

Developing the Students' Communicative Competence

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1. Introduction

What is communicative competence? Canale and Swain (1980) propose an integrative view of communicative competence with four major components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.¹ If this is correct, then how can we improve the students' communicative competence in the classroom? How can we decide whether the student's communicative competence is improved or not? These questions are difficult to solve: strictly speaking, how to make such judgements is not at all obvious: there is no clear criteria for doing so.

So suppose that the students learn to communicate by communicating. Then we have to make the classroom much more communicative. However, ability to communicate effectively is probably not attained most quickly and efficiently through pure communication practice in the classroom within the framework of a formal course of study: there is much less time available, and often less motivation. This means preparing a list of items we wish to teach, syllabus, and an organized, balanced plan of classroom teaching procedures. Then the students will be enabled to spend some of their time concentrating on mastering one or more of the components of the language. One of these components is grammar. That is why we need syllabuses which consist of two aspects of language nature: language structure and language function and I would like to try to combine grammar teaching with a broad communicative methodology, along the line of Ur (1988).²

2. The Organization of Grammar Teaching

The organization of grammar teaching suggested here represents only a general framework into which a very wide variety of teaching techniques can fit. I suggested six stages:

- 2.1 Warm-up Activities
- 2.2 Introduction of New Vocabulary
- 2.3 Oral/Video Presentation
- 2.4 Structural Pattern Practices
- 2.5 Grammar Practice Activities
- 2.6 Consolidation (Explanation)

2.1 Warm-up Activities

2.1.1 Quick-fire

In some of my classes, I spend the first five to seven minutes asking some *quick-firing* questions. The following are some of the questions I use as *quick-fire* to accustom the students to listening to, and speaking in English:

- a. Do you like (English, hamburgers, baseball, cats, etc.)?
- b. Do you play (a sport) / speak (a language) / watch (a TV program)?
- c. What time is it? What day is today? What is the date today?
How is the weather today?
- d. What time do you (get up, eat dinner, come to school, etc.)?
- e. Can you (write, cook, etc.)?
- f. What am I doing?
- g. How many (brothers, sisters, etc.) do you have?
- h. How old is your (brother, sister, etc.)?

I have all the students stand up. I usually nominate the student who raises his/her hand first. If his/her answer is appropriate, he/she can sit down. The students are encouraged to answer the questions because they want to sit down earlier.

2.1.2 Recitation

I sometimes have the students say a text which appears in the textbook aloud from memory. To encourage the students to recite, I usually give them a *theme*, an element which serves as the point of departure of the message and memorize a *rheme*, a remainder of the message, first.³

2.1.3 Short Talks with Questions and Answers

In some of my team teaching classes, I spend the first ten to fifteen minutes presenting a short speech followed with Questions & Answers. The

following is an example the ALT and I have used as a short talk with illustrations:

When I was a junior high school student, I was a member of the debate team on the yearbook staff. As a member of the debate team, I competed against other schools nearby. We often discussed politics. I helped put together the school's yearbook by taking pictures of school events, students, and teachers. I also wrote some poetry that was included in the yearbook.

I volunteered in the school library. I helped put books away and made sure that everyone returned their books on time. I also volunteered to help out my teacher in the morning before school started. I would wash the blackboard, clean the room and help to mark the papers of the first year students.

After the ALT's talk, we ask the students some questions concerning the contents of the talk. If a student answers correctly, he/she is given two points. To encourage them to respond, even an incorrect answer is given one point.

2.1.4 Show and Tell

Show and tell is a popular activity as well. A student stands up in front of the class and shows something that interests him/her. Then he/she gives a very brief explanation of what it is, where it comes from, and so on.

This is rather difficult, so a good way to approach it is with a prepared work sheet that the students only need to fill out and understand. If two students do a show and tell each day, it does not take much time. Also those students can meet with us ahead of time to prepare their work sheet:

WORK SHEET FOR SHOW AND TELL

Fill out the answers for each blank.

- What is this? It is a/an ().
- When did you make/get it? I made/got it ().
- Where is it from? It is from ().
- Who made/got it? () did.
- Why did you make/get it? Because ().
- How did you make/get it? ().

After the students' talks, we have the other students ask questions about the presentation.

2.2 Introduction of New Vocabulary

Introducing and teaching individual vocabulary items is a fundamental part of language work in the classroom. I usually introduce such vocabulary items by showing flash cards, so that the students can understand the content of a text at the next stage.

