An Empirical Study of Communicative Competence in Tertiary Level Students of Public Sector institutions in Pakistan

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Abstract

The following study aims at evaluating the level of English language speaking fluency in tertiary level students of public sector universities in Southern Punjab region of Pakistan. The study has theoretical underpinnings in Hymes’ (1967) and Canale and Swain’s (1980) idea of communicative competence, which encompasses the linguistic as well as the social aspect of language competence. The data is collected from the learners and their teachers through questionnaire and interviews following mixed method approach allowing the corroboration of findings from one type of research through the other type. The population consisted of 100 tertiary level students majoring in English and their teachers. The findings of the data revealed that the learners lacked the ability to communicate effectively in the target language. Major barriers in successful language learning and communication were found to be poor educational and economic background, and lack of communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies in classroom. Future researchers can conduct studies on higher-level students to evaluate their communicative competence.

Keywords: Communicative competence, CLT, Speaking fluency, Barriers, Pakistani public sector institutions

Introduction

The world has become a global village. The cultural boundaries have blurred. As the world is drawing closer and closer together, the need for a universal code of communication has risen. English, as lingua franca, has risen to the occasion and is trying to meet the demand. English now is one of the languages that have come into wide use for communication around the world and is considered indispensable for communication in today’s world (Paik, 2008). Jimenez and Rose (2010) are of the opinion that English language fluency also helps create better future prospects for students and without sustained and systematic efforts into enabling students acquire language fluency, students have “no hope of acquiring the kinds and amounts of cultural, social, and academic capital that they need to move into higher education or meaningful work” (p.411).

Despite Urdu being Pakistan’s national language, English has occupied the status of Pakistan’s official language since after the independence of the Subcontinent. The

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controversy about which language should be the official language of Pakistan continues. English is not only the official language in most provinces but it s also used as the medium of instruction in higher education institutes; some private elite institutes also use English as their medium of instruction. The demand of English by Pakistani officials, students, and parents is on the rise. Most of the competition exams like CSS, PCS, and even Military services exams are conducted in English. Pakistan one of the largest English speaking countries in Asia as at least 11% of Pakistani population can communicate in English (Rahman, 1990, 1991, 2013, 2014).

Recently, the Supreme Court of Pakistan passed a jurisdiction for „promotion and implementation” of Urdu (Haider, 2015). It stated, as reported by Haider (2015) that "In the governance of the federation and the provinces there is hardly any necessity for the use of the colonial language which cannot be understood by the public at large." It can be assumed that steps are being taken to endorse Urdu, but people with certain mindsets opt for speaking it because they want to raise their standard in society.

The study undertaken will try to get an insight into the communicative competence of public sector universities in southern Punjab region of Pakistan. This is an underprivileged region and developments regarding teaching and learning of EFL and ESL are needed. The researchers will analyse the data collected qualitatively and quantitatively to find out the level of language proficiency of the students.

**Literature Review**

Communication competence is a metalinguistic term which presents immense theoretical problems of understanding and application. The first use of the term „communicative competence“, (later referred to as CC) was by Campbell and Wales (1970). They proposed this idea as a response to Chomsky”s notion of linguistic competence, (Adejare, 1995).

According to Adejare (1995), Chomsky”s idea of linguistic competence is “concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.” One great limitation of this concept is that it implies linguistic competence as dealing with an ideal speaker facing an ideal situation in an ideal community. It ignores the cognitive and situational patterns a speaker may face in real-life situations.

