined by Hymes (1972), who defined it as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context. His work clearly demonstrated a shift of emphasis among linguists, away from the study of language as a system in isolation, a focus seen in the work of Chomsky (1965), towards the study of language as communication. Hymes's (1972) conceptualisation of communicative competence has been further developed by researchers such as Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), Bachman (1990) and Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), who attempted to define the specific components of the construct of communicative competence.

The widely cited model by Canale and Swain (1980), later expanded by Canale (1983), includes four competencies under the heading of communicative competence: *grammatical competence* (i.e. knowledge of the language code); *sociolinguistic competence* (i.e. knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a particular context); *strategic competence* (i.e. knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication) and *discourse competence* (i.e. knowledge of achieving

coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text). Pragmatic competence is essentially included in this model under sociolinguistic competence, which Canale and Swain (1980: 30) described as 'sociocultural rules of use'. However, it was not until Bachman that pragmatic competence came to be regarded as one of the main components of communicative competence.

Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language ability included three elements, namely language competence, strategic competence and physiological mechanisms. *Language competence* comprises two further components: organisational and pragmatic competence. On the one hand, organisational competence consists of grammatical and textual competence, thereby paralleling Canale's (1983) discourse competence. On the other hand, pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence, the former referring to knowledge of speech acts and language functions and the latter referring to the knowledge of how to use language functions appropriately in a given context. This distinction between these two sub-competencies echoes Leech's (1983: 10-11) and Thomas's (1983: 99) division of pragmatics into pragmalinguistics, which has been defined as 'the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions', and sociopragmatics, which has been defined as 'the sociological interface of pragmatics'. Apart from language competence, the model also includes strategic competence and physiological mechanisms. The former refers to the mental capacity to implement language competence appropriately in the situation in which communication takes place, whereas the latter refers to the neurological and psychological processes that are involved in language use. The most notable advance on Canale's (1983) model is that Bachman's (1990) model identifies pragmatic competence as a main component of the construct of communicative competence that is coordinated with grammatical and textual competence rather than being subordinated to it and interacting with the organisational competence in many ways (Kasper, 1997). Ever since then, the importance of this competence has been maintained as, for example, in the pedagogically motivated model of communicative competence proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995).

Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) further divided communicative competence into linguistic, sociocultural, strategic, discourse and actional competencies. In analysing these components they start with the core, that is to say, *discourse competence*, which concerns the selection and sequencing of sentences to achieve a unified spoken or written text. This competence is placed in a position where linguistic, sociocultural and actional competencies shape discourse competence, which in turn, also shapes each of the three components. *Linguistic competence* entails the basic elements of communication, such as sentence patterns, morphological inflections, phonological and orthographic systems, as well as lexical resources. *Sociocultural competence* refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express appropriate messages within the social and cultural context of communication in which they are produced. *Actional competence* involves the understanding of the speakers' communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech act sets. Finally, these four components are influenced by the last

one, *strategic competence*, which is concerned with the knowledge of communication strategies and how to use them. This model thus provides a clear picture of the interrelationship among all the components. However, with regard to the function they assign to strategic competence, Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a) claim that this competence should be placed at the same level as the rest of the competencies, since its goal is that of building discourse competence while allowing communicative ability to develop in a parallel way to the other components. This fact therefore has been considered in Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor's (2006a) current model of communicative competence whose main aim is to show how the four language skills serve to build discourse competence for communicative purposes, while also highlights the importance of the intercultural component given the increasing recognition that is nowadays associated to cultural aspects. In the following section, this model of communicative competence is briefly summarized.

