EFL teachers’ perception of the concept of communicative competence

Ahmad Nazari

This study briefly reviews Chomsky’s and Hymes’ ideas on competence and links them to Dubin’s notions of autonomous and ideological communicative competence. Based on interviews with high school EFL teachers, the study hypothesizes that some of these teachers have an indistinct view about communicative competence that moves between autonomous and ideological concepts. Drawing on observation of high school EFL classes, this study also hypothesizes that raising high school EFL teachers’ awareness of the autonomous and ideological concepts of communicative competence is likely to help them see that their teaching activities lean towards the autonomous model of communicative competence. As a consequence, high school EFL teachers might reflect on their beliefs and practices and might be better prepared to base their classes on a broader view of communicative competence.

Communicative competence

The concepts of competence and communicative competence were initially expounded by Chomsky and Hymes. In 1965, Chomsky asserted that linguistics deals with the language knowledge of an ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous community and unaffected by performance variables (Chomsky 1965: 3). In 1971, Hymes maintained that the competence Chomsky had talked about was ‘linguistic’ competence, a limited aspect of a broader concept he called ‘communicative’ competence, which included not only linguistic competence but also other aspects, specifically socio-cultural dimensions (Hymes 1971: 274–86). According to Hymes, a theory of language needs to deal with ‘the constitutive roles of socio-cultural features …’ (Hymes 1971: 277).

Later, language educationist Fraida Dubin (1989) asserted that communicative competence had at least two meanings. She argued that the autonomous meaning of communicative competence entailed an idealized speaker-hearer’s socio-culturally neutral ability to communicate. Dubin contends this meaning of communicative competence leans towards Chomsky’s linguistic competence, which is narrow and reductionist. By contrast, according to Dubin, the ideological meaning of communicative competence signifies what Hymes elaborated on in an attempt to separate it from Chomsky’s linguistic competence. In other words, the ideological meaning is a broad definition incorporating the socio-cultural aspects of
The importance of socio-culturally embedded language practices in EFL education is amply elaborated upon in the relevant literature. For instance, foreign language educationists and cultural linguists believe foreign language learning cannot occur properly unless the socio-cultural aspect of the foreign language is learnt simultaneously because the mere acquisition of linguistic competence is not enough (Holliday et al. 2004; Roberts et al. 2001). Roberts et al. maintain that whatever the purpose of foreign language learning may be, the cultural and social aspects are a fundamental and indispensable part:

Although the foreign language learner may not be joining a new community in any permanent way, their goal is to understand the social practices of that community and to behave in ways which will allow some continuing relationship with it. (Roberts et al. op. cit.: 10)

Similarly, Holliday et al. (2004) believe that there are no neutral exchanges in communication and that all communication, in addition to being about what is said, is about establishing interpersonal relationships (Holliday et al. ibid.: 184). They also indicate that as language is socio-culturally embedded, ‘one has to understand other groups and the language use within other groups’ (ibid.: 185) in order to avoid ‘misunderstanding’, ‘stereotyping’, ‘otherizing’, and ‘languacism’. In summary, language and language learning are not to be detached from the socio-cultural practices of the target language community, or they would lose substance.

Research question

Enhancing learners’ communicative competence is one of the aspirations of a considerable number of high school EFL teachers and EFL scholars, and that is why different foreign language teaching methods (for example, communicative language teaching approaches) have been devised to contribute to this enterprise. Moreover, teachers’ ideas and beliefs affect the way they teach (Tsui 2003; Richards and Lockhart 1996). Tsui contends teachers’ knowledge and practices affect and inform each other and ‘teachers’ disciplinary knowledge often has a decisive influence on the process, content, and quality of their instruction’ (Tsui op. cit.: 55). Given that teachers’ beliefs can affect their practices, it seems useful to find out how high school EFL teachers conceive of communicative competence, the enhancement of which is of paramount importance to a substantial number of them. Such an exploration is likely to contribute to raising high school EFL teachers’ awareness of different meanings and dimensions of communicative competence through helping them reflect on their beliefs and practices. Such reflection could help the teachers come to a somewhat clearer understanding of the dimensions of language teaching and learning (Tsui op. cit.: 66), and as a result they are likely to be better prepared to improve their in-class teaching activities. It goes without saying that one of the purposes of research in applied linguistics is to enable teachers to reflect on their beliefs and practices and in this way to contribute to the improvement of language classroom activities. In this regard, Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2002: 1) and McDonough (2002: 13–14) describe one of the
major functions of applied linguistics as providing knowledge for those who make decisions on language issues in settings including language classroom.

Drawing on this background, this study is an attempt to explore how high school EFL teachers conceptualize the term ‘communicative competence’, and how they put this into practice in their teaching.

