

STRATEGIC COMPETENCE FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION*

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Abstract: This paper first examines the relationship of the components of communicative competence to culture, pointing out that strategic competence, unlike sociolinguistic or discourse competence, is not culture-specific and therefore is supposed to play a more crucial role in intercultural communication. And then it discusses research on strategic competence, particularly the contributions it can make to our efforts to understand and improve intercultural communication. Some questions that further research should address are also raised. Finally it stresses the special significance of exploring strategic competence for studying intercultural communication and indicates implications that the exploration may have for second- and foreign-language teaching.

Key words: culture, intercultural communication, strategic competence

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INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence, a notion proposed by Hymes (1972) and others as a challenge to Chomsky's (1965) concept of linguistic competence, has now become a primary theoretical construct in sociolinguistics and a number of related disciplines, especially for researching into the relationship of language and communication to society and culture.

Until recently, however, intercultural communication studies were more concerned with actual performance than with the competence underlying it. On the other hand, many researches on communicative competence were conducted without taking into consideration the real situations of intercultural communication, which, we can say, is well on its way to becoming an everyday phenomenon the world over today. Though, in recent years, there have been more studies in which communicative competence is approached in intercultural perspective, scholarly attention seems to have been exclusively on its sociolinguistic and discourse aspects. As for strategic competence, one of the four components of which the overall communicative competence is supposed to consist (Canale, 1983; Swain, 1984), research literature is still comparatively scant.

This paper discusses the issue of strategic competence in relation to intercultural communication, wherein strategic competence may play a more important role than others.

BACKGROUND

Communicative competence defined by Hymes was a challenge to Chomsky's use of the term competence (1965), for he found Chomsky's concept problematic since it seemed to be limited in that it included only grammatical competence and assumed uniform competence within the individual and the language group.

Hymes argued that the notion of competence should be extended to include the 'rules of use' as well as the 'rules of grammar'. To him, competence should also describe the knowledge and ability of individuals for appropriate language use in the communicative events in which they find themselves in any particular speech community. In short, Hymes' notion highlights the sociocultural dimensions of competence.

Later, Canale and Swain proposed a modular framework of four components (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Swain, 1984) for describing communicative competence:

a) grammatical competence, including vo-

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cabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics;

b) sociolinguistic competence, addressing the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction;

c) discourse competence, concerning mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres;

d) strategic competence, composed of mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual situations or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence and to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Their most valuable contribution to communicative competence theory is that they integrated into their model communication strategies that people often employ to cope with the problems arising in the course of communication. They pointed out that such strategies should be considered as an essential aspect of communicative competence, which is no less important than grammatical or sociolinguistic competence. This extension of the notion of communicative competence has important implications for studying intercultural communication.

ANALYSING THE COMPETENCIES IN RELATION TO CULTURE

Communicative competence is shaped by the social and cultural life of a particular speech community. Therefore, what is regarded as communicative competence in one speech community may be regarded as something else in another. In fact, the notion itself emerged to relate competence with the sociocultural contexts.

But it should be pointed out that some components of communicative competence are very closely related to culture while others are not. As far as intercultural communication is concerned, it is necessary to distinguish between what are culture-specific and what are not in the

components of communicative competence.

Though scholars still disagree in conceptualising the relationship of grammar to culture, the history of second- and foreign-language teaching and learning the world over seems to have proved that the grammatical competence of a language can be acquired out of the sociocultural contexts of the community in which the language is used as the native tongue. In the world today there are so many people who are bilingual but not necessarily bicultural. That might be one of the reasons that some scholars prefer to assume that grammatical competence has the same status as communicative competence, and that they are complementary to each other instead of one subsuming the other (Chen, 1990).

Sociolinguistic competence is obviously very culture-specific. What lies in the centre of sociolinguistic competence is appropriateness. What is linguistically appropriate for a given speech situation in one culture may be completely inappropriate in another culture. For instance, studies of the ways in which people compliment, apologise, complain, refuse and deny, etc. have all revealed great cultural differences in patterns of interaction and the underlying cultural values which are thus expressed. Sociolinguistic norms are actually part of culture and acquiring sociolinguistic competence of a language is, in a sense, acquiring the culture in which the language is used.

In intercultural communication, where participants may bring into play conflicting norms for appropriateness, there always exists a serious potential for communicative breakdowns. So in second- and foreign-language teaching, there has been a tendency to help the learner acquire the native-like sociolinguistic competence and it is thought that in this way such cultural differences will be resolved and communicative breakdowns will be avoided.

However, since sociolinguistic norms are, by their very nature, reflective of the cultural values of the speech community, insisting on taking the norms of one culture, usually the native-speaker's culture, as the norms for intercultural communication is sometimes found to be quite threatening to the cultural identity of participants from other cultures. Siegal's (1996) investigation of Western women learning Japanese revealed that Westerners tend to resist the pres-

sure of being totally appropriate in using Japanese because it makes them feel that they are denied the right to speak freely as autonomous individuals, a privilege Westerners usually value very much.

Imposing the norms and conventions for interaction of one culture on intercultural communication really involves the danger of reducing it to a kind of intracultural communication. It is more likely that norms for intercultural communication are not based exclusively on one or the other cultural group's norms, but rather are negotiated and constructed out of both.

Discourse competence is also culture-specific. Discourse patterns may not be confined to any particular speech situation, but they are often reflective of the mind-style as well as the values of a cultural group.

Research results from contrastive discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric have indicated that discourse patterns and structures are often closely related to the cultural norms and meaning systems of the society using the language. A well-known research example is Kaplan's (1966) study of paragraph organisation of several major language groups. His study, and many following him, show that discourse structures are not universal but differ from culture to culture. Cultural differences exist even in academic discourse (Clyne, 1981).