3. A framework of communicative competence integrating the four skills

The framework of communicative competence presented by Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006a) includes five components which appear inside rectangular boxes of the same size, namely, discourse, linguistic pragmatic, intercultural competence and strategic. Following Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's (2000) view of discourse competence, the framework has this component at its heart. Thus, it appears inside an oval with a broken line, which leaves room for the four skills within that same rectangular box since the fact of being able to interpret and produce a spoken or written piece of discourse is the means to achieve successful communication. In this way, discourse competence is located in a position where the rest of the components (i.e., linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and strategic) serve to build this competence which, in turn, shapes each of the other competencies. As regards the relationship among all five components, the authors argue, in line with Savignon (2001), that all components are interrelated in the sense that an increase in one component interacts with the other components to produce an overall increase in the whole construct of communicative competence. This is the reason why the framework of communicative competence proposed by Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor's (2006a) is represented as a circle enclosing all five components (see Figure 1).
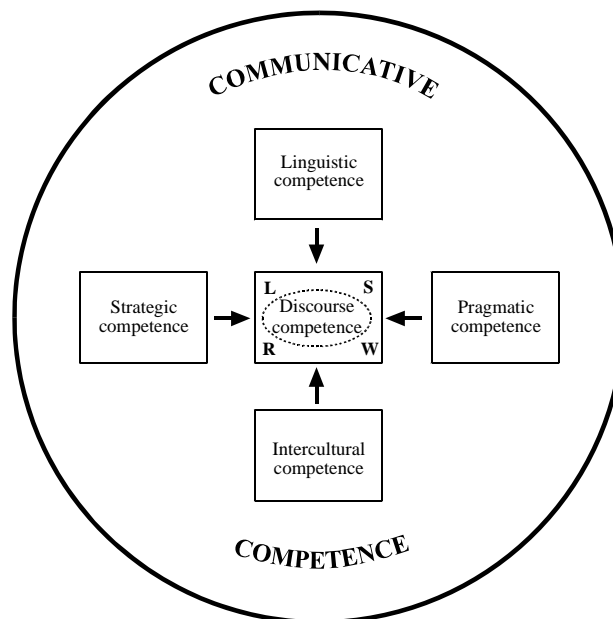
Figure 1: Components of communicative competence[1]
(Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a: 16).

Discourse competence is defined as the selection and sequencing of utterances or sentences to achieve a cohesive and coherent spoken or written text given a particular purpose and situational context. *Linguistic competence* refers to all the elements of the linguistic system, such as aspects concerning phonology, grammar and vocabulary which are needed to interpret or produce a spoken or written text. *Pragmatic competence* concerns the knowledge of the function or illocutionary force implied in the utterance that is intended to be understood or produced, as well as the contextual factors that affect its appropriacy. *Intercultural competence* refers to the knowledge of how to interpret and produce a spoken or written piece of discourse within a particular sociocultural context. Therefore, it involves knowledge of cultural factors such as the rules of behavior that exist in the target language community as well as cross-cultural awareness, including differences and similarities in cross-cultural communication. Finally, *strategic competence* is conceptualized as knowledge of both learning and communication strategies.

This communicative competence model emphasizes the importance of the four language skills since they are viewed as the manifestations of interpreting and producing a spoken or written piece of discourse which, as previously mentioned, is the core competence of the model. Thus, on the basis of this framework and taking the intercultural component as the point of departure, in what follows, a variety of activities in the four language skills are presented for teaching learners intercultural communicative competence.

4. Teaching communicative competence through the four skills: A focus on intercultural competence

In trying to develop learners' overall communicative competence in the target language through the four language skills, we have decided to focus particularly on the intercultural competence as being the approach less taken in the language class. Omaggio (2001) gives the following three main reasons for such neglect. First, teachers usually have an overcrowded curriculum to cover and lack the time to spend on teaching culture, which requires a lot of work. Second, many teachers have a limited knowledge of the target culture and, therefore, are afraid to teach it. Finally, she argues that teachers are often confused about what cultural aspects to cover.

In an attempt to help language teachers tackle cultural aspects in the language classroom, the purpose of this final section is that of proposing a cultural project for building learners' communicative competence in the target language. The project is organized around three main stages: explanation, collection and implementation, which are described in turn.

4.1 Explanation

In the first stage, i.e. *Explanation*, the teacher explains to learners the concept of intercultural competence in order to make them aware of the importance of paying attention to the culture of the target language. Once the concept has been introduced, learners are told they are to explore the culture of the target language and they are presented with a list of key areas that offer the possibility for developing intercultural competence, including *Family*, *Education*, *Law and Order* or *Power and Politics* among others. The choice of topics follows Duffy and Mayes' (2001) project on how best to explore another culture. To alert learners to the content of the topics, the *five-word technique* developed by Cain (1990) could be of help. In such a technique, learners are requested to note down the first five words they think of in relation to each topic presented by the teacher and then learners' individual lists are discussed at length. This work is a simple way to get learners to activate their cultural background knowledge on the topics to be covered.

