

Mother Tongue Based Instruction for Developing Communicative Competence of EFL Learners: Teachers' Experience

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Abstract

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Communicative competence is a prerequisite to acquiring linguistic competences. To develop communicative competence of learners, teachers around the globe have practised various methods and techniques. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have difficulties and hesitations when they have to communicate in need. In this context, this research envisaged exploring the experiences of teachers on the use of the mother tongue of learners including the techniques used by them in developing communicative competence. To achieve the objectives, semi-structured interviews with teachers and class observation were carried out. Then, themes were developed to organize the relevant information and to make meanings. Based on the analysis, it is discovered that the mother tongue of the learners helped develop communicative competence in English. It motivated the learners, fostered the practice and improved learners' communicative competence in a natural setting. Moreover, group/pair works, project-based learning, authentic materials, intercultural syllabus and the use of ICTs) were in practice for developing communicative competence in

Nepali community schools. This implies that the use of the mother tongue and blending of the intercultural syllabus with literature including ICT helps develop the communicative competence of learners.

Keywords: communicative competence, linguistic competence, mother tongue, policy, practice

Introduction

Communicative competence is viewed as the overall knowledge and skill of a person to use a language in a given situation. Specifically, it means the competence of an individual on what to say to whom in a given situation effectively (Hymes, 1972). Competence incorporating use and

appropriateness of use in a linguistic situation is said to be communicative competence. So, the grammatically correct, contextually appropriate and effective use of language seems to make a person communicatively competent. For Canale (1987), communicative competence is the ability to exchange and negotiate information between two individuals using verbal/ nonverbal symbols, and oral/ written/ visual modes, in the production and comprehension processes. Moreover, it is both knowledge and skill to use this knowledge when interacting in actual communication. It includes linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and functions), sociolinguistic competence (register, politeness and style), discourse competence (coherence and cohesion) and strategic competence (verbal and nonverbal communication) (Canale & Swain, 1980). Broadly, language competence is categorized as organizational competence and pragmatic competence by Bachman in 1990 (Celce Murcia, 2007). Under organizational competence, there are grammatical and textual competencies. Moreover, grammatical competence is categorized into syntax, vocabulary, phonology and morphology. Likewise, textual competence is classified into cohesion and rhetorical organization. On the other hand, pragmatic competence is categorized into illocutionary and socio-linguistic competence and illocutionary competence is divided into ideational, imaginative, heuristic and manipulative competence. On the other hand, socio-linguistic competence is divided into sensitivity to dialect, register, nature and imaginative function. This classification comforted the teachers to clarify the concept of communicative competence in the classroom.

There are other categorizations of communicative competence. Among them, Celce-Murcia et. al. (1995) specifically categorized communicative competence as discourse competence, linguistic competence, actional competence, socio-cultural competence and strategic competence. This includes linguistic and extra-linguistic features to be present within an individual to be competent in communication. Further, it seemed more practical to make the students understand the concept of competence. Although communicative competences are classified into various types, only a few studies have been carried out to find out how it can be developed in the second language learners.

The ESL teachers are always in tension for not being able to develop communicative competence in learners. As a result, they are in search of various strategies and instruments to improve the skills of the learners. Since the understanding level of the community school students' in English is said to be low, teachers in the Nepali context, make a trial of different techniques for teaching speaking skill in English. In this context, this study examines the experience of teachers on mother tongue instruction in developing communicative competence among the learners.

Review of related literature

The literature produced in national and international contexts reflects various practices for developing communicative competence. The following sections discuss the communicative competence highlighted by studies.

Linguistic competence: The fundamental aspect of communicative competence

Linguistic competence is the prerequisite to other competencies. Sentence patterns, types, constituent structures, morphological inflexions and lexical resources, and phonological and orthographical systems are essential for effective communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). Likewise, Tahir (2018) reported that good command in communication and linguistic competence help the learners perform better in need. Moreover, he suggested giving equal emphasis to linguistic

competence and performance. Linguistic competence is the second widest concept after communicative competence in the sense that it includes: the grammatical, morphological, phonological and semantic proficiency of learners (Castillo Losada et. al, 2017). It shows that it is the linguistic competence to be taught first among beginners through which other competences can be developed.