Several linguists opposed this idea. Fodor and Garrett (1966) modified linguistic competence. According to them, competence and performance were different ideas. For them, competence
meant the general ability to do something, here the ability of the speaker of the language, contrary to actual performance, which may be subject to fluctuations depending on mental or external situation. They therefore defined grammatical competence as an individual’s knowledge of the structures and patterns of his language. Despite being a new idea, grammatical competence retained certain essential features of linguistic competence in the two areas of mentalism and the total exclusion of usage from consideration (Adejare 1995). Later on, Campbell and Wales (1970) modified the idea of grammatical competence into what they called CC. Like grammatical competence, it contained the concept of grammatical competence, but it goes two steps ahead. Instead of creating a bifurcation between competence and performance and focusing more on competence as the primary object of linguistics, it acknowledges the reciprocal interdependency of both by asserting the duality of rationalism and empiricism as the philosophical factors naturally at work in language acquisition. Therefore, according to them, “communication competence is the capability or ability to produce and understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but appropriate in the context in which they are used (Campbell and Wales 1970, as cited in Adejare, 1995:159).

Further contribution to the field was made by Hymes (1967, 1972), a sociolinguist, who was also convinced that the notion of linguistic competence (referred to earlier) was too narrow. He observed that this rule-governed creativity that, which implies a child’s acquiring grammar at the age of 3 or 4 was not sufficient for accounting for the social and functional rules of language (Brown, 1994).

The studies conducted in the 1970s sought to find out the differences between linguistic and CC to discover the rules and patterns of the speaker’s knowledge of the language and then performance, influenced by social and situational factors, which is nothing but a manifestation of the speaker’s knowledge when it has passed through the mental barriers (Brown, 1994).

In a similar vein, Cummins (1979, 1980) proposed a distinction between Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). CALP refers to the kind of language skills needed for academic learning and writing. It includes the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing about subject area and content material. BICS are language skills needed in social situations, that is, the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people.

Subsequent developments were made by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). They established four different components or sub-categories of CC:
Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) proposed an updated pedagogy based model of communicative competence. They have included actional competence, as a category of CC to the four existing categories of CC. Actional competence means matching the communicative intent with linguistic message.

Alptekin (2002) in a study has questioned the use of old native-speaker based CC. He considers the models of CC unrealistic because they fail to take into account the status of English as lingua franca. Alptekin has modified the notion of CC to incorporate situations where the communication is between native-nonnative and nonnative-nonnative.

Zha et al. (2006) have worked on developing CC through electronic discussion boards. They suggest that teachers include online language teaching designs and peer assistance in their teaching methods.

With regard to communicative competence teaching, Sercu (2010) has studied the problems English as foreign language teachers face to teach students intercultural communicative competence. He has discussed the need and criteria to modify syllabi to cater to the students’ need of learning about foreign cultures through foreign language.

Fang (2010) researched on the CC teaching in China. He expresses his view that since most of the students who want to learn English are not majoring in English, their motive behind majoring in English is the desire to improve their communicative ability. In other words, they are learning the language not for the sake of language itself but for the better prospects that
they may gain because of their language skills in the fields they are pursuing. In that case, the speech comes foremost. It is advisable for teachers to develop an „English context” in the classroom. It will help students develop their speaking as well as listening skills. In such an environment, students can „cultivate their sense of language”. Vadalia and Joshi (2015) explained how the four categories of competence contribute to CC by helping in the following areas.

**Table 1: Vadalia and Joshi (2015)**

| **Linguistic competence:** Understanding and using | **Strategic competence:** Using techniques to |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| • Semantics                                      | • Overcome language gaps                      |
| • Language rules and conventions (grammar, punctuation and spelling) | • Plan and carry out effective communication |
| • Syntax (arranging words into sentences i.e. sentence structure) | • Achieve conversational fluency             |
|                                                  | • Modify text for audience and purpose        |

| **Socio-linguistic competence:** Having awareness of | **Discourse competence:** Understanding larger level organisation and connection of ideas |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • Social rules of language (e.g., politeness, formality, directness) | • Patterns of organisation                                                             |
| • Non-linguistic communication (facial expressions and gestures) | • Cohesive and transitional devices                                                   |
| • Cultural references (e.g., idioms, expressions, background knowledge) |                                                                                       |

Hence, CC enables a person not only to speak correctly, but also appropriately and effectively.

