

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS USED IN ISRAELI ARAB HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This paper aims at investigating teachers' and students' perceptions and levels of satisfaction concerning the oral component of the Communicative Language Teaching as illustrated in the Israeli EFL textbooks. It examines whether the Israeli Arab EFL classroom based on these textbooks leads towards the development of the various communicative (sub)competences, and provides opportunities for meaning negotiation and authentic communication. A quantitative research has been conducted including questionnaires and interviews with both high school English teachers and students. The main findings and conclusions point out that neither teachers nor students are satisfied with the activities provided by the Israeli textbooks in terms of the significance they give to the oral skills, as the linguistic competence is mainly focused on to the detriment of the other competences. Many of the teachers and students in the Arab high schools in Israel are not even aware of all the competences involved in communication.

Keywords: communicative language competences, teachers' perceptions, teachers' satisfaction, students' satisfaction, EFL classroom.

Introduction

Teaching for meaningful negotiation and collaboration has been recognized as essential for language learning. Richards and Rodgers (1986), among others, pointed out the significance of developing oral communication skills which correlates, in the case of English, with its powerful role of dominant language, since it has become "the most studied foreign language" for "education, commerce, religion and government in the western world" (1986: 1). Richards and Rodgers also discussed the development of the communicative approach in EFL teaching and pedagogy.

New components of the communicative language teaching were recognized in the eighties. For instance, Canale and Swain (1980) stated that communicative competence includes three main components – a sociolinguistic, a linguistic, and a strategic one – which apply to all four main domains of language teaching that is: "syllabuses design, teaching methodology, teacher training, and material development" (1980: 31).

Since the eighties, developing communicative skills has been emphasized throughout the world. It has also become the target of English teaching pedagogy in the Israeli *Revised English Curriculum* (2018), which provides the standards and the principles for learning and teaching English as an international language in Israel, and places great emphasis on teaching English for meaningful communication. The core objective of the Israeli *Revised English Curriculum* is to enable speakers of Hebrew and Arabic in Israel "to use both spoken and written English in order to progress in their professional, business, or academic careers, as well as in order to travel, enjoy international entertainment, or to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the internet". (2018: 7)

In order to point out the significant role of (1) the syllabus, (2) teaching methodology, (3) textbooks and teaching materials, and (4) teacher training in the practical use of communicative language teaching and pedagogy, quantitative research methods have been used including questionnaires and interviews with Arab high school English teachers and students.

Literature Review

The development of the communicative competence is considered to be the ultimate goal and essence of English language teaching (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 2000, Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Various definitions of the communicative competence provide meaningful insights into language teaching and pedagogy, although the term “communicative competence” has been controversially defined and interpreted in applied linguistics. Throughout the history of TEFL, the components of the communicative competence have been repeatedly reconsidered and redefined to provide new insights. In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), Noam Chomsky made a clear distinction between language competence and language performance. He defined the term "competence" as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language", and "performance" as "the actual use of language in correct situations." (Chomsky 1965: 4) Chomsky claimed that language competence is associated with linguistic competence, pointing out that grammar "purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence." (Chomsky 1965: 4)

Unlike Chomsky, who implied that “competence” is a theoretical construct, Dell Hymes (1972) defined the term "language competence" closer to what Chomsky called “performance”, that is an ability to employ language appropriately in order to communicate in different social contexts in real life situations. Hymes emphasized that in order to enable foreign language learners to communicate in English for everyday life purposes, they need to acquire different kinds of competences in addition to the linguistic one which focuses on grammar and lexis. Hymes believed that language is not the only intrinsic component of language competence. His perspective on language competence places emphasis on the learner's potential to use different grammatical structures in appropriate contexts, and is therefore mainly based on sociolinguistic aspects. He stated that “[...] a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner.” (1972: 277) Hymes' description of a child's language acquisition points out the significance of creating similar conditions for language acquisition to take place among foreign language learners. Besides Hymes, Diane Larsen-Freeman (1986), and Bachman and Palmer (1996) underlined that communicative competence is divided into two main components, which are language knowledge (content; grammar and lexis) and strategic competence, which includes verbal and non-verbal kinds of communications used mainly in order to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge.