Discourse competence a basic prerequisite for communication

The form of language greater than a sentence that serves a function may be defined as discourse. In this context, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) stated that the proper selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structure and sentences to achieve unified spoken or written text makes a person competent in discourse. Moreover, they added that cohesion, deixis, coherence, and generic and conversational structure for turn-taking are scopes of it. The age when the children are equipped with discourse competence is not clear. However, 4/5 year children were capable of making inferences about antecedents and consequences in a given context (Brown & Hurtig, 1983). It means that discourse competence differs based on age, exposure and the interest of the learners. The proper use of discourse markers, transitional words, cohesive devices communicative principles, speech acts, and speech events makes a man competent in discourse. Being able to communicate means having the knowledge of using discourse features.

Actional competence: Words and work together

Action together with the words amplify the chances of conveying the message to the recipient efficiently. It is related to the understanding of communicative intent matching actional intent with linguistic form based on the knowledge of verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). Asking is in an interrogative mood but if the same form is used in a declarative mood, the speakers have to understand based on the action of the speaker and giving information in the form of an interrogative mood may result in miscommunication which Colle, (2020) claimed to be the most frequent language functions used by learners in day-to-day conversation. However, the study seemed to have ignored other competencies to be developed in the learners. In the early research, Colle (2017) reported that the English textbook in the Indian context, emphasized actional texts to maintain a good quality of teaching and learning process. Further, he suggested asking for clarification, the functional language to be included in the course. Actional competence, although, is a new concept, seems to be important to be developed among the learners to make them competent in communication.

Socio-cultural competence to adjust in the society

A native speaker of English competent in linguistic aspects may lack the knowledge of socio-cultural beliefs of any other country which hinders in communication. So, it is the ability to express messages appropriately within social and cultural contexts of communication. Socio-cultural competence incorporates social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness, cultural factors and nonverbal factors (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). In a similar vein, Guryanov et al. (2019) stated that it includes social values, beliefs, behavioural patterns, customs, traditions, language, and cultural achievements peculiar to society. The ability to adjust and accommodate in society by following and sharing the language and culture makes a man competent from a socio-cultural perspective. There are several values and norms in every society. If a person can understand them and communicate with others considering them, s/he is believed to have socio-cultural competence. The mother tongue of the learners' is said to scaffold and facilitate them understand such issues and when the students are

familiar with these things, they gradually can express them in the target language.

Strategic competence: An additional skill

Strategies of communication differ from person to person. The strategies of learning language, processing language, producing linguistic expressions considering psycholinguistic, interactional and communicative context and continuity of all these things come under strategic competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). How efficiently one can communicate in various contexts depends on the strategies one possesses and applies in need. Findings showed that females outperform their male counterparts and they have more positive attitudes and motivation at higher levels (Basterrechea et al., 2017). Probably, the strategy of looking something positively and motivation lead them to the situation. Likewise, the study by Sartaj et al., (n.d) in Pakistan claimed that students at the undergraduate level were equipped with poor strategic competence because of the lack of training and negligence. However, they were better at the self-monitoring strategy of strategic competence. Like a working strategy, the communicative strategy seems to play a vital role in effective communication. The person having strategic competence is likely to be a teacher, politician, social worker, doctor or counsellor and a student equipped with such skill might outperform rest of others.

Mother tongue and other tongue for communicative competence

Communicative competence like other motor skills is said to be developed through continuous effort and exposure to the phenomenon. People having regular practice and exposure acquire communicative competence. In line, Bakar et al. (2019) in Malaysian context, reported that overall communicative competence can be improved significantly through project-based learning activities allowing the students speak mother tongue for peer/group works. However, it seems to be more effective to the low-proficient English language learners than highly-qualified people. In addition, authentic materials and tasks allowing mother tongue within the framework of the pedagogical project were highly beneficial in the development of communicative competence in the context of the US (Castillo Losada et al., 2017). It seems that there are many factors contributing to the development of communicative competence. It is believed that the communicative language teaching method enhances the communicative competence of learners. Moreover, it is viewed as a source of learning and a medium of instruction. Various strategies are adopted in various parts of the world depending on the level of the learners, the availability of resources and the competence of the teachers.

