

An Iranian View on Linguistic Competence in Using a Foreign Language: A Survey Among High School Graduates Who Have not Attended Private Language Institutes

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An Old Definition for a New Study

Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance was the origin of communicative competence ideas. Chomsky defines competence as the shared knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener set in a completely homogeneous speech community. Such underlying knowledge enables a user of a language to produce and understand an infinite set of sentences out of a finite set of rules. Hymes (1972) says that the transformational theory "carries to its perfection the desire to deal in practice only with what is internal to language, yet to find in that internality that in theory is of the widest or deepest human significance." He concludes that a linguistic theory must be able to deal with a heterogeneous speech community, differential competence and the role of sociocultural features. He believes that we should be concerned with performance, which he defines as the actual use of language in a concrete situation, not an idealized speaker-listener situation in a completely homogeneous speech community. Hymes deems it necessary to distinguish two kinds of competence: linguistic competence that deals with producing and understanding grammatically correct sentences, and communicative competence that deals with producing and understanding sentences that are appropriate and acceptable to a particular situation. Thus, Hymes coins a term "communicative competence" and defines it as "a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language."

Since Hymes revised the idea of communicative competence, a lot of complementary ideas have come up in this regard ; many to define, some to make derivations and a few to criticize.

Spitzberg defined communication competence as "the ability to interact well with others". He explains, "the term 'well' refers to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness" (Spitzberg 1988:68). A much more complete definition is provided by Friedrich (1994), when he suggests that communication competence is best understood as "a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using the knowledge of self, others, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances."

Communicative competence is measured by determining if, and to what degree, the goals of interaction are achieved. The function of communication is to maximize the achievement of "shared meaning". Parks emphasizes three interdependent themes: control, responsibility, and foresight; and argues that to be competent, we must "not only

‘know’ and ‘know how’, we must also ‘do’ and ‘know that we did’” (Parks 1985: 174). He defines communicative competence as “the degree to which individuals perceive they have satisfied their goals in a given social situation without jeopardizing their ability or opportunity to pursue their other subjectively more important goals” (p. 175). This combination of cognitive and behavioral perspectives is consistent with Wiemann and Backlund’s (1980) argument that communication competence is:

The ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he (sic) may successfully accomplish his (sic) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (sic) fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation (p. 188).

The component model of competence is a useful framework for understanding communication competence designed by Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) and is known as that because it is comprised of three specific dimensions: motivation (an individual’s approach or avoidance orientation in various social situations), knowledge (plans of action; knowledge of how to act; procedural knowledge), and skill (behaviors actually performed).

Lane (2001) defines six criteria for assessing communication competence of Canary and Cody (2000). They include adaptability, conversational involvement, conversational management, empathy, effectiveness, and appropriateness. They are explained in more detail below:

Reviewing Types of Communicative Competence

Researchers and scholars interested in communicative competence discussions, have known some categories and subcategories. They have tried to introduce some names which are interrelated and all are dependant on the context in which they occur.

When someone can recognize literary techniques such as humour, irony, contrasts and vocabulary with nuances in various texts and can also express herself or himself precisely and with a varied vocabulary, when he/she employs suitable verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic features of speech in both prepared and improvised oral expressions and also has the ability to differentiate and exemplify word-formation processes in a text, when learners identify vocabulary, words and their word-forms and form words from given common syntactic roots/stems (word formation) and they are able to use lexical aids (dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses) in written and electronic forms, and when one can consolidate processes of lexical enrichment of the L2 language and can also find characteristics of word formation, irregular processes and lexical innovation and can deduce the meaning of words from their context, we can say that they have *linguistic competence*.

The ones with a *grammatical competence* can distinguish the meaning-based relationships between grammatical units in a clause and a compound or complex sentence and those who are said to have *semantic competence* are the ones who are able to explain the meaning of the given words/word phrases from the texts and they can select appropriate and effective vocabulary corresponding to the meaning (when producing texts).

Orthographic competence is another subcategory of communicative competence and a subdivision of linguistic competence, with the ability to observe spelling, technical accuracy of syntax in phrases, clauses, sentences, texts and note deviations from stan-

dards, to use spelling and punctuation aids (in written and electronic form) when producing texts and to identify orthographic (punctuation) mistakes in their own and other texts, correct them and give reasons and arguments for their corrections.