According to Vadalia & Joshi (2015), the focus of language teachers while teaching a foreign language should be on these four elements. They say that the speaker should speak „not only in the approved manner (based on linguistic competence), but also aptly (based on CC)”. The learners should be taught lexical and grammatical rules as well as the rules of communication.
in that particular language. For that, it becomes important that the learner understand the tradition of the target language speakers.

Ahmed and Pawar (2018) have explained Alcon’s model of communicative competence in a study. This model comprises three main components, which are (i) discourse competence (linguistic competence, textual competence and pragmatic competence), (ii) psychomotor skills and competencies (four macro skills of language i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) and strategic competence (strategies used of linguistic and sociolinguistic competencies are lacking). The researchers have laid more emphasis on psychomotor skills, as discourse competence and strategic competence are of no use without the skills to use them. Methods to enhance these skills should be part of language teaching methodology.

From the above, it can be gathered that the principle of CC, which is now a “household principle” in L2 research and teaching and learning, is extensive and has been subject to criticism and changes. There is no doubt that these various insights of CC have generated and fed off significant research into the study of both academic success and the role of general language/linguistic ability.

In Pakistan, the major problem faced by students is communication. It has to be kept in mind that learning is not cramming words from books. If a language learner cannot communicate effectively in a target language, his knowledge is defective. Therefore, the institutions in Pakistan have to shift their focus from written to oral discourse.

**Statement of the Problem**

Second language teaching and learning has been a source of debate for a long time. The nineteenth century, methods like grammar translation method could have sufficed, but with the dawn of globalisation and broader international communication, the need for a more efficient method of language teaching has arisen. With the latest trends in language teaching, communicative competence has become a goal in EFL and ESL instruction. In the context of Pakistan, where English is a second language, there is a need for syllabus that is designed to meet these requirements. For many years, the government has been striving to bring the syllabus up to scratch, but with negligible results. Considering the high demand of English communicative competence, as has been mentioned above, the following study will assess the communicative competence of public sector universities in South Punjab Pakistan, analyse the weak areas and try to suggest measures for developing communicative competence in students. The study will be helpful for policy makers and syllabus design committee.

**Objectives**
The primary objective of the following research study is to ascertain whether the students of Pakistani public sector colleges are able to communicate in English effectively. The sub-objectives of the study are to ascertain the causes of the problem faced by students in learning and communicating effectively in the target language and to determine how the social, economic, cultural and psychological factors contribute to these problems.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical framework is derived from Hymes” (1967) and Canale and Swain’s (1980) models of communicative competence.

Research Questions
The questions that this research aims at answering are the following:

a.) Do the tertiary level students of Pakistani public sector universities in Southern Punjab have fluency in speaking English?

b.) What kind of problems do students face in communicating effectively in the target language?

Delimitations
The study is concerned only with the speaking skills of the students as speaking is the most important skill and can enhance the students’ career prospects. The students of tertiary level have been selected as they have passed through initial levels of language instruction. This study will try to assess how much they have learnt.

Research Design
The researcher has selected the mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) for the collection and analysis of data. This method will allow the corroboration of findings from one type of research through the other type thus making data triangulation possible. The data was collected from the students and teachers of a public sector university of Multan, Pakistan. The researcher contacted the administration and gained permission. The gender of the students was constant. Only female students were the subject of the study.

Research Tools
The tools selected by the researcher were questionnaire and interviews. The researcher selected students from first and second semesters of BS English. The study required students who had just begun their major in English. The students belonged to a well-known public sector university of Multan. The sample was selected using random probability sampling. Random probability sampling allowed an assortment of students from different backgrounds. The gender of students was female. Since the questionnaire was to be distributed in class,
permission was taken from the class coordinator. For interviews, five teachers of the same class were selected.