Method of the study

The present study is qualitative in that since the data have been collected through interviews and observations and not through a quantitative sampling approach, they are true only about the teachers I have interviewed and the high school classes I have observed. However, the issues raised about the EFL teachers’ perception in the specific high school may have relevance to the EFL teachers in other high schools. I am suggesting, thus, that the issues are generalizable to the theory and not to the population. In other words, the issues I have raised and the principles underlying them are not ‘enumerative induction’ but ‘analytical induction’ (Mitchell 2000: 127). Those principles are intended to be taken by other researchers and explored by them.

To carry out interviews, and to carry out classroom observations for exploring how the teachers’ views on communicative competence are realized in practice, I chose the EFL teachers and classes of a high school as a case. Choosing a case is not necessarily concerned with representativeness and typicality of the case but with its accessibility and the opportunity it provides to the researcher to learn (Stake 2000: 446–7). As Stake puts it, the case study researcher leans toward those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn . . . . That may mean taking the one most accessible, the one we can spend the most time with. Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Isn’t it better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case? (ibid.: 446)

Participants

Interviews with three EFL teachers of a high school in Iran were carried out to find out how they perceive the concept of communicative competence. The participants were male and non-native speakers of English, two of whom had a BA degree and one had an MA degree in TEFL. The participants, during their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, had passed courses on linguistics as well as language teaching theories and methods. They also seemed well-experienced (a minimum of 10 years’ experience) in teaching English as a foreign language. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, analysed, and interpreted.

‘To move beyond perception-based data (e.g. opinions in interviews)’ (Cohen et al. 2000: 305) and to explore further how the teachers’ views on communicative competence were realized in their teaching practices, nine EFL classes taught by the interviewed EFL teachers were observed. The high school in which the observations were carried out was an urban state boys’ school. Each class of the school held from 30 to 40 students meeting four hours per week for English language classes. The age range of the students was from 15 to 18. Three textbooks, prescribed by the Ministry of Education, were used in the EFL classes in the three high school years, i.e. one book in
each year. The EFL exams administered to the students were either teacher-
made (for half-term exams) or made in the provincial department of the
Ministry of Education (for end-of-the-term exams) to be administered in all
high schools of the province.

As my research was inductive and hypothesis-generating by nature,
I decided to carry out open-ended observations, attempting to write down
almost all teaching and learning activities I saw and heard. I acknowledge
that my presence in the classes I observed might have affected the behaviour
of the researched. Yet the extensive use of naturalistic research in
educational studies indicates that it is gaining acceptance and importance
as a legitimate style of research (Cohen et al. op. cit.: 157).

Data presentation
and analysis
Teacher reports

The following are the participants’ definitions of ‘communicative
competence’:

**Question:** What does ‘communicative competence’ mean to you?

**Teacher 1:** To me, ‘communicative competence’ refers to a basic
repertoire of vocabulary, forms, and functions that the learner
can use in her/his daily conversations and communications.
If the learner can creatively apply that basic repertoire to daily
communication, both oral and written, I think s/he has got
what’s called ‘communicative competence’. Communicative
competence, I believe, can’t be obtained through memorizing
that basic repertoire but it can be developed through creative
use of that repertoire.

**Teacher 2:** It’s both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of language. It’s
that by which the learner can express themselves and
communicate their ideas with others. For instance, if
somebody can’t verbalize what they mean, they might express
what they mean by gestures and facial expressions. I consider
all of these as the aspects of communicative competence.
When we speak about communication and communicative
competence, we mean not only the verbalization of language
but also the expression of language through gestures and
facial movements.

**Teacher 3:** It’s an amalgamation of forms and functions. It’s the
application of forms to perform functions. If we don’t know
the language functions, we can’t communicate. By language
functions, I mean how to use the language. Communicative
competence is the ability to use the language forms as for all
language skills; the ability to use language forms in real
situations for communicative purposes.

The underlined expressions in the above interviews (for example, ‘basic’ and
‘vocabulary, forms, functions’) seem to imply narrower views of
‘communicative competence’. The highlighted statements such as
‘repertoire’, ‘creatively apply’, ‘not memorizing’, and ‘creative use’ seem to
be indicative of broader meanings of ‘communicative competence’.
As mentioned earlier, it has been argued that teachers’ perceptions affect their activities and what they want from students (Tsui op. cit.; Richards and Lockhart op. cit.). In this case, the interviewees’ teaching and learning activities must be affected by their understanding of communicative competence. The analysis of the teachers’ assertions on the in-class activities that they assign to the pupils might reveal whether these activities are affected by their views about the concept of communicative competence. Asked what activities they require the learners to do in the classroom, the teachers said:

Q: What kinds of activities do you ask your students to do in the classroom? Why?

T1: Having taught the new vocabulary, I want students to use those new lexical items in sentences orally. Then I teach the reading text and I want one of the good students to give a summary out of the text. Afterwards, I teach the structure mentioned in the book by using certain traditional techniques.

