Background Information for Interactive English Forum

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2.0

This unit first focuses on the importance of speaking, oral interaction skills, and group activities in English Language Education. After describing the relationship between communicative competence and the students' oral activity, the Interactive English Forum, the background of the notion of communicative competence is described and defined in terms of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

2.1 Communicative Competence and the Interactive English Forum

"Speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill: literary skills are on the whole more prized": Bygate (1987: ii). Learners need to be able not only to write, but also to speak with confidence in English as a foreign language (EFL) in order to carry out smooth verbal interactions. It is especially crucial to start to learn communication skills as soon as one begins learning English, that is, at junior high schools, since that is the age at which students begin learning EFL in Japan. Davies (1978) mentioned that a communicative approach should focus on oral skills before written ones. Putting too much stress on grammar in junior high and high schools might have caused the deficiency in communication ability, specifically oral interaction skills, among Japanese learners.

According to Long's "Interaction Hypothesis"(1981, 1983a and 1983b), the interactional nature of conversation facilitates language development. Observing the Forum participants' rapid progress of English through oral interactions between students, the idea proposed by Scarcella and Oxford (1992) is persuasive – that is,

when ESL learners share common goals and interests, they communicate with one another better. The Interactive English Forum is precisely an activity that corresponds to what Long and Porter suggested in 1985 – that paired and small group activities increase the amount of meaningful and interesting interactions and greatly multiply the number of opportunities to speak English. Oshita (1996) also put forward the claim that group works enables students to diversify communication patterns, activate psychologically, facilitate solving the problems, evoke the interlocutor's sympathy, and become conscious of conveying the meanings. The group activity, the Interactive English Forum, would be pedagogically meaningful for language teachers to work toward facilitating students' development of English speaking ability. As mentioned before, the Forum has been put into practice based on the idea of communicative competence, which Nagasawa (2003) wrote as follows:

> The suggestion of the "internationalisation" from the Ad-hoc Committee was also realised in the revision of the Course of Study in 1988. The key phrase in the revision was developing "communicative competence" in English. A close examination of the main text of the course and the accompanying document reveals that the new concept is a modification of Canale's (1983) idea of communicative competence, consisting of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. The more recent 1998 revision, following the key concept of the 1988 version, added emphasis on developing "practical" communicative competence.
>
> Nagasawa (2003: 3).

Since Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance

in terms of linguistic knowledge and Hymes' first use of the term communicative competence (Hymes 1972), various definitions have been given. Among the vast research, Canale and Swain (1980a, 1980b), Canale (1983), and Swain (1984) brought various expanded notions of communicative competence, which subsequently contributed to the Course of Study in Japan. In the view of Canale and Swain, communicative competence minimally involves four areas of knowledge and skills: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Theory and some literature of the communicative competence in relation to the present study are described in the next section.

2.1 Communicative Competence

2.2.1 Grammatical Competence

As stated by Canale, grammatical competence "remains concerned with mastery of the language code (verbal or non-verbal) itself. Thus included here are features and rules of the language such as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics": Canale (1983: 7). Hendricks et al. (1980) had an interview test to see the correlation with English proficiency and discovered that vocabulary showed the highest correlation at 0.93, followed by listening comprehension, grammar, and fluency, with pronunciations showing the lowest correlation at 0.43. In this regard, the size of vocabulary – the number of non-textbook words – and sentence structures are investigated in the main study below (see Section 4).

2.2.2 Sociolinguistic Competence

Hymes (1972) contributed the notion of sociolinguistic appropriateness, distinguishing between what is possible, what is feasible, what is appropriate, and what is actually done in the use of communicative language. Sociolinguistic competence, according to Swain, "addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts, depending on contextual factors such as topic, status of participants, and purposes of the interactions. Appropriateness of utterances refers to both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form": Swain (1984: 188).