Canale and Swain (1983), who disapproved of Chomsky's definition of communicative competence, strongly opposed the idea that language is the only component of communicative competence. They posited four main components which are associated with the term "language competence": sociolinguistic, strategic, discoursal and linguistic competences. The sociolinguistic competence, as emphasized in Hymes' model of communicative competence, relates to the language learners' potential to apply communicative functions appropriately in different sociocultural contexts, based on "contextual factors such as a topic, role of participants, setting, and norms of interaction." (1980: 30) They also pointed out that the sociolinguistic competence may also include "the extents to which appropriate attitude and register or style are conveyed by a particular grammatical form within a given sociocultural context". (ibidem) Canale and Swain believed

that the sociolinguistic competence is "made up of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. Knowledge of these rules will be crucial in interpreting utterances for social meaning, particularly when there is a low level of transparency between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker's intention." (1980: 30) According to them, discourse competence relates to the learner's ability to achieve "cohesion (i.e. grammatical links) and coherence (i.e. appropriate combinations of grammatical functions) of groups of utterances" (ibidem). Strategic competence refers to the learner's ability to handle communication using both "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence." (idem, 31) Grammatical competence, on the other hand, includes knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexis. Canale and Swain believed that "grammatical competence will be an important concern for any communicative approach whose goals include providing the learners with the knowledge of how to determine and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances." (1980: 30)

A more recent definition of sociolinguistic competence was offered by the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)*: "[the] sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use [...]" linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; expressions of folk-wisdom; register differences; and dialect and accent." (CEFR, 2001: 17)

The new recognitions and insights concerning the different components of the communicative language approach have operated a drastic revolution in the field of English pedagogy. They have emphasized that communication is not just speaking and listening, but involves other different competences that were not recognized before the twentieth century. Richards and Rodgers (1986), for instance, claimed that "Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how the learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and the learners in the classroom." (1986: 6)

Developing communicative competence has received particular attention in the field of EFL course design and textbooks evaluation, too. Rod Ellis (2003) affirmed that "course design is concerned with the selection and sequencing of content - the 'what' of teaching. As such it contrasts with 'methodology', which addresses the 'how' of teaching. Together, 'course design' and 'methodology', comprise the language curriculum". (2003: 1)

According to the Israeli English curriculum of 2018, the definition of the communicative competence should be the foundation of the foreign language teaching materials and textbooks. The communication-oriented activities comprised in the textbooks should be based on the already-mentioned components of the communicative competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic.

Quantitative Research

This quantitative research aims at examining the Israeli Arab teachers' and students' awareness, perspectives and satisfaction concerning the effectiveness of the textbooks and teaching materials used in the Israeli Arab high schools with a view to develop the learners' communicative oral competence in the EFL classroom. The research provides answers to the following research questions:

- (a) Are teachers and students satisfied with the kinds of speaking activities and tasks offered by the textbooks they use, in terms of the significance given to oral skills?
- (b) To what extent do teachers identify and exploit these strategies and techniques?
- (c) To what extent do the teachers (from the sample group) follow the approved textbooks that they have chosen?

(d) What communicative oral competences do teachers believe the approved teaching materials focus on (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic)?

Research Methods and Methodology. The research makes use of a semi-structured interview that contains 21 open-ended questions, and which aims at eliciting the teachers' awareness, perspectives and satisfaction on the promotion of the oral component of the communicative approach in relation to the selected textbooks. The interview has revealed responses that require clarifications and elaboration, and new insights for current research.

The participants were seven English teachers, who teach in different high schools in the Arab Sector in Israel. They vary in terms of gender, age, qualification, and teaching experience. All of them hold an Israeli teaching certificate. Four are females and three males. The age span is between 27 and 42. Five teachers hold a BA degree in English, while the other two hold an MA degree. Their teaching experience varies between 6 - 18 years. The interviews were conducted during the participants' free time.

In addition to the interviews, two different questionnaires were given to the seven teachers and their students. The questionnaires aimed at collecting data from a larger number of participants. Until now, 12 teachers, and 93 students have completed the questionnaires. The data collected are related to the teachers' perception of the importance given to the development of the communicative oral competences in the Israeli Arab EFL classroom and to the extent to which these competences are under focus.