2.3 Oral/Video Presentation

The aim of the presentation is to get the students to perceive the language structure, its form and meaning, used in a communicative situation and take it into short-term memory. I usually begin by presenting the class with a text in which the language structure appears. I often use a story or short dialog which appears in written form in the textbook. Presenting a whole language operation in a context, I take out the key items of the language structure. The students are asked to read aloud, repeat, reproduce from memory. It is important to make clear the meanings or communicative uses of the language structure in a total context.

I sometimes use video when I would like to present complete communicative situations and get the students to try to guess what kind of expressions are appropriate for the situations. As the combination of sound and vision is more accessible, communication can be shown in a context and the students can perceive many aspects of communication more easily: the setting, the roles of the participants, the topic, the language function and so on. The communicative aspects of a video presentation can often make clear to the students a point of language which is difficult to explain in words alone.

2.4 Structural Pattern Practices

The oral/video presentation is followed by structural pattern practices. Moving away from the context, I focus on the grammatical items of the language structure presented: the items of the language structure are drilled and the main features of syntax and phonology are focused on. The objective is that the students should understand various aspects of the items of the language structure: what they sound, what they mean, and so on. The principle of repetition means that we have to get the students to produce examples of the structure over and over again. This would make the

students tired. I have to think of ways to achieve the two features of interest and repetition simultaneously.

2.5 Grammar Practice Activities: Some Versatile Games

The aim of the grammar practice activities is to get the students to absorb the structure thoroughly: or, to put it another way, transfer what they know from short-term to long-term memory. This stage is most productive and interesting, because the strong emphasis is on the production or comprehension of meanings for some non-linguistic purpose, while keeping an eye on the way the language structures are being manipulated in the process. This stage is also the most important, because it is through practice that the teaching material is most thoroughly and permanently learned.

I feel that games are not merely for pleasure, but rather are a means to create active communication among students. Games can provide useful opportunities for students to communicate with each other and the teachers. I think that versatile games are very effective because one is easily able to change from one kind of game to another. Several of them are: Communication Card; English Baseball; Fruit Basket; Interview Bingo; Karuta; Memory; and Pictionary.

2.5.1 Communication Card

I use this game to get the students to absorb the language structure completely. The main objective of this game is to find someone who has exactly the same card. I prepare a set of cards with various pairs. Each student must use the target sentence represented and is not allowed to say anything in Japanese: he/she must not look at anyone else's card, either. The player who found his/her partner can sit down. It is usually a good idea to do a preliminary full class 'rehearsal' of the task before playing this game.

2.5.2 English Baseball

I use this game to review target sentences in the textbooks. I usually make twenty questions or simple tasks using the target sentences:

Examples:

First base: Spell the word 'write.'

Second base: Does Yuki have a sister in Africa? (Yes, she does.)

Third base: Who began to read about Africa? (Yuki did.)

Home Run: Fill in the blank: Someday I () () ()
there to work as a volunteer. (would like to)

I have the students play in their group (*han*). I usually make enough copies of the questions, cut them out, and put them into an envelope for each group. Each group then divides into two equal teams with the teams sitting across from each other. Each team plays *jan-ken* to decide who starts pitching. Then student A of the first team is the first pitcher. He/she draws a question from the envelope and asks player A on the other team to answer. If the opposing students answer correctly, he/she advances to the base indicated on the question sheet. Then players B do the same thing until there are three outs or unanswered questions. Then, they switch sides. I use the baseball diamond and the student keep track of their progress with erasers.

2.5.3 Fruit Basket

This game is kind of like musical chairs and most of the students already know how to play. The students put their chairs in a circle minus one: for example, if there are forty students, put thirty-nine chairs in the circle. Every student gets a card. The person without a chair stands in the middle and calls out one of the prearranged words/sentences, which is written on the cards. I usually write all of the words/sentences, which I am going to use on the blackboard and review them before playing. Students who hold a card with the word/sentence must stand up and switch seats, but they cannot move to the seats next to them. One student will always be left without a seat. I use this game to review vocabulary especially for the seventh grade students. (This is especially good before they can read the alphabet.) I put a picture of the object and the written English word on the cards: for example, I draw a picture of a plane and the word 'plane.' It is good to use about five or so words so that about five or six students have the same card. I sometimes introduce 'and' for more complicated play: for example, 'plane,

train and car.' Then each student who is carrying those cards must move. I use sentences instead of words for the eighth/ninth grade students: for example, to review the past tense, I write about four or five past tense questions on each card as follows.

CARDS FOR FRUIT BASKET			
	Question	Yes	No
1	Did you ride a bicycle yesterday?		
2	Did you play video games last night?		
3	Did you eat ice cream yesterday?		
4	Did you watch a basketball game on TV yesterday?		

