



Communicative Competence

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What is it?

Communicative competence refers to the knowledge required for interaction using language that is not only formally accurate but also contextually appropriate, e.g. in its degree of formality, politeness, and directness. The focus on knowing how language is used to manage personal relationships and to achieve strategic goals distinguishes the concept from that of linguistic competence, which is concerned narrowly with the production of formally acceptable utterances.

Who uses the concept?

The term 'communicative competence' was coined by sociolinguists to demonstrate that the use of non-standard linguistic forms in interaction may be appropriate to the particular situation that the participants find themselves in, and to the discursive goals that they are negotiating through their speech. The concept was also taken up and elaborated in second language education, where it became the keystone of the so-called 'communicative approach' to language teaching. This approach privileged the acquisition of communicative competence, particularly the knowledge of how to achieve goals through the use of language, above the ability to display structurally accurate linguistic forms.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

The concept in itself has only a partial fit with intercultural dialogue. It does not fit insofar as communicative competence presumes that the participants in any given exchange should share cultural norms about appropriate language use, e.g. when to use an informal or polite form. It does fit

insofar as communicative competence focuses on how language achieves strategic goals. Intercultural communicative competence is an extension of the concept towards knowledge of what to do when cultural norms of appropriate linguistic behaviour may *not* be shared, but strategic communicative goals still need to be achieved. Such knowledge includes sensitivity towards the possibility of different culturally conditioned interactional styles.

What work remains?

Research into communicative competence continues to address the 'rules of use' that govern different situated interactions, e.g. professional interactions, social media interactions and political discourse. There is also continuing interest in how children and adults acquire communicative competence in their first and other languages. Further research is needed on how members of different cultural groups understand communicative competence when engaging in joint interaction.

Resources

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