

Tailoring Communicative Competence for Senior Citizen ESL Learners

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Abstract. Considering the role of communicative competence in teaching language for communication is necessary when it serves the purposes of providing language teachers a model of communicative competence to apply in teaching & assessment (Celcia-Murcia, 2007) and supporting learning language for communication as the solution to social problems for one particular group of learners. Coming from an aim to propose how teaching language for communication can restore identity damage and abandon ageism for Senior Citizen as a potential group of English language learners (SCESL), an attempt is made in the paper to construct a model of communicative competence from the mediation of contextual needs of learners with diverse probable applications: in particular for further consideration of cognitive-sociocultural-affective backgrounds of SCESL as teaching contexts and the transferring of learning spaces from classroom to community as teaching probable applications. From the theoretical perspective, tailoring communicative competence is seen in the paper as the integration of the triangular linguistic-practical-conceptual competences, while tailoring communicative competence from the practical perspective for SCESL should be practically concerned with their cognitive and affective backgrounds to overcome sociocultural tensions in the community.

Keywords: Senior Citizens, Communication Language Teaching, Appropriate Methodology, Teaching Contexts, Eaching Probable Applications, Ageism, ESL Older Adult Learners, EFL Older Adult Learners.

1. Why Tailoring Communicative Competence for Senior Citizens ESL learners?

Some ideologies of ageism in workplace and teaching will be firstly addressed:

- “Now that you’re 60, you should think of retiring-” *in workplace*
- “..What age group will I have to teacher? In schools overseas, students of all ages study English. Children as young as three go to English kindergartens, while senior citizens study English as a hobby.”-*in teaching*

Two initial concerns immediately appear right after those lines: firstly, old age is seemingly associated with the distinction of disability to work and to acquire education; and secondly, there should be a development of anti-discriminatory practice to abandon ageism. The latter concern, nevertheless, has been proposed by Jordan (as cited in Harris & Hopkins, 1994: 74) as a “high priority in both curriculum and the operational evaluation of social work education and training.” Following Jordan, the practice of group-based reminiscence was supported for mediating the “loss of sense of ‘personal identity’ because of relocation or institutionalization” and for promoting the impact of communication patterns from reminiscence practice to construct the sense of intimacy in interaction among older people (Bornat 1985, Bromley 1988 & Scrutton 1989, and Norris 1986, as cited in Harris & Hopkins, 1994:77)

Reconsidering communication patterns of group-based reminiscence in a formal context of educational practice for the larger impacts on abandoning ageism, on the notion of developing an “appropriate methodology” for a specific group of learners in the “context approach” proposal, Bax (2003b:281) mentioned communicative language teaching (CLT) attitude as the main barrier to lower the importance of “context”- the “crucial determiner of the success or failure of the learners.” In response to Bax’s claim, Holliday (2005:146) emphasized on “the distinction between communicative principles and their diversity of probable applications” as what seemed to have been missed from Bax’s proposal for a “context approach” ; however, Holliday recognized Bax’s contribution for the understanding of the contextual needs of learners “without the primacy of some sort of ideology about methodology” (Holliday, 2005:146). In light of Bax’s

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emphasis on the context and Holliday's emphasis on diverse probable applications, it is seen the necessity of constructing a mediation between the context where CLT is applied and its probable applications for a specific group of learners, especially when such mediation to develop an appropriate CLT for SCESL is applicable. By linking the context with the question "what are the challenges?" and its probable applications with "what is happening now?" there are incoming signs to confirm such belief. What is happening now can be surveyed through English next demography trends which demonstrate the widening of student ages and needs and the possibility of Asia as the determiner of the future of global English (Graddol, 2006: 30), which is also being affirmed by a new trend of integrating conversational activities for Senior Citizens among Asian communities, for instance in Tokyo, Japan (Doba et. al, 2011:44). However, differences in cognitive abilities for Second Language Acquisition and ordering of linguistic processes (Lenneberg 1967, Thompson & Geoff 1996 as cited in Duran 2010) as well as the diversities of learner profiles in terms of needs, demands of improvement of communicative skills, and language assessments (Duran, 2010) are viewed as challenges when constructing teaching program for language communication for SCESL¹ as a specific group of learners.

2. Aim and Key Argument of the Paper

Regarding the impact of communication patterns on educational practice and the possibility of developing an appropriate CLT for SCESL in the future, a pragmatic issue to be considered is whether the achievement of communicative competence as the expected outcome is approachable for the learners. To further elaborate on this pragmatic issue, the general aim of the paper is to tailor an insightful understanding of communicative competence in theory and practice. This aim is firstly matched the concern of earliest linguists to "develop and elaborate a model of communicative competence that course designers and language teachers could apply to teaching and assessment" (Celce-Muria, 2007) and secondly the concern of sociologists to develop anti-discriminatory practice to abandon ageism through communication patterns (Bornat,1985). Considering the mediation between the teaching contexts and teaching probable applications for a specific group of learners, the paper argues that tailoring communicative competence for a specific group of learner should be the challenges of reconsidering cognitive, sociocultural, and affective backgrounds of the learners as teaching contexts and the ability of transferring learning spaces from classroom to community as teaching probable applications.