To suggest to the students that the reading activity’s for developing their reading comprehension, I ask students to summarize orally the reading text by using their own English words. While the students are presenting their summaries, I don’t usually correct their mispronunciations because I don’t want to interrupt their chain of thought.

T2: I ask my students to carry out certain activities including working on the vocabulary and the dialogues in the book. I ask them to memorize the dialogues. As for vocabulary, I ask my students to make English sentences by using the new lexical items.

I also ask my students to give an oral summary of the reading passage because the students have problems with memorizing words, and I personally believe that if students want to internalize words, one way to give oral summaries as summarization is a kind of production as well.

T3: I ask students to do silent reading so that they can concentrate on the reading passage individually. I also ask students some questions based on the reading passage, and they’re also required to make questions based on the reading material. In this way, students can not only comprehend the reading text but also practise the language structures.

Certain expressions in the above transcripts have been either highlighted or underlined. The highlighted expressions (for example, summarization, comprehension, and production) can be labelled as ‘activities dealing with broader concepts of communicative competence’ because they seem to focus on comprehension and production, which sound like flexible activities. The underlined statements (for example, sentence making, structure teaching, and word memorizing) may be labelled as ‘activities dealing with narrower concepts of communicative competence’ because they appear to further focus on memorization and isolated chunks of language, which are mechanistic.
To further demonstrate that both the broader and narrower views of 'communicative competence' are lurking in the teachers' conceptions, the analysis of another part from the interviews with the teachers might be fruitful:

**Q:** What methods do you apply to teach English? Why do you use those methods?

**T1:** To teach grammar, I use the inductive approach because, according to my experience, the students spontaneously discover the structure as it’s more enjoyable for students to induce the structural rule by themselves.

If we accept that language is a **means of communication**, teaching and learning language should be in line with that view. If we separate language from **communication**, language will lose its real nature. To me, language is a **system of communication**, and I believe if the learners can’t **use practically** what they learn, their learning will be nonsense.

**T2:** To avoid outmoded techniques and methods, I try to combine the techniques of the audio-lingual and direct method to enhance students' **fluency**. Actually, I try to be eclectic in teaching the different sections of the books. I should also say that eclecticism hasn’t been successful in teaching language structures in my classes, and that’s why I apply certain traditional techniques to teach structures.

**T3:** I try to employ from traditional and more modern methods those techniques which seem suitable to my classes. If language learning happens, we’ll actually reach different objectives. In fact, my experience shows if students **learn communication** in the L2, they can also cope with other aspects of language learning such as dealing with structures, answering language tests, and **comprehending** written materials.

Once more, the underlined phrases in the above transcripts such as ‘to teach grammar’, ‘discover the structure’, and ‘to induce the structural rule’ might be labelled as ‘the limited views of communicative competence’ whereas the highlighted phrases like ‘a means of communication’, ‘communication’, and ‘a system of communication’ could be labelled as ‘the broader views of communicative competence’.

**What happens in practice**

In the classes I observed, a number of activities were recurrent. These are highlighted in the following extracts from my notes made at the time of the observations.

The teacher **repeated** the example at the top of the exercise together with the students. Then, he, in English, asked a volunteer to **recite the structure** mentioned in the last session.

On the board the teacher, in English, wrote: She bought a book, and, in English, he asked what the syntactic function of each word was in that sentence.
He wrote on the board: I like swimming, and he performed some repetition drills with the students on this new structure.

He carried out some substitution drills together with the students on the structure of gerunds. Then, in English, he said, Gerunds can be used as the object of the sentence as well.

The teacher, in Farsi, re-explained the relations of English verbs, and on the board, in Farsi, he wrote:

- V+ masdare ba to (V+ infinitive with to)
- V+ masdare bedoone to (V+ infinitive without to)
- V+ esme masdar (V+ gerund)
- V+ that+ yek ebarate kamel (V+ that+ a complete phrase)

He also exemplified in English each of the above structures orally.

The classroom observation data reveal that though some of the teachers spoke in the L2 for teaching and communication, they spent most of the class time on sentence-level activities, structural exercises, decontextualized activities, and activities which demanded that the learners memorize syntactic structures and vocabulary items.

**Discussion**

The analysis of the first transcript, i.e. the teachers’ definitions of ‘communicative competence’, seems to suggest that the teachers’ perception is indistinct in that they appear to move, in defining that concept, between the broader and narrower meanings of ‘communicative competence’. In other words, my interpretation of the interviews on the meaning of ‘communicative competence’ is that the teachers seem to be aware of both broad and narrow meanings of that concept but they do not seem to make a distinction between the two.

Similarly, an interpretation of the analysis of the second transcript, i.e. the interviews on in-class activities, might be that the teachers seem aware of the broader and narrower meanings but do not seem to distinguish between the two. Accordingly, some of the activities the teachers maintain they assign to their pupils can be said to be affected by their narrower views of ‘communicative competence’ and some by the broader ones.