The questionnaires and the interview questions are based on the assumption that foreign language teaching and learning are highly influenced by the teachers' perceptions, and by their practical methodology of teaching, and the classroom atmosphere created. The descriptors introduced in the questionnaires were inspired by the principles provided by the works of various applied linguists reviewed: Canale and Swain (1980), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Bachman and Palmer (1996), Chomsky (1965), Hymes (1972), Savignon (1972) and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1986). These principles include: learning to use language for authentic real-life situations, significance given to promoting the students' speaking performance, learner-centered teaching, using resources and materials in the English lessons, using activities for promoting communication skills, promoting contextualized oral interaction, integrating the oral skills and integrating all the skills in harmony with the main focus of improving the communicative competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discoursal, and strategic). The partial data collected from the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires have been analyzed in relation to the principles of the communicative language teaching approach formulated by different applied linguists (Canale and Swain, Hymes, Larsen-Freeman, and Savignon).

Discussion and Analysis

Students' Perspectives. According to the results of the questionnaires given to the students, 50% of them do not believe in the efficiency of the EFL classroom in promoting communicative oral skills. The data show that the teachers do not work enough on oral communication. On the other hand, a large percentage of the students (42%) state that their English lessons contain a lot of dialogues, discussions, conversations, and oral presentations. However, most of them (42%) agree that their teachers do not introduce role-play activities or communicative games in order to promote oral communication. Also, most of the students (52%) agreed that their teachers do not use technology in the EFL classroom. Interestingly, a large percentage of the students (34%) claimed that their teachers and classmates often switch to Arabic. Moreover, 45% of participants added that their teachers do not use pair and group work very often. Besides, they said that the English teacher is in the center of classroom work, as s/he is the one who speaks the most, and there are few opportunities for the students to

interact. The data concerning the cooperative classroom atmosphere and the use of textbooks and teaching materials for promoting the oral skills also pointed out to the teachers' lack of interest in developing their learners' communicative oral competence.

Concerning the use of textbooks, more than half of the students stated that their teachers rely exclusively on the oral activities found in textbooks. Furthermore, a large number of students (45%) stated that their teachers omit some of the oral activities offered by the textbooks. Besides, 45% of the students claimed that their textbook does not include any oral activities and that their teachers do not use supplementary materials for developing oral communication. Moreover, many students (33%) still believe that it is possible to pass the English national exam without working hard on improving oral skills. About half of the students agreed that their teachers do not place the same focus on oral communication as they do on reading strategies though most of the students believe that speaking is the most important skill they need to improve.

To conclude, the participants claimed that the teachers focus to some extent on the linguistic, strategic, discourse and sociolinguistic language competences. However, they agreed that much more emphasis is placed on the linguistic competence than on the other communication competences. In other words, the results show that the teachers do not place enough emphasis on developing oral communication competences. Consequently, the students are less motivated to improve their oral skills than the other language skills. The reason may be that reading comprehension is better represented in the Israeli English national exam.

Teachers' Perspectives. The data collected from both the questionnaires and interviews applied to the teachers pointed out that these are not satisfied with their students' general speaking performance and communicative oral ability. 37.5% of the teachers agreed that they do not devote enough time to oral communication in the English lessons, and some of them believe that they do not have enough time to introduce all the activities. In the interviews, all the teachers mentioned that they find it difficult to introduce communicative oral activities to large classes.

All the interviewed teachers, in addition to about half of the teachers who participated in the questionnaires, admitted that they give more attention to the reading skills and try to develop reading strategies, as much of the testing in the national exams is concerned with reading strategies. Besides, in order to help their students pass the national exam, they need to improve the writing skills, vocabulary and grammar.

Concerning the use of textbooks, the teachers agreed that they are not satisfied with the kind of speaking activities offered by these. They do not use all the activities because they find some irrelevant, uninteresting, and even boring. They also believe that the selected textbooks do not provide enough opportunities for meaning negotiation. Most of the teachers (63.6%) agreed that they focus mainly and mostly on the development of the linguistic competence. Some of them added that they do introduce elements of sociolinguistic competence as well as discourse competence. However, most of them (45.5%) admitted that they do not focus on the strategic competence.

Interestingly, most of the teachers do not organize pair or group work. They justified this absence by the fact that preparing communicative oral tasks demands a lot of work, and that they have large classes. Their lack of unwillingness to introduce pair and group work points out that the classroom atmosphere in the Israeli Arab English lessons is not conducive to engaging the students in communicative oral activities. Besides, it also indicates that the classroom interaction takes place mainly between the teacher and individual students, and not among the students. The students' answers in the questionnaires point in the same direction.