Linguistic and communicative competencies were viewed as complementary to each other however, they have whole and part relations where communicative competence is broader than linguistic one in the sense that communicative competence includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic competence. Each of the competencies has emphasized different but important concepts that a learner should develop to be competent in communication. The research findings (Paudel, 2021, Phyak, 2013, Poudel et al., 2021, Poudel et al., 2022, Rana, 2018 & Sah & Lee, 2022) also depicted the need of MTI in basic level for interactive classroom and desired output however, there is the lack of study on the role of MTI in developing communicative competence of learners. So, this research has a good justification to carry out to explore the possible solutions related to poor communicative competence of the learners.

Methodology

It is a phenomenological research design based on primary sources of data. Moreover, I used

secondary sources of data available online and printed forms to maintain credibility. The objectives of this research were to explore the methods and techniques executed to develop communicative competence in learners in general and the role of the mother tongue in particular. Moreover, it aimed to suggest some pedagogical implications of the study. To fulfil these objectives, I collected data from 12 basic-level teachers, from six schools two from each chosen purposively representing both community and private schools. Through semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2022), I collected their experience and perceptions regarding the development of communicative competence in learners and their techniques of teaching for developing communicative competence. Moreover, I observed their classes to explore their practice in the classroom. The collected data were transcribed, coded, organized, and analysed and the findings were thematically presented as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017). The classroom observation helped me to explore the role of the mother tongue and the techniques the Basic School teachers employed in developing communicative competence. Member check (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), consent for interview and class observation helped me maintain the ethical aspects and credibility of the study respectively.

Results and Discussion

The data gathered through semi-structured interview and class observation were coded, organized, interpreted and presented into themes in summarized form. The findings of this study and the world literature relevant to it are presented in the following section.

Mother tongue: A scaffolding tool in developing communicative competence

The use of the mother tongue helped students communicate with their friends and teachers regarding various problems and issues of second language learning. During the class observation, I noticed their involvement in peer and group work and before that, they talked in their mother tongue. When they established good rapport, they, by mixing the code, started talking in English. Regarding the practice, one of the participant teachers said,

When my class was silent, I was worried. Then, I let them tell the answers in Nepali. When I approved the answers, I asked them to write their answers in English for few minutes and they started sharing them sometimes reading the copy sometimes without seeing it. It helped them develop confidence. (Raju, Jyoti Comm. School)

It is evident from the interview that teachers let students use their mother tongue in English classes and it scaffolds the skill. It developed confidence among them. The findings aligned with Sah and Li (2022) who discovered that the use of the mother tongue enhanced learners' confidence in communicating in the second language and acquiring content knowledge at a time. However, in a different context, Enama (2016) found that the learners who were competent in content knowledge were poor in communicating in the target language because of the use of the mother tongue in teaching. It proved the importance of content knowledge to be competent in communication in any language.

The teachers in this study, experienced regularity, active participation, good socialization and good relations of students among friends and teachers which helped them develop communicative competence. Ramesh, a participant teacher asserted, '*Nepali language in my class created lively environment. Otherwise, it was like one-way traffic. I used to speak, they just kept listening*'. It shows

that mother tongue use in junior classes helped motivating students in learning to communicate in English in a natural setting. As the teachers demanded Mother Tongue based Instruction (MTI) in this study, Pattanaik (2020) also suggested not using a second language in basic education because of the decreasing educational outcomes of the students. It indicated the need for the mother tongue in developing communicative competence as well as the overall outcome of students.

Learning to speak English in a child-friendly environment in the classroom

The teacher participants of community schools used Nepali medium instruction as all the students were Nepali native speakers, when their students could not understand (English Medium Instruction (EMI)). However, the teachers of private schools used both English and Nepali mediums according to the gravity of the lessons. For example, Dhana, a female participant expressed,

I frequently switch the code in my class. I easily understand students' interest and problems. When I realise that they want clarification in Nepali, then, I elaborate it in Nepali. When they feel comfortable with my English, I continue it. But I found them enjoying in using Nepali language.