Another form of competence could be *phonological competence* in which one can practise and master pronunciation of formal language (words, sentences and texts), try to speak as formally as possible in conversation and during the intercourse with their teachers, detect their own and other pronunciation mistakes (correct and reduce mistakes).

Sociolinguistic competence is another discussion in which one who is said to have sociolinguistic competence can identify the most significant characteristics with regard to customs, norms, attitudes and values of the society whose language is being studied; respect for cultural patterns different to the students' own. There is also another aspect of competence named *pragmatic competence* which is divided into three other discursive, functional and interactive competences.

As we intend to study the dimensions of linguistic competence, we don't explain the others in detail.

A 1977 Evaluation Experience

To evaluate the communicative competence some efforts have been made. Wiemann (1977) created the Communicative Competence Scale (CCS) to measure communicative competence, an ability "to choose among available communicative behaviors" to accomplish one's own "interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line" of "fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation" (p. 198). Originally, 57 Likert-type items were created to assess five dimensions of interpersonal competence (General Competence, Empathy Affiliation/Support, Behavioral Flexibility, and Social Relaxation) and a dependent measure- (interaction Management). He tested some 239 college students to rate videotaped confederates enacting one of four role-play interaction management conditions (high, medium, low, rude). The 36 items that discriminated the best between conditions were used in the final instrument. Factor analysis resulted in two main factors - general and relaxation - indicating that the subjects did not differentiate among the dimensions as the model originally predicted. But it can be a reliable type of test according to the evaluating measurements that were available.

Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Teaching in Iran

For many years, teaching English has been the main foreign language teaching procedure in Iran. The current government has followed the same teaching styles and human force education without any prominent changes. It doesn't seem reasonable to continue with the same system for those many years. There are so many authorized books in the market which are being taught by the non-government private language institutes. These are the books which have passed through different filters and have been designed by experienced language experts and researchers. Tested in some countries, with tapes, CDs, teacher's books, activity books and etc. these books can be reliable authorized sources that decrease a lot of problems of the authors and experts and save a lot of energy and money.

We can't see suitable well designed textbooks and up to dated teaching styles and approaches as well. Every year groups of English teachers in different provinces gather together and send their teaching reports, criticism on the textbooks and their suggestions to the high office of textbook publication, but no one minds it.

These are just some factors resulting in the lack of satisfactory communicative competence of Iranian high school learners of English. This research has tried to show this by testing, gathering data and analyzing it to prove the inefficiency of language teaching system in Iran. A system which, as it was stated, has been on the curriculum for about thirty years. The research aims at showing the low level of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence of these learners in learning English as a foreign language.

Research Method

In this research, the means to gather data is a questionnaire based on which some different types of competences of the students were controlled. With the cooperation of education organization offices in different province centers, more than 320 questionnaires were distributed and completed. Among them 305 were returned and finally 296 were approved as answered properly.

The data was fed to computer and analyzed by SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 16. The results of each question were illustrated in separated tables and diagrams and then interpreted. At the end the reliability of the questionnaire was tested and it was proved reliable.

Data and Analysis

In this section the research findings in relation to the particular research questions or hypotheses are presented. It is actually the core of the research which includes discussions, analysis, tables and diagrams. The data are illustrated in detail in the tables. The process of the data has been done in two levels:

- a) the description of the data
- b) the analysis and explanation of them

Based on the previous chapters this research studies the rate of communicative competence among the senior high school students. At the description level, the research sample has been described and a picture of this condition is presented. In this section statistics aren't used to confirm or reject a specific hypothesis, because in this step the relationship between variables is not considered and only the main variables of research are described. In the next section inferential statistics have been used to study the relations among variables, findings and the results related with determining the rate of communicative competence among the senior high school students in using the English language in bi- and multi- variable analysis.

Statistical Sample: 296 senior high school students in Iran.

Hypotheses

Five aspects of linguistic competence were tested and the following hypotheses were studied during this experience:

- Hypothesis 1: Iranian senior high school students lack satisfactory lexical competence.
- Hypothesis 2: Iranian senior high school students lack satisfactory grammatical competence.
- Hypothesis 3: Iranian senior high school students lack satisfactory semantic competence.
- Hypothesis 4: Iranian senior high school students lack satisfactory orthographic competence.
- Hypothesis 5: Iranian senior high school students lack satisfactory phonological competence.