Examining the kinds of oral activities conducted in class, it became obvious that the teachers do not use role-play, dialogue or games which encourage the communication between the students themselves. In contrast, the teachers prefer to introduce presentations, discussions, and conversations which do not guarantee that all the students in the classroom really communicate, although all the participants claimed that they try to encourage all the students to participate. However, they complained that not all the students are willing to take part in the interaction, and justified the latter's unwillingness by their fear of mistakes. Interestingly, when asked about the kind of oral activities they introduce and the time allowed for the students to answer, the interviewed teachers said that they use 'yes' or 'no' questions, and only a few ask open-ended questions, so that they cannot expect the students to speak a lot. They added that the students are asked a question and are expected to answer the question, and then the "conversation" ends, and the teacher switches to another student.

Furthermore, most of the teachers added that they do not use technology in the English classroom. They blame this on the Internet's unreliability, and the difficulty of using technology. When asked about the way they react to the students' oral performance, six teachers said that they give feedback which consists of a few words concerning language and content in a similar way to that in which the students' speaking performance is evaluated in the national exam. The teachers do not provide detailed feedback, and neither do they use checklists or rubrics for assessing the students' speaking performance.

As far as the use of textbooks is concerned, in general the teachers do not believe that these play a crucial role in the development of the communicative language teaching. However, they rely mainly on these textbooks and do use all the oral activities present in the textbooks; besides, some use supplementary materials approved by the Ministry of Education. Half of the teachers (50%) who answered the questionnaires, in addition to the interviewed teachers, disagreed that the educational policy encapsulated in the Israeli English Curriculum to promote the learners' communicative oral competence is well represented in the textbooks. Most of them (70%) agreed that the linguistic competence is the most emphasized component of the oral competence.

As far as the new oral national exam is concerned, most of the teachers (90%) are optimistic. They believe that the new computer-based oral exam will determine the teachers to devote equal time for developing speaking, reading and writing. They also believe that the new oral exam will determine an improvement of the quality of the speaking performance, and the students will be able to get engaged spontaneously in various conversations on a wide range of topics. Besides, they believe that the new oral exam will provide valid and reliable results. The teachers also agreed that communicative oral language teaching is not compatible with the requirements of the present national exam. Also, the ignoring of the sociolinguistic component seems to be a common problem associated with the implementation of the communicative oral approach.

More importantly, the teachers are of the opinion that the communicative oral language teaching principles are not fully compatible with the Arab culture and values, and that creating the right kind of classroom interaction is a major challenge for them. Moreover, half of the teachers agreed that there are not enough teacher training courses to promote awareness of all the components of communication among teachers. Compared to other approaches, communicative oral language teaching places greater demands on the teachers. Also, teaching large classes is an impediment to developing the communicative oral competence.

Conclusions

Generally, the communicative approach is not implemented, and the principles of the communicative oral language pedagogy are not met at work in the Israeli Arab English classrooms. The teachers do not actually promote the communicative oral skills. When introducing communicative oral activities, they avoid using pair or group work. Besides, they do not use oral interaction techniques such as dialogues, role-play, or communicative games, which guarantee all the students' active participation. The interaction takes place mostly between the teacher and individual students rather than between the students themselves. Throughout the lesson, the teacher stands at the center of the activities, their role is the dominant, and such a pattern of interaction does not encourage real communication or general participation. As a result, not all the students can get engaged in communicative oral activities. Besides, the teachers are more likely to use closed yes/no questions rather than factual, open-ended questions. Therefore, they are unlikely to enable learners to interact freely in ongoing dialogues or conversations. Moreover, the teachers themselves do not speak freely much, and as such they cannot serve as models of English proficient speakers.

Furthermore, the teachers are not fully aware of all the different components of communication. They focus mainly on the linguistic competence, rather than on the sociolinguistic, discursal and strategic competences. They believe that the students need to improve their linguistic knowledge first in order to be able to speak, and neglect the sociolinguistic, discursal and strategic competences. They do not follow a specific syllabus for developing speaking, and they do not believe in the role of the textbooks in promoting oral communication. Most of them skip most of the oral activities, and do not use supplementary materials in compensation. Moreover, the teachers do not follow any particular checklist or rubric in order to evaluate their students' speaking performance.

The main reasons for the teachers' inability to promote speaking activities include: the large size of classes, their inability to use technology due to poor Internet connection, and the absence of video or audio materials.

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