3. Tailoring Communicative Competence in Theory

One major contribution of CLT in teaching language for communication is the notion of communicative competence as the ability to use language for meaningful communication rather than the acquisition of grammatical competence (Richard, 2006:3). Bourdieu (1977:647) further elaborated the notion of communicative competence by proposing the definition of practical competence as the ability to learn "in situations" and "in practice: what is learnt is, inextricably, the practical mastery of language and the practical mastery of situations which enable one to produce the adequate speech in a given situation". In light of Bourdieu's proposal of practical competence, four aspects of language knowledge of communicative competence (Richard,2006:3)-how to use language for different purposes, to adjust language use with the environment and the participants, to understand different types of text, and to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge-can be further seen as practical skills in practical competence while practical competence can be grouped as a subset of communicative competence.

Considering the teaching contexts, Pennycook (2000:89) raised an interesting comparison between "a language classroom as a closed box" inside of which was combined of methods, competencies, strategies, grammar, task, exercises, and drills with the alternative view of classroom as "the world beyond their walls" where there were complex social and cultural spaces. The main challenge of ESL language classrooms for providing the learners the skills to accommodate their wider communication with status, power, discrimination, and exclusion (Warriner, 2007:308) can be further linked to probable applications through

¹ The paper would define SCESL as language learners who learn English as an additional language (L2) apart from their native language (L1) rather than the distinction between learners in EFL and ESL countries.

the process of combining single skills into competence, one of such is referred as “language socialization” by Duff (2007: 310) as “ the process by which novices or newcomers in a community or culture gain communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy in the group. It is a process that is mediated by language and whose goal is the mastery of linguistic conventions, pragmatics, the adoption of appropriate identities, stances (e.g., epistemic or empathetic) or ideologies, and other behaviors associated with the target group and its normative practices.” Regarding the aspect of teaching probable applications from Duff’s language socialization, the mediation of language and the mastery of linguistic conventions & pragmatics are seen as a means to transform practical skills into practical competence. When four aspects of language knowledge of communicative competence as practical skills go through language socialization, practical competence can be redefined as the skill of adjusting language use with the environment and the participants through the mediation of language from one SCESL to another SCESL to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge and the skill of learning how to use language for specific purposes through the mastery of linguistic conventions and pragmatics for the understanding of different types of text. Furthermore, Duff’s adoption of identities, stances or ideologies in language socialization might bear relation to Bender’s conceptualization of “repairing identity damage” in reminiscence groupwork (1994:42). Such conceptualization can be seen as a type of conceptual competence in which conceptualizing self in positive evaluation will promote a “sense of self-worth” which will further lead to active participation of SCESL in social activities and active engagement in social communication. The conceptualization of self in positive evaluation is noted in turn to correspond with “naturalization of linguistic competence”: as to how Park (2010:24) defined it as “...the naturalized link between language and speaker is intensified, in the sense that it is even more deeply placed inside the individual, not on the “outer layer” of spatial, temporal, or social belonging but in more fundamentally internal qualities of character and disposition.”

In light of mediating the teaching contexts with teaching probable applications for a specific group of learners, the paper would propose that tailoring communicative competence for SCESL in theory should be based on the triangular linguistic-practical-conceptual competences as the foundation of deciding what sets of language knowledge and skills are necessary for the transition from single skills to competence and for the socially situated practice of overcoming sociocultural tensions coming from the status of ESL in community.

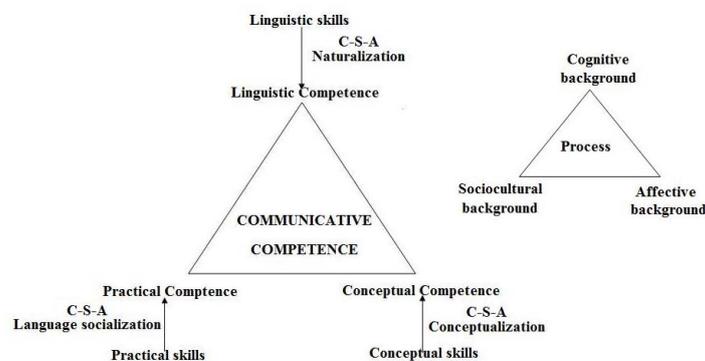


Fig.1: The triangular LPC competences & the triangular CSA backgrounds

4. Tailoring Communicative Competence in Practice

Tailoring communicative competence in practice should be firstly directed at how teachers should accommodate with learners in classroom interaction as teaching probable applications and what may cognitively, socioculturally, and affectively obstruct communication adjustment between teachers and students as teaching contexts. One pragmatic concern of communication adjustment with older adults was mentioned by Platt & Weber (as cited in Garrett, 2010: 112) as “miscarried accommodation attempts” which may often occur within between speakers from different age groups. Overaccommodation, one of these attempts, was hypothesized in Gould & Dixon study as a type of communication adjustment to maintain successful communication with low-working memory older adults (as cited in Garrett, 2010: 114-115). They compared three mixed low and high working memory female groups: one younger group (mean age 21) and two older groups (mean age 71) in their responses to two versions of video recordings of how the speaker

would give instructions to a patient in their forties and in their eighties-the latter version was noted to include many features of overaccommodative speech. Findings from participants' recalls are shown as the followings:

