Communication Competence Related Skills in the Context of Student Performance and Teaching in EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Communication skills related to general communication competence are frequently placed in the context of foreign language acquisition (L2) and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). For instance, self-disclosure was investigated in relation to writing and discussion assignments in an online course [1], (un)willingness to communicate was explored in association with the frequency of communication in an L2 environment [2] [3], interaction management was observed in the context of CALL [4], and listening skills were analyzed in the mobile language learning environment [5]. In this paper an overview of topics associated with communication skills that appear in literature on L2 learning is presented, along with a model of students' communication competence in an L2 and EFL learning contexts that was adapted from the computer-mediated communication competence model by Spitzberg [6] and his intercultural competence model [7]. A number of potential uses and benefits of communication skills instruction that is integrated in EFL teaching and learning is briefly outlined and explained. Assessment instruments for measuring communication skills of L2 and EFL learners are cited and their potential implementation in measuring learners' skill level, as well as in L2 and EFL instruction, are briefly explained. To conclude, communication skills can be used both for the assessment of individual differences of learners and as a subject of L2/EFL instruction. They are an important tool for delivering and displaying L2 and EFL competence in a practical real-world environment and can be used to facilitate both learning and enactment of L2 linguistic competence.

Keywords: *EFL, L2, computer-assisted language learning, communication skills, communication competence, intercultural communication.*

1. Introduction

To illustrate the main point of this paper as briefly as possible a conceptual model of communication competence in foreign language (L2) use is introduced. The four general and hierarchically presented dimensions of L2 activities are outlined in *Figure 1* on the basis of literature (adapted mostly from the *framework of communicative competence integrating the four skills* [8], and also from *molar and molecular perspective on communication competence* [9], levels of abstraction in observing interaction processes – *microscopic, mesoscopic, macroscopic* [10], *levels of analysis in the social ecological multilevel theoretical framework* [11], [12] and *communication accommodation theory* [13]. The conceptual model depicted in *Figure 1* consists of following four dimensions, from the lowest *micro* to the highest *supra* level of analysis (as a reorganization of a model by [8]):

- *Micro* - **linguistic competence** (lexicon, phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, sentence sequencing),
- *Mezzo* - **pragmatic/action/discourse** competence (performing and interpreting concise speech acts, monologue and dialogue according to participant and situational variables),
- *Macro* - **strategic/adaptive competence** (knowledge and use of interaction strategies, learning to adapt and advance in competence, utilization of specific skills to enhance ability and overcome barriers),
- *Supra* - **social/intercultural competence** (utilization of knowledge, social/cultural cues and skills to understand the interaction environment and appropriately perform wide-ranging sequences of intentional communication acts).
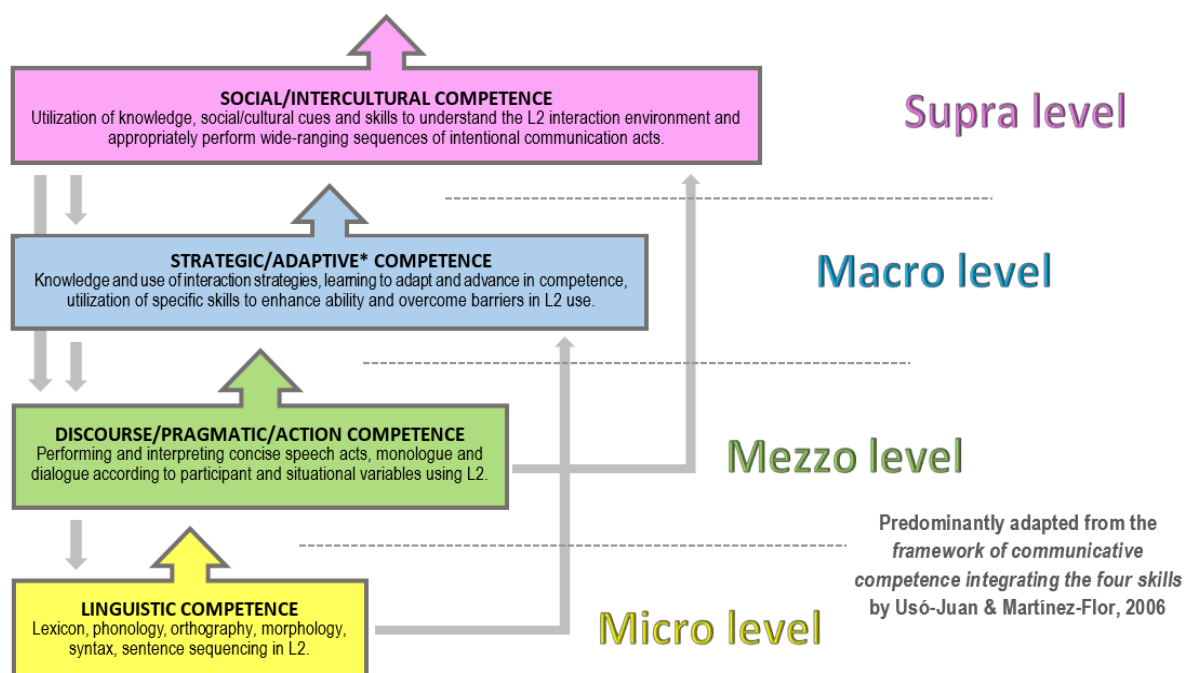
Fig. 1. A conceptual model of communication competence in foreign language (L2) use; *the main focus of this paper is on adaptive competence; sources: [8],[9],[10],[11],[12],[13].