Interpretation of the Results

Regarding lexical competence the results received from 296 Iranian senior high school students who completed the questionnaire, the highest percentage (79.1%) of them are believed to have low oral knowledge of vocabulary to express their opinions. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 1 shows this well. The highest percentage (74.7%) of them are believed to have low written knowledge of vocabulary to express their opinions and information about different school conditions properly. The results of the test on the students' grammatical competence ability show that the highest percentage (81.4%) of them to have low ability to express different grammatical functions using language and its description. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 10 shows this well. The highest percentage (64.9%) of them to have low knowledge to distinguish the base, prefix and suffix. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 11 shows this well. The highest percentage (64.2%) of them are believed to have low ability to distinguish different sentence components. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 12 shows this well.

The results related to the semantic capability of the students indicate that the highest percentage (80.4%) of them are not capable enough to express their own ideas regarding the language, characters and people living in the past and nowadays. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 16 shows this well. The highest percentage (81.1%) of them say that they use very little of techniques like repetition, simile and contrast in using language.

In orthographic competence, the results show that the highest percentage (77.7%) of them believe to have low knowledge of using morpho-syntactic examples. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 27 shows this well. The highest percentage (73%) of them lack a proper knowledge of punctuation rules. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 28 shows this well. The highest percentage (79.4%) of them are thought to be unable to present written texts on paper, respecting rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 29 shows this well. And the highest percentage (83.8%) of them believe to have low capability to observe spelling, technical accuracy of syntax in phrases, clauses, sentences, texts and note deviations from standards. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 30 shows this well.

And ending in phonological competence, we can see that the highest percentage (84.5%) of them believe not to have the ability to distinguish written and phonological forms of words and divide them to different segments and short and long vowels. The

total result is not satisfactory and diagram 31 shows this well. The highest percentage (84.5%) of them believe to have low ability to set the stress pattern, intonation, pauses and speech speed based on the communicative intention. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 32 shows this well. The highest percentage (85.1%) of them believe to have low capability to distinguish standard from nonstandard phonological forms. The total result is not satisfactory and diagram 33 shows this well.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results driven from the questionnaires, Iranian system of teaching English as a foreign language hasn't been able to develop different aspects of communicative competence among the senior high school students. During more than three decades no significant changes have been seen in curriculum design, textbook publications and neither can we see any prominent changes in teaching styles of the teachers whereas we can observe lots of changes in different fields of foreign language teaching and learning in the world.

The story gets weirder when we can see that our university professors and language teaching pioneers are so active in holding international seminars related to the English teaching and learning and English literature.

While we can see a lot of progress in different English speaking countries regarding developing communicative skills and techniques to improve communicative competence and performance of the language learners, we have no such movements in the basic skeleton of our academic system of foreign language learning and teaching.

Thanks to our nongovernmental and nonacademic institutions, which are in a race to overtake each other in teaching English, we can still see some of our learners attempt to make progress in language learning.

After all, what can be advised to make the situation better is to find the exact reasons of these deficiencies and to try to get help from different scholars and experts in writing textbooks, training human forces, designing curriculum and in a word to revolutionize the language teaching system in Iran.

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**Օտար լեզվի կիրառման լեզվական իրազեկության իրանյան տեսակետ
(ուսումնասիրություն հանրակրթական դպրոցի որոշ շրջանավարտների
շրջանում, որոնք չեն հաճախել որևէ մասնավոր լեզվական հաստատություն)**

Ավելի քան երեք տասնամյակների ընթացքում նշանակալի փոփոխություններ տեղի չեն ունեցել անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու դասավանդելու իրանյան համակարգի ուսումնական ծրագրերի, դասագրքերի, ինչպես նաև դասավանդման եղանակների մեջ, մինչդեռ ամբողջ աշխարհում օտար լեզվի դասավանդման տարբեր բնագավառներում կարելի է տեսնել բազում բարեփոխումներ: Մույն հետազոտության մեջ փորձ է արվել ուսումնասիրել լեզվական իրազեկության տարբեր կողմերը հանրակրթական դպրոցի որոշ շրջանավարտների մոտ, որանք անգլերեն չեն սովորել որևէ մասնավոր հաստատությունում: Ուսումնասիրության նպատակն էր պարզել, թե որքանով է ակադեմիական կրթական համակարգը ընդունակ աշակերտներին անգլերեն սովորեցնել: