The Communicative Competence of Learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Abstract: More language teachers have shifted away from the 'focus on form' teaching approach, which includes grammar translation and audio lingualism, and toward communicative language teaching (CLT). The communicative competency approach stresses communicative competence, which can be described as learners' capacity to effectively present themselves in the target language and successfully communicate in real-life circumstances. Learners must acquire not only linguistic but also pragmatic knowledge of the TL in order to do so. Competence, both linguistic and pragmatic, is knowledge created and acquired through exposure and usage, according to Kasper (1997). In other words, communicative competence is unlikely to be promoted without the essential exposure for learners to detect and acquire linguistic input, as well as opportunities to apply the information. The purpose of this research is to show that introducing computer-mediated communication (CMC) into English as a foreign language (EFL) learning may increase both intake (exposure) and output (use) of the target language, both of which are necessary for learners to improve their linguistic and pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Communicative competence, computer mediated communication (CMC), authentic and interactive learning tasks.

Moving away from the 'focus on form' teaching approach, such as grammar translation and audio-lingualism, more language teachers have recently recognized the failure of the form-focused approach in developing learners' communicative ability in real-life situations and have shifted to the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. The CLT approach emphasizes communicative competence, which is defined as the ability of learners to efficiently express themselves in the target language and successfully communicate in real-life circumstances. To do so, learners must acquire not only linguistic but also pragmatic knowledge of the target language. It is proposed that competence, both linguistic and pragmatic, is the knowledge gained and developed via exposure to and use of the target language. In other words, communicative competence is unlikely to be promoted unless learners have the necessary exposure to detect and acquire the linguistic input, as well as opportunities to apply the new information.

Unlike ESL learners, who must use the TL in everyday life to survive in the target culture, EFL learners often do not have appropriate access to the TL outside of the classrooms to practice what they have learned. When students leave the classroom, they usually return to the real world speaking their native language. Although teachers have steadily embraced ways that focus on meaning and language use in the classroom, the learning outcome is still insufficient due to the linier mode of face-to-face interaction.

EFL teachers are in desperate need of a solution to increase exposure and use of target knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.

The goal of this paper is to argue that incorporating computer-mediated communication (CMC) into EFL learning can not only increase both the input (exposure) and output (use) of the TL required for learners to promote their English proficiency, but also learning motivation, learner

autonomy, social equality, and identity. This paper first presents the rationale for the CLT approach as well as the limitations of traditional EFL classrooms in implementing it. It then presents the pedagogical benefits of CMC in language learning. The principles of using CMC tools in foreign language teaching were also presented, and the conclusion followed.

THE RATIONALE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACH

Traditional approaches that focus on structure and form were preferred in language classrooms prior to the CLT approach; however, due to their failure to develop learners' communicative skills in the target language, language teachers have gradually recognized the strength of the CLT approach. Traditional approaches have their roots in the study of Latin and Greek, the medieval languages of religion, literature, and philosophy. It focuses on formal written language analysis while ignoring the study of everyday spoken communication. The CLT approach is based on the idea that the teacher should act as a facilitator in order to create a student-centered classroom and engage students in authentic-like and meaningful communication with the goal of increasing comprehensible language input for students and expecting them to do so.

Focus on meaning and language use

Language serves as a means of communication. We use language to express ourselves in real-life communication; however, language is more than just a tool for communication; it also represents our social and cultural backgrounds. Simply learning the target linguistic knowledge will not engage learners in real-life communications in the target culture; they must also acquire the target pragmatic competence, the ability to incorporate cultural knowledge into language use and choose appropriate language in different sociocultural contexts. Unlike grammar translation or audiolingualism, which focus solely on learners' ability to produce accurate language form and structure, the CLT approach emphasizes learners' ability to use the target language efficiently in a variety of contexts. By pairing up learners and involving them in a wide range of meaningful interactive discussion tasks the teacher expects to promote the learners' ability to achieve the communicative goal, rather than forming grammatical sentences.

Create more comprehensible input

Another goal of the CLT approach that involves learners in meaningful communication is to produce more understandable input. This is based on the long interaction hypothesis, which states that when learners are involved in two-way meaningful communications that require information exchange, they tend to produce more negotiated language modification. The following are examples of negotiated language modification: comprehension checks, 'do you understand?', clarification requests, "what did you say?', or confirmation checks, 'did you say 'the cat'?' Although learners are not always able to produce comprehensible language necessary for successful communication when using these strategies in paired interactions, they are able to obtain more comprehensible input than in teacher-student interactions and have a greater chance of noticing the linguistic gap between their non-native like language and the language of the other person. It is proposed that the gap-noticing can often help learners to know what is still needed to be learned and benefit the learning.

THE PRINCIPLES OF INCLUDING CMC TOOLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The goal of incorporating CMC into language learning is to expose students to as much language input as possible while motivating them to be more self-directed in their learning. Although language teachers are no longer at the center of language classrooms, teachers must carefully consider how to design learning tasks, monitor learners' learning, and evaluate their language progress in order to maximize the efficiency of CMC in language learning.

Create language and cultural learning activities.

Most L2 or FL learning activities focus on rule drilling; learners may learn the rules but do not necessarily acquire them or know how to apply them in real-life situations. Adequate opportunities to apply learned knowledge are required to transform learned knowledge into competence. Teachers, as a result, learning tasks must be designed with clear objectives in mind, as well as what learning tasks or materials will benefit students' acquisition of both the target linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. It is suggested that learning tasks and materials be designed with language and cultural goals in mind.

Create motivation: Collaborative learning

One important reason for designing learning tasks for learners to complete is to motivate them. Teachers can have students work on a collaborative project with another student, such as writing a story journal together online. Using the blog feature, students can use their imaginations, exchange ideas online, and keep a story journal together. Learners are more likely to actively participate in the discussion and engage in the learning if they are motivated not only to complete the story but also to make the story interesting.

Control the progress of learners' learning

Another advantage of designing a learning task with a clear objective is that it allows you to control the learners' learning progress (Hubbard, 2004); otherwise, learners may become lost in the learning process. For example, if the teacher does not design a task for students to complete (for example, learning more about a friend and introducing him/her to the class), students may become confused about what needs to be discussed, learned, and accomplished. Alternatively, they may encounter unexpected difficulties during the interaction that the teacher did not prepare them for.

Design tasks with same goal but in different forms

When a learner learns a new word or phrase, it is first stored in his short-term memory; only after being exposed to the same term several times is the learner able to acquire the new term and store it in his long-term memory. This implies that simply involving learners in a single task is unlikely to promote the acquisition and competence of the desired new knowledge. Teachers should plan several different tasks with the same goal when designing learning tasks, for example, if the goal is to expect learners to perform appropriate speech acts. Learners are more likely to acquire the target knowledge if they receive more exposure and practice from different tasks with similar goals.

Encourage online opinion exchange

Another goal of using CMC to support language learning is to create an environment in which learners can interact with one another. Aside from one-on-one e-mail interactions, creating an asynchronous discussion board to extend classroom discussion is another way to help learners develop their ability to express agreement or disagreement with the opinions of others. When engaging students in group discussions on a classroom discussion board, the teacher becomes the key figure in encouraging online opinion exchange and assisting students when communication breaks down. Although the discussion board should be student-centered, teachers must still monitor learners' interaction and learning progress. For example, if the teacher finds onelearner tends to speak less or does not reply to other learners' messages, the teacher should remind him of the importance of giving and replying to comments.

EFL learners generally struggle to develop communicative competence due to a lack of authentic resources and the requirement to use the target language. Although CLT is being gradually adopted, teachers find it difficult to maximize interaction in traditional EFL classrooms due to a variety of factors such as the linier feature of face-to-face interaction, learners' personalities, learning and response pace, and so on.

According to CALL research, incorporating CMC into EFL learning can provide learners with more authentic input and more opportunities to participate in the target sociocultural contexts; both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge can be promoted. Furthermore, the use of CMC in and out of the classroom can promote motivation, learner autonomy, social equality, and identity. More research is needed to determine whether EFL learners' communicative competence can be fully developed with the help of CMC tools. However, for EFL learners who desperately need more authentic exposure and opportunities to apply classroom knowledge, the use of computer-mediated communication tools both inside and outside of the classrooms can certainly benefit learning and develop learners' communicative competence to some extent.

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