Using the same language in communication does not reduce such differences to a minimum. Scollon and Wong Scollon (1991) found that when East Asians are communicating with Westerners in English, there is a tendency for them to delay the introduction of topics, which is unexpected from English-speaking Westerners' viewpoint and often leaves them confused about what the topic is. Conversely, the Westerners' way of introducing topics early in a conversation strikes the Asian as abrupt or rude.

More recently, Young (1994)'s research showed us that the Chinese discourse patterns seem to be just the reverse of the English discourse conventions in that definitive summary statements of main arguments are delayed until the end. She explained that Chinese discourse patterns persist in the English of many Chinese because, for the Chinese, they are closely related to the cultural concept of face, which lies at the very core of personal identity construction.

In my opinion, such transfer of native discourse patterns for use in a second or foreign language, which is usually considered as a mistake and may even lead to an impression of inability to use the language properly, can sometimes be better understood as the speaker's efforts to assert his or her cultural identity.

Unlike sociolinguistic or discourse competence, strategic competence is not culture-specific. Available empirical results and anecdotal evidence have confirmed the assumption that strategic competence is greatly independent of the culture in which it is acquired.

Paribakht (1985), supported by his analysis of the realisation of communication strategies by different groups of English speakers, claimed that strategic competence appears to develop in the speaker's first language with his or her increasing language experience, and to be freely transferable to his or her second language. This transfer, unlike others such as sociolinguistic or discourse transfer, has little to do with culture and therefore does not cause interference in communicating with native speakers or other non-native speakers of a different cultural group.

Even though the cultural background may have some influence on the individual's preference of certain communication strategies to others, potentials of communication strategies seem to be always shared cross-culturally (Imahori & Cupach, 1994).

Communication often involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity. This is surely more often the case in intercultural communication than in communication within a culture. Higher degree of unpredictability and creativity will require more of strategic competence, which is supposed to cope with the situations that are beyond the participants' other competencies. In many cases, it is the only resource that the participants can draw on if they expect to carry out the interaction and achieve their intended communication goals.

RESEARCHING INTO STRATEGIC COMPETENCE

Research on strategic competence and communication strategies is still somewhat recent and mostly has focused on what strategic competence

consists of, namely, communication strategies and their uses in communication, particularly second language speakers' communication with native speakers.

For the purpose of the present discussion, at least two things have to be mentioned.

First, by its very definition, strategic competence, mastery of communication strategies, has got much to do with intercultural communication. Faerch and Kasper (1983) defined communication strategies as 'potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular goal'. The two criteria here are problem-orientedness and potential consciousness, of which only the first has been widely considered as essential. Now most researchers in this field agree that the main purpose of communication strategies is to manage communication problems. Since intercultural communication is supposed to involve more problems, it naturally follows that a skillful use of communication strategies will certainly play a more salient role in it.

Second, in the developing process of the research, Faerch and Kasper's original conceptualisation of communication strategies, which concerned only one problem type, resource deficits (gaps in speakers' knowledge preventing them from verbalising messages), has now been duly extended to cover a much wider range of communication problems. This suggests that research on strategic competence can make more contributions to studying intercultural communication.

It also has to be pointed out that the research so far has almost exclusively focused upon the second or foreign language speakers, particularly learners, in their attempts to communicate with native speakers of the language. But the real situation of intercultural communication is that native speakers will also encounter some problems that they seldom do in intracultural communication and the responsibility of solving the communication problems has to be shared by both or all the participants.

Unfortunately, there has been little research on the use of communication strategies by native speakers when they try to communicate cross-culturally with non-native speakers, except some studies of what is called 'foreigner talk', concerned mainly with native speakers' coping with the problems caused by their non-native

interlocutors' inadequate grammatical competence. The research scope should be wide enough to include every aspect of language use of all the participants in communication. This may be difficult, but otherwise the research cannot expect to make much progress.

In relation to intercultural communication, there are a few questions that future research on strategic competence should address:

1) Are there any significant similarities and differences between the strategic use of language for intracultural communication and for intercultural communication? We conducted some researches on communication strategies in first language use, but the researches focused exclusively on children, whose communication problems are mostly resource deficits.

2) How and to what degrees the transfer of strategic competence from first language to second language is possible and whether it is different and, if it is, how it is different from other language transfers that have been much studied?

3) Are there any substantial influences that the individual's cultural backgrounds may have upon their characteristic preference of some strategies over others in intercultural communication? If there are, what are the most salient cultural factors in this respect?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Intercultural communication studies should not be occupied with investigating and analysing communicative problems, difficulties or breakdowns resulted from cultural differences. It is as important to study how people tackle problems, overcome difficulties and repair breakdowns. While researches on sociolinguistic and discourse competencies and the related cultural differences can help explain much of the failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication, researches on strategic competence and its implementation may account for many cases of communication in which cross-cultural understanding is achieved in spite of seemingly formidable difficulties and problems involved.

For second- and foreign-language teaching and learning, researches on strategic competence will have some implications. First, more importance should be attached to developing strategic

competence in second- and foreign-language learners, for, without strategic competence, many learners, even some who have a fairly high linguistic proficiency, are often found incompetent in dealing with communicative problems, especially the problems arising in situations for which our teaching has not prepared them (Chen, 1990).

And second- and foreign- language testing will also have to take this into consideration. What has been extensively tested up to now is mostly grammatical competence of the learners, and occasionally sociolinguistic and discourse competencies. Strategic competence seems to have never been included in our tests. It should be recognised that our tests can hardly be truly reliable indicators of the learners' overall competence in the target language before we find a way to test their strategic competence. Including strategic competence in our tests will surely reduce the discrepancy that still exist between what is tested and what the learner has actually acquired and is able to do in real situations of communication. This can be an area in which further research will produce fruitful results.

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