It is obvious from the interview that the choice of students is the mother tongue for in-depth understanding of the content knowledge and respond it to the teacher. Further, they reported that contents related to science and technology could be taught in English but culture and other social sciences required a mother tongue so that students' participation in discussion was possible. This resonates with the findings of Sah (2022) who reported that in-depth knowledge acquired through mother tongue on any topic helped them to learn English which ultimately developed their communicative competence in the target language. In addition to the use of the mother tongue, the teachers adopted group work, project-based learning and role play in developing the communicative competence of learners. However, Sharma (2006) suggested using students' mother tongue so that they could learn the content and improve their communicative skills at a time. Teachers had a dissatisfaction on the practice of teaching all other subjects except Nepali in English medium. They doubted that the practice might hamper the identity of the country. Moreover, Ramesh from community school said, "*overt instruction, group work, contextualization cues, translation and less emphasis on pronunciation helped develop communicative competence in English among the learners.*" He also emphasized the use of mother tongue and acculturation of the pronunciation to develop fluency in the target language. This finding resonated with the findings of Scarcella et al. (1990) who argued that communicative competence in the target language developed through the mother tongue of the learners keep national identity, conserve culture and develop a new model of second language acquisition. Moreover, the teacher's negative comments on the different pronunciation than the standard British Received Pronunciation of students added tension among the learners. As a result, the high expectation of teachers to listen to their students communicate like native speakers seemed beyond achievement. In African context, Ball (2010) argued that second language instruction might leave the children passive killing their potential in various fields. In addition, the use of bilingual and multilingual instruction has been found advantageous in developing content knowledge among the students which encouraged them to share their understanding in mixed language of English and Nepali in the beginning and only in the English language gradually. The findings aligned with Aydin and Ozfidan (2014) who reported the instrumental role of bilingual or multilingual instruction in developing the communicative competence of second-

language learners. Abandoning English-only hegemony and adopting a mother-tongue-only policy as a decolonizer might be counterproductive. So, Norro (2023) suggested multilingual instruction to develop competence and achieve educational objectives. It indicated the importance of making the children proficient in communicative competence first so that they could bring their understanding out and make a query during their confusion which seemed possible through the mother tongue of the students.

Challenges regarding the practice of MTI in English class

Participant teachers believed that the students used their mother tongue to communicate ideas, feelings and emotions whereas the English language was for teaching and learning and for jobs abroad. As a result, there is a trend of joining EMI schools whether it is community or private one. The teachers reported that the parents felt proud of sending their children to EMI schools whether their children had developed communicative skills or not. Similarly, teachers felt high morale teaching in EMI schools and the learners felt proud of saying their school was an English medium school. For example, Ashok, a participant said,

Students enjoy NMI. The class is also interesting but I worry whether they are deprived of sufficient exposure in English. Their communicative competence in comparison to the one taught in EMI I think is lower. We should find a way out which can develop communicative competence, create student friendly environment and develop content knowledge.

The worry of the teacher seemed genuine in the sense that the learners lacked communicative competence even after attending many years in such schools having NMI. This finding contrasts with Ssentanda et al. (2016) who discovered poor communicative competence of learners taught in a second language for years. Still, they advocated for second language instruction. In such a situation, it is a problem to change their perspectives towards mother tongue instruction. Opposite to the findings of this study, Elboubekri (2017) in the US context, reported that the EFL learners demanded the use of ICT in developing communicative competence in the target language and blending of ICT than instruction in the mother tongue. On the other hand, Rezaei and Naghibian (2018) in Iran discovered that an intercultural syllabus blended with the literature specifically stories in the mother tongue indicated progress in developing communicative competence. Probably, such technique motivated them share their understanding to the peers and groups. The first priority is to develop confidence and make the learners speak then only they can communicate in the target language. The English only instruction might be the reason the learners stay dumb in the classroom.

Conclusion and implications

Communicative competence is the overall efficiency of a speaker to understand and make others understand speech in a given situation. The concept of communicative competence has been clear since scholars and linguists made a demarcation line between linguistic and communicative competence. Because of the total EMI, the incomprehensible input, in the junior classes, the students lacked exposure to the content knowledge and they were incapable of sharing it to others. However, the flexible practice of EMI and MTI in the class developed confidence among them which led them to communicate in the target language in course of time. Consequently, it resulted good rapport among students and teachers and promoted collaboration and cooperation between them. The findings

suggested to employ mother tongue of the students in the class, design lesson, develop materials and instruct in student friendly language to achieve the objective of making them able to communicate in the target language. In addition to it, some techniques like group work, project-based learning, use of ICT and designing the intercultural syllabus were in practice to make learners communicatively competent in the basic level.

Communicative competence is a broad concept to include in the syllabus and let the teachers and learners be informed about its scope. It is necessary to make teachers aware of the importance of medium of instruction that MTI is not a crime rather it is a means to develop communicative competence of the learners. Teachers' knowledge on various types of competencies can develop students' fluency of English.

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