4.2 Collection

In the second step, *i.e. Collection,* learners are given the task to gather material outside the classroom in relation with the cultural topics they have agreed to work with in the first stage. Learners are recommended to collect material from a variety of sources including photocopied information from different printed materials, photo-documentaries, pictures, video or DVD scenes, recorded material like interviews to native speakers, excerpts from the internet and the like. The good thing of this activity is that learners' cultural awareness is further increased through having to question themselves what is culturally representative of the given topic. Once learners have collected all the material, they are required to hand it in to the teacher at appointed

office hours in order to allow him device activities in the four language skills that are to be implemented in the next stage of the project.

4.3 Implementation

In the third stage, i.e. *Implementation*, learners work with a variety of activities that require their use of the four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to develop their overall communicative competence, and promote their cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

4.3.1 Listening skill: Sample activities

Activities such as video-taped cultural dialogues, audio- or video-taped cultural misunderstandings and taped-recorded interviews with native speakers, among many others, could promote listening skills with a special emphasis on the intercultural competence.

− In *video-taped cultural dialogues*, the learners view a video sketch where two people of different cultures are discussing an area of a cultural topic that the project focuses on. One of them is from the learners' own culture whereas the other is from the target culture. The teacher plans pre-, while- and post-listening questions to raise learners' cross-cultural awareness while practicing listening. For example, a pre-listening question could request learners to predict the opinion of the two persons with regard to the given topic. While-listening question could require them to confirm or reject their predictions made on the pre-listening phase. Finally, the post-listening question could ask them to critically discuss the opinion of the person from the target culture. Once discussion on content is over, learners could also be requested to identify differences (if any) among the two persons interacting in the scene with regards to pauses, changes of intonation, voice quality or periods of silence on the one hand, and with regard to non-verbal means of communication (i.e., body movement, facial expression, eye contact, etc.) on the other hand.

− Listening to audio- or video-taped *intercultural misunderstanding* (Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2002) is another useful activity to further sharpen learners' awareness of cultural differences. Learners can be required to listen to a situation that reports a real-life intercultural misunderstanding that causes people to become confused or offended and can then be asked to get into pairs or groups in order to come up with an explanation of such misunderstanding, which will inevitably increase their intercultural awareness.

− *Taped-recorded interviews with native speakers* is another useful activity type particularly suitable for practicing the intercultural competence. Here learners get into groups and are assigned the responsibility of tape-recording an informal interview with a native speaker they know. Learners should choose a cultural topic the project is based on and prepare questions on that topic for the interview. In class, the interviews are played and learners compare the opinion of the interviewee on the particular topic with their own opinion (adapted from White, 2006). These

spontaneous recorded conversations offer two benefits. First, they give learners the chance to be exposed to natural language by listening to the native speaker's responses, something which is difficult to find in scripted material. Second, they encourage learners to become aware of their common problems with grammar, pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and the like by listening to themselves.

− Moreover, songs, jokes or anecdotes from typical films from the target culture could be an excellent source of listening material to transport learners to the target culture and prepare them to communicate naturally.

− Finally, all recorded material gathered by the learners in the second stage of the project (i.e., interviews, TV or radio news, films, documentaries, songs, jokes or anecdotes, among others) could be used as the starting point of a modest *Listening Library* of culture-specific material for the class. Material should be organized into different thematic packets and accompanied with worksheets of structured exercises prepared by the teacher in order to develop all components underlying listening.

4.3.2 Speaking skill: Sample activities

Activity formats such as face-to-face tandem learning, making up questions to a native speaker or role-playing, among others, may develop speaking skills with a particular emphasis on the intercultural component.

− *Face-to-face tandem learning,* that is, collaborative oral learning between speakers of different languages is a type of activity particularly suitable for fostering learners' intercultural communicative competence. This activity can easily be developed in instructional settings with the *Erasmus* scheme, which involves student exchanges among European Union countries. Typically, teachers arrange opportunities for all learners to get engaged in face-to-face tandem, and once learners have got to know their partners and have arranged the time and place for the tandem sessions, they are asked to choose a particular cultural topic among those dealt with in the project and talk about it with their corresponding partners. Learners are requested to tape-record all conversations (with the permission of the Erasmus student) and then prepare an oral report for the particular topic they have been talking about in the sessions. The aim of this oral report is to encourage a more in-depth reflection about the topic being discussed while speaking skills are being promoted. All recorded tandem conversations could be added to the *Listening Library* of the class and be used as the basis to prepare additional activities that make learners reflect on linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural-related issues (e.g., tone of voice, silence) and strategic features underlying these oral interactions (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2006).