The number of participants was 100. The researcher talked to the participants and explained to them the significance of the study. When they were ready to participate, the researcher administered the questionnaire to them. The selected students came from various strata of society. Their ages were between 18 and 22. The size of the sample was convenient to the researcher for conducting a small-level research. The data will be analysed first quantitatively and then qualitatively. The answers of the students will show their social and educational background. The researcher will find out what factors stand as hindrance in gaining fluency in speaking English.

For the structured interviews of the teachers, five teachers teaching to the same classes were selected. These teachers were asked a set of open-ended questions to get as much as content needed to analyse the quality of output they receive from their students.

The teachers were asked questions about the level of their students’ competence, the problems they face in communicating in the target language, their students’ educational background and whether or not they were satisfied with their students’ output.

**Setting**

The setting for the administration of the questionnaire was the classroom. The students were first made familiar with the subject and the objectives of research. They were assured that their privacy would be respected. Then the teachers were interviewed.

**Questionnaire:**

In the questionnaire, the students were asked questions regarding their family and educational background. Moreover, they were asked about their current education.

The interview session for the teachers carried questions about the level of their students’ competence, the problems faced by the students, their educational background and whether or not the teachers were satisfied with their students.

Most of the teachers interviewed had been a part of both, public and private, sectors.

**Part I: Data collected from the Questionnaires.**

100 Participants = 100 %

**Section I: Personal Information.**

| 1. Family | Working class | Landlord | Businessman | Other |
|-----------|---------------|----------|-------------|-------|

| background | Punjabi | Saraiki | Urdu | Other |
|------------|---------|---------|------|-------|
| 64 (64%)   | 11 (11%)| 25 (25%)| 0 (0%)|       |

**Section II: Educational Background.**

| 3. Your school was | Public | Private | - | -  |
|--------------------|--------|---------|---|-----|
| 86 (86%)           | 14 (14%)|         |   |     |

| 4. The medium of instruction at the school you attended was | English | Urdu | - | - |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|---|---|
| 79 (79%)                                                   | 21 (21%)|       |   |   |

| 5. At school your teachers used English in classrooms | Always | Sometimes | Never | Most of the times |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------|------------|-------|-------------------|
| 20 (20%)                                              | 65 (65%)| 3 (3%)     | 12 (12%)|                   |

**Section III: Current Education.**

| 6. Why did you choose to study English at this level? | To get better job opportunities | To establish your status in society | You had no other option | You liked it |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
|                                                      | 52 (52%)                         | 13 (13%)                          | 29 (29%)                | 6 (6%)       |

| 7. Do you often speak English in society? | Yes | No | Sometimes |
|------------------------------------------|-----|----|------------|
|                                          | 30 (30%)| 62 (62%)| 8 (8%)    |

| 8. Do you feel confident in speaking English in classroom? | Yes | No | A little | Quite Comfortable |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|----------|-------------------|
|                                                          | 21 (21%)| 19 (9%)| 43 (43%)| 27 (27%)          |

| 9. Are your | Yes | No | To some extent | - |
|-------------|-----|----|----------------|---|
| Present teachers proficient in speaking English? | 08 (08%) | 61 (61%) | 31 (31%) |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| 10. Your writing ability is better than your speaking ability. | Yes 87 (87%) | No 13 (13%) | |
| 11. Your teachers use English for instruction in class | Always 23 (23%) | Never 0 (0%) | Most of the times 51 (51%) | Sometimes 26 (26%) |
| 12. Does your language learning meet your expectations? | Yes 11 (11%) | No 4 (4%) | To some extent 56 (56%) | Quite a lot, but not fully 29 (29%) |

The ones who were not satisfied were asked the following question.

**61 Participants**

13. If it does not, why?

Most of the students said that it was because the classes were not participatory enough. Some of them said that it was because they had to face this because their prior education was not up to the mark. Some of them also claimed that their current teachers were competent enough.

14. What suggestions would you give for improvement in the English language instruction?

Students were of the opinion that speaking English must be made compulsory at least in the classrooms.
Part II: Data collected from the Interviews.  
Questions asked from the teachers.