Briefly speaking, in the conceptual model represented in *Figure 1*, the *linguistic* competence elements at the *micro* level participate in the creation of speech acts for the *pragmatic/action/discourse* competence at the *mezzo* level. The elements of the latter aggregate to contribute to *strategic/adaptive* competence at the *macro* level. Finally, at the most general *supra* level of L2, there is *social/intercultural* competence which has two-way relationships with the dimensions at the *macro* and *mezzo* level.

2. Communication skills in the communication competence model of L2 use

The model in *Figure 1* was outlined to provide a bigger picture perspective for the main focus of this paper – the **macroscopic** level of communication competence and its **strategic/adaptive dimension**, or more specifically, **communication adaptation/accommodation** in function of the *utilization of specific skills to enhance communicative ability and overcome barriers in L2 interaction*. In the broad context of *communication accommodation theory* [13] specific communication skills are viewed as a *facilitating factor* for the manifestation and confirmation of L2, particularly for the adaptation to specific tasks and contexts of communication. For instance, generally speaking, (a) *listening skills* may be beneficial to the mutual understanding of participants in L2 communication, (b) *interaction management* may contribute to their conversation flow, (c) *self-disclosure* can be favourable for dyadic and inter-group relationship building, etc.

Spitzberg and Cupach [14] created a list of about 100 labels for the factors/dimensions of interpersonal/social competence that had been mentioned in scholarly research. Self-assessment measures for a great number of communication skills were published in a book edited by Rubin et al. [15]. However, in scholarly literature only a limited set of communication skills have so far been associated with learning L2 and effectiveness in L2 use, either in *face to face* or *online* settings. For instance, *self-disclosure* was investigated in relation to writing and discussion assignments in an online course [1], *(un)willingness to communicate* was investigated in association with the frequency of communication in an L2 environment [2] [3], *interaction management* was observed in the context of CALL [4], and *listening skills* were analyzed in the mobile language learning environment [5]. To theoretically organize the skills with potential relevance for L2 interaction the *computer-mediated communication competence (CMC) model* that was proposed by Spitzberg [6] will further be utilized. In *Figure 2* the elements of Spitzberg's CMC model were adapted/expanded and used heuristically to position numerous communication skills in relation to their capacity or potential to support (1) pragmatic/action/discourse competence, (2) strategic/adaptive competence and (3) social/intercultural competence. Numerous possible outcomes of interaction in an L2 environment, supported with the use