- Older respondents with high working memory benefit from overaccommodation but no benefit for older people with low working memory. Maybe overaccommodative features such as repetition make the messages longer and more taxing on cognitive abilities.
- 42% preferred the instructions of their own doctor to those with the neutral tone while 82% preferred doctor's instruction to those with accommodative tone.
- Gould & Dixon (as cited in Garrett, 2010:115) claimed that "if a positive doctor-patient relationship is important in gaining high levels of compliance with medical regiments, as many health researchers have claimed, then these kinds of speech adjustment can be of some significant detriment.

From these findings, encountered challenges for tailoring communicative competence for SCESL in teaching context can be grouped into cognitive and affective factors as the followings:

- Benefits of communication adjustment to SCESL are varied according to cognitive abilities. This assumption is significantly linked to studies about the complexity language learning as "...an extraordinary intellectual achievement...for post-pubescent language acquisition", the compensating strategies for the declined in cognitive function, the role of episodic-semantic-working memories in successful language learning (Strozer 1994, Lachman 2001, Poon, et. al, Clark & Salthouse, Baddeley 1992, Skehan 1998, Scott 1989; as cited in Hale, 2005)
- Creating affective stance in teacher-student interaction is of its importance. SCESL may prefer accommodative speech with whom they are more familiar; and moreover, positive teacher-learner relationship might be broken down if heavy compliance with instructional regiments is implied in classroom communication. These two assumptions are linked with self-efficacy and motivation as two affective factors in language learning in which there is a noticeable difference between low and high self-efficacy learners for low and high achievement in language learning, the effects of self-direction principle for self-confidence and control, and whether motivation is "the consequence of success or the cause of success." (Ehrman 1996, Imel 1989, Skehan 1989; as cited in Hale, 2005).

To improve cognitive demands in language learning for SCESL, how teaching probable applications can be tailored to the development of communicative competence can follow the principle of playing-down cognitive attention such as how Pinazo & Sanchez (as cited in Duran, 2010) suggested cognitive entertainment strategies for "relaxing attention and concentration, association and organization activities", for "promoting neuroplasticity adaptation to internal and external change", and for supporting the transferring acquired skills to communicative competence. Secondly, regarding affective issues in ESL classroom interaction, the perfect model teacher for teaching English language communication on one hand should not only correspond to Alptekin (2002)'s suggestion as "successful bilinguals with intercultural competence" but also with the ability to mediate the amount of instructions and create the affective stance of familiarity with the learners. Thinking beyond the context of the classroom and with regard to sociocultural tensions, the role of communication adjustment with SCESL in classroom should also be directed toward the development of communicative competence in relation to learners' positive self-conceptualization to overcome the varidirectional of distant and opposing double-voicing in community: it is particularly when the stylized Asian English "stood for a stage of historical transition that most adolescents felt they were leaving behind" and was often symbolized "a voice not being claimed as part of the speaker's own identity but one that was relevant to the identity of the person that being addressed or targeted (Rampton, 1998: 305)

Overall, regarding teaching contexts and teaching probable applications for a specific group of learners, the paper would propose that tailoring communicative competence in practice for SCESL should be fundamentally based on the act of communication adjustment in classroom with a broader concern to their cognitive and affective backgrounds to overcome sociocultural tensions in community .

5. Tailoring Communicative Competence in Theory and Practice in Future

On one hand, what has been proposed for communicative competence may be overlapped with the traditional notion of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980); nevertheless, the understanding of communicative competence on the notion of combining single skills through processes suggests that there

should be the development of strategies to accommodate SCESL with their cognitive, sociocultural, affective limitations in language learning. In the future, ageism may be foreseen to be gone when there was a growing demand of developing learning communities for language communication; however, globalization may lead us to the concern of growing “privilegism” in teaching industry. Similarly with the concern of “privilegism” in teaching industry, Le (2012) also compassionately expressed his concern of hegemonic globalization in the profit-driven contamination of teaching industry on the ironical operation that “the world is a global village where some privileged villagers are more valued than others.” From Le’s remark, the paper would end up with the suggestion that learning language for communication to achieve a healthy psychological state in the later life would become more applicable if there was a balance between the moralistic aim and its material package; however, conquering our vulnerability to old age is perhaps a broader foreseeing concern for this achievement.

6. References

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