Cohen (2003) lists six speech acts that require appropriateness: apologies, complaints, compliments, refusals, requests, and thanking. In terms of apology, Cohen (2003) lists five kinds of apologies: 1) expression of an apology (e.g. containing a verb "sorry," "excuse," et cetera), 2) acknowledgement of responsibility (e.g. "It's my fault."), 3) explanation or account (e.g. "The bus was late."), 4) offer of repair, and 5) promise of non-recurrence. Linnell et al. (1992) found no significant difference between the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) in apology utterances in six of the eight situations of verbal discourse completion situations. Fukushima and Iwata (1987) observed that there was no significant difference between the NS and the NSS in the sequence of semantic formulas in request utterances, which was generally similar in Japanese and English. EFL learners' proficiency does not seem to affect sociolinguistic competence.

On the other hand, Cohen cited his own work with Olshatain and Rosenstein (1986) that the NNS lack sensitivity to certain sociolinguistic distinctions that native speakers make, such as the distinction between forms for realizing the semantic formula of expressing an apology, for example, *excuse me* and *sorry*. Cohen (1996) concluded that target language learners might tend to respond in accordance with the

learner's native language and culture and find that the utterances are not at all appropriate for the target language and cultural situation. Because junior high school students have not acquired enough social convention, even in their first language, there would be considerable difficulty in determining the most appropriate way to make utterances in particular situations. Nevertheless, apologies, refusals, compliments and requests are investigated according to Cohen (1996) in Section 4.

2.2.3   Discourse Competence

Canale and Swain (1980a) did not use the term, discourse competence, but they included the notion of cohesion and coherence in sociolinguistic competence. However, in their paper in 1980b, which is mentioned in Swain (1984), the researchers referred to "discourse competence as mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres... Unity of a text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning": Swain (1984: 188). The idea of cohesion and coherence, as described by Halliday and Hasan (1976), is that cohesion refers to the linguistic features that relate sentences to one another and coherence refers to text that appropriately fits its situational context. For Halliday and Hasan, when a text is consistent internally, it is cohesive; when it is consistent with its context, it is coherent. To explain cohesion and coherence, Widdowson's (1978) example is often quoted:

A: That's the telephone.

B: I'm in the bath.

A: O.K.

Although this interaction does not have an apparent indication of cohesion, it has coherence because A's first utterance is a request, B's utterance is an excuse for refusing the request, and then A accepts B's refusal. Coherence is essential in conversation as Richards and Schmidt (1983) wrote, "A more appropriate focus for the teacher's attention might be on the coherence of the learner's conversation...": Richard and Schmidt (1983: 152). Whether the participants' conversations are formed coherently or not is observed in the main study.

Turn-taking has been discussed by numerous scholars and the definition of turn-taking varies from study to study. Goffman (1981: 23) defines turns as "an opportunity to hold the floor, not what is said while holding it." Richards and Schmidt (1983) wrote that conversation is governed by turn-taking norms, conventions which determine who talks, when, and for how long. People take turns when they are selected or nominated by the current speaker, or if no one is selected, they may speak of their own accord (self-selection). If neither of these conditions applies, the person who is currently speaking may continue: see Sacks et al. (1974). The method by which the participants take turns is analyzed in terms of nomination and self-selection in the main study. Sato (1990) found a significant difference between the Asian and non-Asian students with respect to the frequency of turns taken, which appeared to be caused by language transfer.

Within an extended turn, speakers still expect their conversational partners to indicate that they are listening. There are many different ways of doing this, including head nods, smiles, and other facial expressions and gestures, but the most common vocal indications are called backchannel signals, or simply backchannels: see Yule (1996). Yngve (1970) explained backchannel responses as vocalizations

such as *mm, ah-ha*, and short words and phrases such as *yeah, no, right, sure*. Duncan and Fiske (1977), in addition, included non-verbal factors in backchannels. These definitions are adopted in the present study.