of specific communication skill(s), are also listed in *Figure 2* as an extension of the original CMC model. Depending on the level of communication competence in L2 (from *mezzo* to *supra*; see *Figure 1*), some of the potential outcomes of L2 interaction can be: understanding, appropriateness, influence, coordination, satisfaction, cooperation, efficacy (goal attainment), attractiveness, relationship, inclusion, socialization etc. (see *Figure 2*). It may be reasonable to consider that facilitating the achievement of those outcomes by developing L2 communication competence above the basic *linguistic competence* (at the *micro* level) can be defined as the additional goal of L2/EFL instruction.
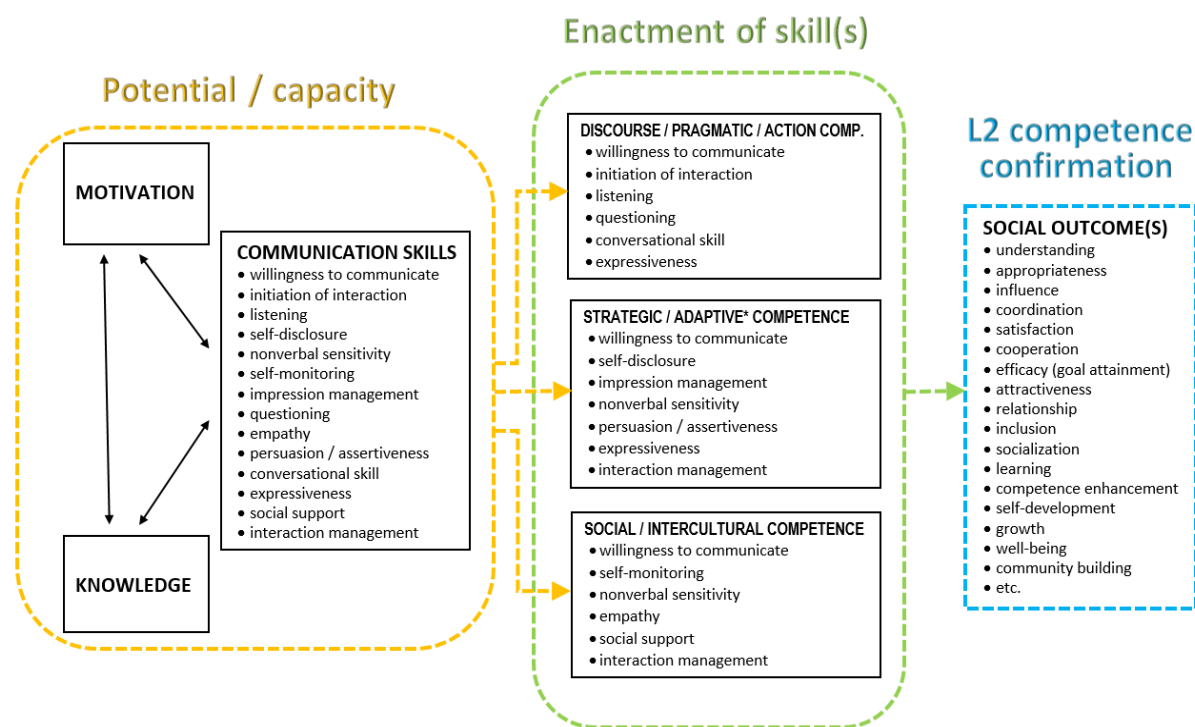

Fig. 2. A conceptual model which illustrates how specific communication skills (as potential or capacity, including knowledge and motivation) can be used to facilitate or enhance practical manifestation of the dimensions of L2 communication competence (enactment of skills) and produce various outcomes (confirmation of L2 communication competence); adapted from: [6]

Owing to the limited length of this paper the individual communication skills listed in *Figure 2* will not be explained in detail. However, it must be noted that for all of those skills at least one or more self-assessment measures have been developed and published in scholarly literature. Furthermore, the first author of this paper has constructed 25 such measures for *face to face* interaction and 10 measures for *online* interaction, all of them devised either for research or educational purposes.

It must be emphasized that the elements presented in Figure 2 are applicable in predicting, explaining and developing communication competence in L2 use when a sufficient level of *linguistic competence* is present for meaningful interaction. Regarding *potential/capacity* (see *Figure 2*) it is clear that greater *knowledge* of L2, as well as of conversation topic(s), situation/context, other participants in interaction, their culture, and potential strategies/tactics for achieving desired goals in a situation at hand, can facilitate the *outcomes* of L2 activity. Also, with greater *motivation* more effort will be invested into achieving successful L2 interaction outcomes and, therefore, existing knowledge and skills will also be better employed for an L2 specific interaction purpose. Finally, a higher level of certain *communication skills* may help in specific types of L2 activity.