− The activity of *Making up questions to a native speaker* could also be an interesting one. A native speaker in the target language (for example, a foreign exchange student) could visit the class and learners could be assigned the task of preparing questions in small groups in order to interview the visitor. Questions should include items about the topics the project is dealing with, such as education in his country, what he likes doing at the weekend, eating habits or politics. Once the interview is over, the teacher's crucial task is to lead follow-up discussion so that the responses

provided by the native speaker can be interpreted or possibly re-interpreted by the learners (adapted from Omaggio, 2001).

−   Another activity that may work well in the oral skills class is *role-playing*. In particular, this activity has been claimed to be suitable for practicing the cultural variations in speech acts such as apologizing, suggesting, complimenting, among others (Lanzaron, 2001). Olshtain and Cohen (1991) suggest a five-step process for the teaching of speech acts. The first step involves what they call diagnostic assessment in which the teachers determine the learners' level of awareness of the speech act to be taught. In the second step, the teacher presents learners with examples of the speech act in use (i.e., model dialogues) and learners are to guess details with regard to participants, such as their social status or role-relationship, as well as to the particular speech act, that is, whether an apology could be considered an offense, for example. In the third step, learners are given a variety of typical situations in the target culture and they have to evaluate how contextual variables affect the choice of the linguistic form of the speech act. In the fourth step, learners perform a role-play as a final practice. Here, as highlighted by the authors, the important thing is to supply learners with a lot of details about the role-relationship between the interlocutors as well as about the situation. This practice is followed by feedback and further discussion, the final step of the approach, to further help learners be aware of similarities and differences between speech act behavior in their own culture and in the target culture.

−   By and large, all aural, visual and reading materials gathered by the learners in the second step of the project, can be utilized in some productive activities as background for promoting speaking. For example, as suggested by Shumin (2002) nonverbal videos can be played in class to have learners act out or describe what they view. This activity is particularly suitable to make learners focus on body language and help them to gradually assimilate the nonverbal behavior in the target culture. Alike, pictures, short scenes from films or documentaries can be used to elicit learners' opinion on a given cultural topic.

4.3.3 Reading skill: Sample activities

A variety of activities may be used in the language class to develop reading skills with a focus on the intercultural component. This section mentions a few, including critical reading, cultural bump activities, activities that focus on written genres or cultural extensive reading, among others.

−   C*ritical reading*, that is, reading to make judgments about how a text is argued, is a beneficial reflective activity type for promoting learners' intercultural competence while practicing the reading ability. In carrying out this activity, the general framework based on pre-, during-, and post-reading instruction could be of help. For example, as a pre-reading activity learners could be asked to determine the content of the reading by strategically previewing the passage and then judge whether the identified content is representative of their own culture or of the target culture. As while-reading activity, learners could be requested to focus not only on *what* the text

says (typical of close reading exercises) but also, and most important, on *how* the text portrays the given topic (i.e., author's choices of language and structure). Finally, as post-reading activity, learners could be asked whether the content of the text would vary if it was written by another writer or read by another reader in a different cultural context (adapted from Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006b).

− Teachers can also make learners read situations in which there is a *cultural bump*, that is, a situation that cause people to become uncomfortable or strange given particular cultural beliefs and attitudes. Then, different written interpretations of the behavior of the people involved in the situation can follow the account in a multiple choice format to allow class discussion and subsequently, check whether learners have correctly interpreted what went wrong and why people acted as they did, which will definitively help learners become aware and understand behavior in a target culture (Williams 2001).

− Learners could also be required to analyze two written texts which have a similar genre as for example, reading advice columns in daily newspapers but which are from different cultures in order to compare if concerns and debates vary between cultures (Williams 2001).

− The sentences of a cultural anecdote could be scrambled by the teacher and then learners could be requested to put the anecdote in sequence. This activity type is a useful one in order to help learners discern organizational issues in a given text (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

− All material gathered by the learners in the second stage of the project could serve as the basis to prepare additional activities that make learners develop in activating all competencies of the communicative competence construct. Word association activities where learners associate words in a given text to a given cultural topic could be helpful to promote learners' linguistic competence. Analysis of the text devices that convey the intended meaning of a given cultural text could serve to promote learners' pragmatic competence. Furthermore, the practice of previewing or making guesses about the content of a given cultural text both before and while reading could work to develop learners' strategic competence.