1. **Do your students face problems in communicating in English?**
Three out of five teachers said that the students faced trouble while communicating in English. The other two said that the students were improving.

2. **What kind of problems are these?**
The teachers said that students faced difficulty in finding the right words to express themselves. Two teachers said that the main problem was students’ lack of confidence. One of the teachers said that the students could neither understand nor express in English very well.

3. **Do you consider it best to use English in class or the use of mother tongue can also be helpful**
Two teachers said that only English should be used in class, two were of the opinion that there should be code mixing, while one teacher said that because most of the students did not understand English, Urdu should be used as a medium of instruction.

4. **Do your students have better writing abilities than speaking abilities?**
Four out of five teachers said that their students’ writing abilities were better than speaking abilities.

5. **Are your students creative or do they just prefer cramming?**
All the teachers said that most of the students preferred cramming.

6. **Does the educational background (private or public sector) influence a learner’s communication skills?**
Four teachers said that private sector students were more confident in their speaking.

**Discussion**

*Overarching Themes:*

1: Poor educational background

In Pakistan, there are public sector English medium schools and public sector Urdu medium schools. Most of the private sector schools are English medium while very few are Urdu medium. Most of the respondents from public sector English medium schools answered to the subsequent questions like whether they are confident in speaking English in classroom or whether they use English in society were “no”. While students from private sector English medium background were confident in speaking English, whether correct or incorrect, and said that they used it with friends and family.
Whether their teachers at school level used English in class, most of the students replied no. It proves that at an earlier level, they were not provided the chance to communicate in the target language and consequently they have poor speaking abilities.

One of the main problems told by the teachers was that the students could not express themselves well. They had ideas, but when it came to expressing them, their communication powers failed them. Their grammatical competence was also weak. Moreover, the students from Urdu medium schools or from far-off areas lag behind those who come from private sector schools and urban areas.

Majority of teachers in the interview expressed the opinion that their students face problems in communicating in English. The main reason behind it, according to one of the interviewed participant, is that the schools, whether public or private, do not help students improve their oral skills. Educational background also affects the students’ confidence.

2. Lack of economic means

Since the fees of private English medium schools are high, these schools are out of the reach of parents with modest economic means. It indicates that economic background plays a vital role in students’ language fluency.

3. Lack of interactive activities in classrooms

Students’ psychomotor skills i.e. four macro skills of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) depend hugely on the activities they do in classroom. The findings have shown that the class is mainly teacher centred. There is next to none teacher-student interaction.

Most of the students expressed their dissatisfaction. Many students said that their present teachers were not proficient in speaking English. Those who were not satisfied were asked the open-ended question as to the reasons of their dissatisfaction some participants said that the teachers were not competent enough.

The questionnaire has shown that the teachers used English in classroom sporadically. The teachers in their interviews agreed. They said that it was impossible for them to convey many abstract ideas without recourse to the mother tongue because students did not understand them. Therefore, most of the times, they mixed codes.

The students mostly prefer cramming rather than being creative. Those who try to put their ideas into their own words often do so unsuccessfully, which leads to deduction of points.

Most of the teachers were not happy with the outcome they received from the students.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the speaking abilities of the students in Southern Punjab region of Pakistan are not up to the mark. There are multiple factors affecting students’ CC. Most
important of them, in Pakistani perspective, are economic, cultural, educational and psychological conditions. Gender can also be a contributing factor in a country where women are subjugated. Developing the learners’ communicative competence, and mainly psychomotor skills, should be the goal of language teachers. This can be achieved through oral discussions and dialogue, interaction between students and teachers, role-play activities, and computer assisted language teaching. Future researchers can conduct studies on higher level English students. As the government of Pakistan is working on revising the syllabi of secondary, higher secondary levels, and tertiary levels, the design committee, stakeholders, language teachers, and learners can draw insights from the study.

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