In continuation we provide brief illustrations to support the proposition that communication skills can contribute to (at the *macroscopic level* and regarding the *dimension of strategic/adaptive communication competence* – see *Figure 1*) the manifestation of *communication adaptation/accommodation* [13] or, as mentioned earlier in this paper, facilitate the "utilization of specific skills to enhance communicative ability and overcome barriers in L2 interaction". (1) Knowledge of *willingness to communicate* and *initiation of interaction* can assist in the initial phases of frequently taught L2 interactions in travel, shopping, business introductions etc. (2) *Self-monitoring* and *impression management* can be useful for a candidate that uses L2 during a job interview. (3) *Empathy* and *self-disclosure* can be relevant for use of

L2 in turning new acquaintances into long-term relationships. (4) *Listening* and *questioning* can be beneficial for those who use L2 in actively attending or facilitating a business meeting. (5) *Expressiveness* and *persuasion/assertiveness* can enhance the effects of public speaking and oral presentations in L2. (6) For tourist guides using L2 skills like *nonverbal sensitivity* and *interaction management* could be important for leading tourist groups. (7) Last but not least, the skills of *self-disclosure* and *impression management* can contribute to effectiveness and appropriateness in private L2 online communication using social networks like Facebook.

3. Means of communication skills development in teaching L2 / EFL

How can the teaching of communication skills be incorporated into an L2 or EFL class? In this section several examples will be provided in the context of traditional *face to face* teaching. In our examples it is recommended to connect the original topic of an L2 or EFL lesson with a specific communication skill. For instance, when teaching the topic of *business meetings* in L2 or EFL it could be useful for students to learn more about the *communication skill of questioning* (for example, the assumptions behind a question, question formulation, alternative questions, flow of questioning, types of answers etc.; see: [16]). Similarly, when teaching the topic of *attending a job interview* in L2 or EFL, students can also learn about the goals, strategies and skills of impression management (see: [17]) and use a self-assessment scale for measuring their impression management skill [18]. Likewise, when teaching about the use of L2 or EFL in *communication over a social network like Facebook* a self-assessment instrument entitled Revised Self-Disclosure Scale [15] can be used to (a) elicit self-awareness of this topic and (b) inform students about the structure of the self-disclosure communication skill since this instrument has subscales with constructs related to this type of communication: *Intended Disclosure; Amount; Positive-Negative; Control of Depth; Honesty-Accuracy*. Finally, when teaching about L2 or EFL use in *teamwork in multicultural IT organizations* the skill of social support may be trained with a role-playing scenario and activities like generating and evaluating sample supportive messages, distinguishing helpful from unhelpful messages, understanding diversity in perception of supportive messages and strategies etc. (see [19]).

4. Axioms for future research of communication competence in L2 use

To summarize the brief elaboration of the use of communication skills for the development and facilitation of communication competence in L2 use at different levels of observation (predominantly in relation to *strategic/adaptive competence* and *macro* level, but also partly in relation to *mezzo* and *supra* levels) the following axioms are defined:

A1. Communication competence in L2 use can be analyzed in relation to different *levels of observation* (micro, mezzo, macro and supra) and respective *dimensions* (linguistic, pragmatic/action/discourse, strategic/adaptive, and social/intercultural); see *Figure 1*.

A2. Various communication skills constitute communication competence in L2 as (1) an individual's potential/capacity and also as (2) a means of supporting/facilitating enactment or practical realization of his/her L2 competence. This predominantly refers to the *macro* level of observation and *strategic/adaptive competence*, and partly to the *mezzo* and *supra* level and other L2 competence dimensions (see *Figure 2*).

A3. The important outcomes of real world L2 and EFL activities are not only related to mutual *understanding* of persons in interaction, but also to numerous other communication functions/goals; these outcomes do not rely solely on *linguistic competence* in L2/EFL, but also on knowledge and motivation factors, as well as on diverse communication skill(s).

A4. The teaching, training and self-assessment of specific communication skills can be incorporated into L2 and EFL education to support/facilitate the achievement of important outcomes of L2 and EFL interaction in real world environments.

A5. Generally speaking, not only *linguistic competence*, but also the knowledge of social norms and cultural specificities, previous experience, and *use of various communication skills* can contribute to *social/intercultural competence in L2 use* at the highest *supra* level of observation (utilization of knowledge, social/cultural cues and skills to understand the interaction environment and appropriately perform wide-ranging sequences of intentional communication acts).

5. Conclusion

This paper presents a concise introduction to the potential use of communication skills education incorporated in L2 and EFL teaching. The main rationale is that L2 and EFL real world activities are dependent of the level of communication skill and general communication competence of individuals (our students). Therefore, embedding brief episodes of teaching/training of relevant communication skills

relevant for specific topics in L2 and EFL education (meetings, job interviews, use of social networks, teamwork etc.) could contribute to manifestation of greater real world communication competence in L2 use and achievement of important outcomes of communication interaction outside classroom.

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