− Finally, as happens with listening, all reading material gathered by the learners in the second stage of the project (newspapers, magazines, books, comics, anecdotes etc.) could be used as the starting point of a modest extensive *Reading Library* of target culture-specific topics. Extensive reading should be promoted both in and out of the classroom. In the classroom, learners could engage in 10 minutes of *sustained silent reading* to read individually what they select from the class library. Out of the classroom, learners should be encouraged to take reading material home and respond to it by i) answering questions prepared beforehand by the teacher, ii) writing summaries, iii) writing reactions reports, or iv) giving oral presentations (Day and Bamford, 1998: 141).

4.3.4 Writing skill: Sample activities

Activities such as tandem e-mail learning, designing stories and story continuation, among others, may develop writing skills with a particular emphasis on the intercultural component.

- *Tandem e-mail learning* has been regarded as an effective activity to promote cross-cultural dialogue while it is also a means of engaging learners in extended writing in a motivating way (Dodd, 2001). The idea is that two native speakers of different languages help each other to learn each other's language through the use of e-mail, communicating 50% of the time in each other's language. Once all technical aspects have been solved, learners are first introduced themselves and they are then requested to engage in a written dialogue based on a given cultural topic of the project. For in-class work, learners are requested to bring into the class the printed copy of all e-mail exchanges in order to prepare a brief report in which they synthesize how the topic discussed in the e-mail conversations is represented in the partners' culture. For such an activity, learners are encouraged to follow Kroll's (2006) suggested sequence of steps from the setting of an assignment to the point at which the learners submit the complete text including, preparation for the given task (here the re-reading of all e-mail exchanges), drafting and feedback, which may be repeated as many times as needed prior to submitting the final written work for evaluation. All these printed e-mail conversations could be added to the *Reading Library* of the class to be used as the basis for additional written assignments (Usó-Juan et al., 2006).
- *Designing stories* is another activity type that could be used to promote learners' cultural imagination through writing. Here the teacher collects some magazines and first selects a variety of pictures that depict people in strange situations in the target culture, and then divides the class into small groups making each group responsible for describing what is happening in a particular picture. Once the groups have had the chance to generate their own opinion about what is happening in the picture and the group leader has informed the rest of the class, learners have to retell the story either individually or in groups, making sure the written account is coherent and cohesive (adapted from Omaggio, 2001).
- Likewise, learners' cultural imagination can be promoted through writing by selecting passages with cultural misunderstanding. Ideally, passages should be narrative texts with different paragraphs each leading toward the intercultural misunderstanding. Typically, the teacher covers all but the first paragraph in which the situation is presented and learners are then asked to read this first paragraph and continue the story in the way they think is most likely. In such a process, learners should be encouraged to plan, draft and revise as many times as needed before it is ready for submission (Usó-Juan et al., 2006).
- Similar to the speaking skill, all aural, visual and reading materials collected by the learners in the second step of the project could serve as the basis for engaging learners in the *preparatory* activities that precede the learners' drafting of a written

text, which is essential if learners are to master the skill of writing. At the end of the implementation stage, learners reflect on their experience and exchange opinions about the topics being dealt with in the project. This discussion encourages them to take an evaluative and critical position in relation to the cross-cultural awareness activities in which they have participated.

5. Conclusion

Developing learners' communicative competence has long been among the major goals of L2 instructional programs. It is our position that crucial to that development is an understanding of discourse as the key competence with the rest of the competencies (i.e. linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and strategic) shaping it. Accordingly, we have argued that the four language skills play a key role in fostering learners' communicative competence since they are the manifestations of interpreting and producing a spoken or written piece of discourse, as well as a way of manifesting the rest of the components of the communicative competence construct. In this paper, and taking the intercultural competence as the point of departure, we have presented a sampling of activities in the four language skills for helping learners to communicate fluently and appropriately in the target language and culture. Although the four language skills have been presented separately for clarity purposes, the design of most activities has considered all the skills conjointly, consistent with how people interact with each other in real life. As a final remark therefore, we hope that the activities proposed in this paper may help learners see language learning not merely as *language practice* but as a *communicative activity*.

Notes

1. The capital letters stand for the four skills: L=Listening; S=Speaking; R=Reading; W=Writing.

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