Before we play this game, the students answer these questions for themselves by filling out yes/no on their cards. After filling out the card, the center person reads a sentence and whoever answered 'yes' must move. (I do not tell them this in advance.) This game is extremely useful because it gets those students who would normally never say anything to say something in English.

2.5.4 Interview Bingo

This game combines bingo and an interview game. I write sixteen or twenty-five questions for each bingo card. They are target sentences the students are currently learning. (For example, "Have you ever been to Kenji World?") The students must go around the class asking their classmates and teachers the questions. If they answered 'yes,' they can cross off that square. Then they get bingo when they have crossed off a whole row. I allow the students to ask each individual person only one question regardless of a yes or no response. The harder I make it to answer 'yes' to these questions, the more fun it is. (For example, "Have you ever been to Paris?") This game adds extra zest to regular interview games.

2.5.5 *Karuta*

The students usually get a kick out of playing *karuta* in English. Cards are spread out face up on desks or a group of desks joined together. For example, if the students play Alphabet *Karuta*, each card has a letter of the alphabet written on it. (I usually play it with capital and small letters.) The teacher says a letter and the students race to see who can pick it up first.

Karuta can also be used to reinforce general vocabulary at any grade. It is also especially useful when learning irregular verb forms: for instance, I write the present tense on one side of the card and the past tense on the back side. I usually have the students put the past tense face up and I read the present tense. I also play it in the opposite way. When I team-teach, the ALT just reads the verb form the students have facing up, or I read the words in Japanese and have the students pick up the English. It is good to have about twenty or so cards to play *karuta*.

2.5.6 Memory

The object of this game is to find pairs. To play memory I prepare a deck of cards with various pairs. Then I spread the cards out on a table faced down. Each person playing takes turn turning over two cards. If you turn over a pair, you get to keep the two cards. However, if the two cards do not match, you must turn them back over. When turning over the wrong cards you try to remember where they are, so you can grab the pair when the matching card turns up later. The player with the most pairs win. To encourage the students to use the target sentences, I usually use a card as follows:

CARD FOR MEMORY		
TURN (順番)	MEMBER (班員)	POINTS (得点)

① 一つの絵につき、カードをめくってから5秒以内に「正男は～しています。」と言えれば1点もらえる。(副班長が1, 2, 3, 4, 5と数えること。多少の誤差を認めること。)

② さらにカードを取ることが出来れば、さらに1点もらえる。

③ もしカードをめくった人が英語を言えないときには、「Masao is washing the car.」などのように教えてあげること。教えた人には1点を与える。

2.5.7 Pictionary

Pictionary is a game like charades but with pictures instead of gestures. Charades is a game in which words are acted by players, often part (syllable) by part, until other players can guess the whole word. Pictionary, however, is a kind of game in which sentences are drawn by players often part (word) by part, until other players can guess the whole sentence. This game can be adjusted to any target sentence in the textbook at the eighth/ninth grade level. This game can be used especially for the sentence patterns which are difficult to learn by playing any other game. I sometimes ask the ALT to think of fifteen or so very funny sentences which incorporate things or people the students know into the target sentence pattern. The more outrageous it is, the more the students will pay attention to it. I take one person from each group (*han*) into the hallway and show them the sentence. I usually read it in English for them and translate it into Japanese. If they forget the sentence, they can always come back to see it again. When the students go back to the class, they must draw pictures in order to have the other students make the sentence. The first group wins if their answer is absolutely correct. It is good to be picky here with the articles etc. The students cannot use gestures or speak at all except for yes/no. Furthermore, they cannot write English, Japanese, or numbers when they play.

2.6 Consolidation (Explanation)

The objective is that the students should review various aspects of the items of the language structure mentioned above. At this stage, we need to make extensive use of Japanese to explain, translate, generalize and so on. Where the structure is particularly difficult for the students to grasp, this stage takes some time. Where the structure is very simple, it may take only a minute or so.

3. Some Concluding Remarks

We must encourage the students to use English. We should use English as much as possible in our usual English classes to make English pleasurable. We should praise those who answer questions, and let the students learn that even an incorrect response is a success in communication

practice.

To sum up, then, I think the grammar practice activities mentioned above will contribute very much to advancing the students' communicative competence. They will improve especially the students' listening/speaking abilities. Hopefully after more research has been done, I can provide more ideas for interesting and useful grammar practice activities designed to develop the students' communicative competence.

4. Notes

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¹ See Canale and Swain (1980) for relevant discussion.

² See Ur (1988) for much detailed discussion.

³ On this matter, see Halliday (1985)

5. References

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