Likewise, the analysis of the third transcript, i.e. the interviews on the method of teaching, seems to suggest that though both the narrow and broad conceptions of the term are high in the teachers’ heads, their perception of the concept is indistinct, and they do not seem to differentiate between the narrower and broader meanings of communicative competence.

The activities observed recurrently in the classes lean towards the narrower concepts of communicative competence (note the activities in bold in the observation extracts) as socio-cultural practices are not embedded in them. According to Borg (2003), there is a complex relationship between teachers’ perceptions and practices in the sense that not only do they inform and affect each other, but they are also influenced by factors including institutional ones (ibid.: 91). Though I do not deny the impact of
institutional constraints (for example, limited class time, big class size, prescribed syllabus) which might cause the teachers to feel more comfortable with applying a narrower view to their teaching activities, I contend another reason for implementing the narrower concepts of communicative competence in the classes could also be explained by suggesting that the teachers seem to have a general indistinct view of the notion of communicative competence and do not distinguish between its two meanings. In other words, it can be said that the teachers’ practices are, to some extent, based on a general indistinct view of the concept ‘communicative competence’. Given the teachers’ interviews (they seem to have a general indistinct view and do not differentiate between the narrower and broader meanings of ‘communicative competence’) and the way they performed in the observed classrooms, they do not seem to be aware that they tend towards the narrower definitions in their teaching and learning activities. Accordingly, I hypothesize that were the teachers aware of the distinction between the two concepts, they would be likely to see that they are not tending towards a broader concept in their classes; as a consequence, they might be better prepared to implement the notion of communicative competence more fully in their EFL classes than was the case in what I observed.

As was argued earlier, sticking to the narrower views of communicative competence establishes high school EFL classes which are void of socio-cultural practices of the L2. It goes without saying that real communication entails linguistic and socio-cultural practices of language. In other words, operationalizing the broader concept of communicative competence in the EFL classes is essential. A contribution to meeting this end, I contend, is to raise high school EFL teachers’ awareness of the distinction between the narrower and broader views of communicative competence.

In addition, as far as research on the English language teachers’ perceptions and practices is concerned, Borg (op. cit.), reviewing a wide range of literature, shows that much research has been carried out on native English teachers at private and higher education institutions. He concludes that there is a need for research on teachers’ perceptions and practices in ‘state schools, taught by non-native teachers, and where syllabuses are to various degrees prescribed’ (ibid.: 98). Borg continues, ‘hardly any of the settings studied in research I have reviewed here reflect these characteristics’ (ibid.: 98). The present research and discussion then could also be considered as an attempt to contribute modestly to filling this gap in the literature as this research has been carried out on the English language teachers’ perceptions and practices in a state high school, taught by Iranian teachers, and where the syllabus is prescribed.

**Summary and conclusion**

This study concisely reviewed Chomsky’s and Hymes’ notions of competence and made a relationship between these and Dubin’s elaboration on the meanings of communicative competence. It was asserted that, according to Dubin, the narrow, autonomous meaning of communicative competence was actually revisiting Chomsky’s linguistic competence as both ignored the socio-cultural practices of language. The present study, through interviews with the EFL teachers in an Iranian high school, showed that some high school EFL teachers have an indistinct view
about the concept of communicative competence and do not seem to distinguish between the broader and narrower meanings of the concept. Observing the EFL classes taught by the interviewed teachers, I also found that though the teachers’ definitions of communicative competence is a combination of broader and narrower views, in practice their in-class activities tend towards the narrower concept. One of the reasons for this tendency could be certain institutional constraints, thereby causing the teachers to feel more comfortable with implementing a narrower view. Another reason, I suggested, could be the teachers’ lack of distinction between the two concepts of communicative competence.

As this is a case study and not intended to make any generalizations, interviews with other high school EFL teachers in other contexts might provide us with similar or different data and similar or different interpretations about their perception of communicative competence. It also goes without saying that the research question of the present paper could relate to all EFL teachers. In other words, EFL teachers who are native English speakers could also be the participants of further studies. In addition to this avenue for further research, testing the hypothesis generated through this study could be another issue worth exploring, i.e. researching the probable effects of raising high school EFL teachers’ awareness of the distinction between the narrower and broader concepts of communicative competence on their teaching activities.

Revised version received April 2005

References


The author

Ahmad Nazari has a PhD in Applied Linguistics. He has taught at the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Sunderland in the UK. He is currently a senior lecturer and the MATESOL Programme leader at the School of Education in the University of Sunderland where he teaches ‘Theories of L2 learning’, ‘Language and power’, and ‘Research methods’ to MATESOL students. His key area of interest is processes of L2 learning and teaching.

Email: ahmad.nazari@sunderland.ac.uk