Some researchers inquired into the difference in backchannels between Japanese and English. Maynard (1986) revealed that the Japanese nod approximately twice as many as Americans, and Kubota (1994) investigated that nods by Americans increase in proportion to the length of dwelling in Japan. More recently, Clancy et al. (1996) advocated the classification of reactive tokens. According to the researches, reactive tokens consist of six groups: backchannel (e.g. "Um huh."), reactive expression (e.g. "Great."), repetition, collaborative finish, laughter, and short statement (e.g. "That's wonderful.") Because the junior high school students at the Forum seemed to have a plentiful amount of turn-takings and reactive tokens, investigation is carried out on these two forms of communication in our analysis.

In terms of hesitation, which learners with low proficiency often employ, Olynyk et al. (1990) discovered that hesitation markers in transitionally relevant places were used more frequently by high-proficiency speakers than by low-proficiency speakers. MacCarthy (1991) observed that "thinking time" before a response is forthcoming seems agonizingly long – a tendency observable among Japanese learners. An inquiry into the participants' hesitation may result in some information regarding the relationship between hesitation and proficiency.

2.2.4 Strategic Competence

According to Canale and Swain (1980), "strategic competence is 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": Canale and Swain (1980: 30). Canale (1983) later extended the definition of strategic competence as "... (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence or to performance limitations and (b) to enhance the rhetorical effect of utterances": Canale (1983: 339). The theory of Bachman's (1990) "communicative language ability" referred to strategic competence as an important part of all communicative language use. Savignon (1983) mentioned that learners lack basic grammar and vocabulary in the target language, and, therefore, the communicative success relies entirely upon the "ability to communicate within restrictions." To the question, "Why do learners need communicative strategies?" Dörnyei answered, "They provide the learners with a sense of security in the L2 by allowing them room to maneuver in times of difficulty. Rather than giving up their message, learners may decide to try and remain in the conversation and achieve their communicative goal": Dörnyei (1995: 80). Terrell (1977) also claimed that communication strategies are crucial at the beginning stages of L2.

The difficulty of assessing the participants' strategic competence is realized, along with the indication that discourse and strategic competence overlap, and that many discourse features are also employed as communication strategies. In the main study, some features of strategic competence are investigated according to the notion of communication strategy by Tarone (1983):

- Paraphrase: Approximation (e.g. *pipe* for *waterpipe*), Word coinage (e.g. *airball* for *balloon*), and Circumlocution ("She is, uh, smoking something. I don't know what's its name. That's, uh, Persian, and we use in Turkey, a lot of.");

- Borrowing: Literal translation (e.g. *He invites him to drink*, for *They toast one*

another.), Language switch (e.g. *balon* for *balloon*, *tirtil* for *caterpillar*), Appeal for assistance (e.g. "What is this? What called?"), and Mime (e.g. clapping one's hands to illustrate applause);

- Avoidance: Topic avoidance - the learner simply tries not to talk about concepts for which the target language item or structure is not known, and Message abandonment - the learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance.

2.3   Comparison between NNS and NS

Regarding the situation that more and more people around the world are starting to use English, in the Pacific regions as well, the varieties as world Englishes should be legitimately recognized.   Kachur (1997) indicates three circles of world Englishes: an inner circle to which native speakers belong, an outer circle where people use English as a second language, and an expanding circle in which people learn English as a foreign language but use it for businesses and academic purposes as a tool of communication.   In this globalized society, numerous people in the outer circle and increasingly in the expanding circle use their local variety of English.   It is important for non-native speakers to communicate with each other with confidence by means of world Englishes.   However, English textbooks in Japan are written based on the native-speakers' norms as a target language. Comparing the data between the NNS and NS will give a large amount of information regarding this situation.   MacCarthy (1991) noted that observation of the behavior of native and non-native speakers is all-important.   Swain (1984) also claimed that learners and native speakers differ in relative mastery of these skills, and that the skills are involved in different degrees in specific language tasks.

Acknowledgement

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