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Teaching Communicative Competence to Adult Learners: An Intensive Foreign Language Program in China

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Teaching Communicative Competence to Adult Learners:
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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to explore some feasible ways in which communicative competence can be taught at the Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute in Beijing, China.

In the first part of the paper, a portrait of the institute's intensive language program , including its philosophy, a brief history and a description of the students, is provided so that the readers will have some idea why the paper is focused on communicative competence. Language is then described as a communication process involving linguistic, interactional and variational competence. The main part of this paper focuses on some innovative techniques by which communicative competence can be taught. A set of roleplays that includes situations which Chinese scholars may encounter when studying in the U.S. is presented. Finally, three possible ways to assess students' communicative competence are discussed.

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I INTRODUCTION TO THE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Foreign language teaching in China used to be considered a process that required years of consistent effort and practice before the target language could be mastered. The perception of the nature of language learning was based on the classic assumption that when learning his first language, a child begins by imitating his parents' speech. As the child grows, he has been repeatedly corrected and checked by his parents and people around him. This is the process through which a child is eventually able to achieve approximately the same sophisticated level of proficiency as his parents' in his first language. On the basis of this view of the nature of language learning, foreign language teaching was regarded as a process which should foster and facilitate the learner's imitation and practice in the target language. For instance, students had to learn a lot of pattern drills, imitate native speakers with tape recorders, recite drills and memorize various texts from textbooks before using the language to express their ideas and communicate with others. This process of language learning required considerable time before one could use the language.

Until recently this philosophy had dominated foreign language teaching in China. However, there has been an increasing recognition among foreign language teachers in China that this philosophy of language teaching is both superfical and inadequate. This changing attitude toward language teaching can be

perceived from the increasing number of intensive language programs which have been established in China in the past few years. In order to improve the Chinese people's standard of living and to develop and enhance the nation's economy, a " Four Modernization Program " has been launched in China by the government. One of the programs which has been taken the lead in innovative approaches to foreign language teaching was set up with the aid of the teaching staff of the American Language Institute at Georgetown University. They originally established an intensive language program at the Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute in 1979 which has thereafter been expanded and refined by subsequent teachers and teacher trainers. The establishment of this intensive language program was a result of China's need to send a large number of scientists and professionals abroad to pursue advanced science and technology in order to assure success in implementing the "Four Modernization Program".

Since these scientists and professionals are going to use the target language as a tool in their studies and research, it is not necessary for them to learn every detail of the language but the essential skills which will allow them to live in the foreign country and to be able to communicate ideas about their subjects and research projects in their own fields with foreign teachers and colleagues. Thus, the English for Special Purposes Program (ESP) at the Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute was set up to meet the language requirements of the above mentioned scientists and professionals in a period of 5-10 months. The

program focuses on developing and improving listening , speaking
and note-taking skills of the scientists and professionals so
that they will be able to function well once abroad. The program
accepts scientists and professionals who have learned some
English in the past but who have difficulty communicating in the
target language. The scientists and professionals are recommended
and selected to take the program's entrance test by the ministries
and departments for which they work. According to the scores on
the test and their fields of work the students are placed in
different level classes so as to maximize their learning.

In regard to the students' future need for the target
language, the teaching methods used at the program attempt to
improve and facilitate the oral communicative competence of the
students. In order to serve that purpose, there are no hard and
fixed rules for using a certain method. A method is adopted or
rejected on the basis of whether or not it enhances the students'
listening and speaking skills. Unlike conventional language
institute, the ESP program allows for innovative methods and
techniques in language teaching. Methods such as Community
Language Learning, Silent Way, Suggestopedia and TPR, which aim
to promote the students' understanding and communicative competence
in the target language, can be adopted at the program. This does
not mean that effective and appropriate traditional teaching
methods should be abandoned altogether. Some appropriate tradi-
tional teaching methods are also used in conjunction with new
innovative teaching methods in order to meet the students' needs

in the target language.

The teaching materials are also developed by the teachers working in the program. The materials selected should meet Stevick's (1976) criteria of linguistic, social and topical dimensions. It is difficult for the teachers to find a published commercial textbook that meets the objectives of an ESP program in China. Therefore it is necessary that the teachers develop and accumulate their own teaching materials. In fact, a system of classifying teaching materials in files has been under preparation since 1980. A language manual indicating the textbooks and accompanying cassettes has been written for the convenience of the teachers. Foreign textbooks are purchased for the program from the U.S. according to the appropriateness of these texts to the program. The teachers will make appropriate adaptations of the purchased text in accordance with the language level of their students.

Having given a general description of the ESP program, I shall now turn my attention to the main intention of the paper. As has been indicated earlier, the main purpose of the program is to help develop the students' communicative competence to such a level that they will be able to communicate with foreigners in daily situations. Keeping this in mind, the main purpose of the paper is to describe and explore some recent innovative methods and techniques by which communicative competence can be taught and developed. I will first discuss the fact that mastery of a second or foreign language by the students involves the

development of his linguistic, interactional and variational (socio-linguistic) competence. Then I will turn my attention to the teaching of communicative competence, through language games and communication activities.

II LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Human language, a unique and efficient means of communication, distinguishes man from other animals. Without language, it would be impossible for man to hand down the riches of human knowledge from one generation to another. "The essence of language is human activity-activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, an activity on the part of that other to understand what was in the mind of the first." (Jespersen, 1924)

Recently, this emphasis on the communicative function of language has become a major focus and concern of language teachers. Communicative competence is widely proclaimed as the ultimate objective of language teaching. Although there are different interpretations of communicative competence, linguists, socilinguists and psycholinguists would concur that it is the ability to interact effectively in real-life situations according to the appropriate social context.

Communicative competence consists not only of linguistic but also interactional and variational competence. It is essential for a teacher to understand the fact that mastery of a foreign language is measured not by how much a learner has come to know about the language linguistically but by the degree to which he is able to communicate with native speakers in the language. In an EFL situation such as in China, variational competence — the socio-linguistic aspect of the target language — is often neglected in foreign language teaching either because its importance has not

been realized by teachers or because it is difficult to find a
teacher who is capable of teaching this aspect of the target
language.

Before we delve into some practical ways in which communica-
tive competence can be effectively taught in the EFL classroom,
it is pertinent briefly to describe and examine the components
of communicative competence.

A. Linguistic Competence

One's communicative competence is based, first, on profi-
ciency in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading
and writing. These four skills are woven together to form one's
linguistic competnce. Linguistic competence refers to one's
ability to produce the basic structural patterns, (syntax) intel-
ligible speech sounds (phonology) and the basic vocabulary (lexi-
con and morphology) of the target language. Having linguistic
competence in the target language does not necessarily mean having
the ability to communicate. For instance, there are different ways
to reply to "Thank you" depending upon whether it is a formal or
an informal situation. If it is a formal situation, people usually
say "You are welcome". If it is an informal situation, they may
say "Sure," "No problem," "Uh huh," etc. The fact that people
reply differently to "Thank you " is primarily a matter of formality
and informality and has little to do with meaning. Learners
familiar only with the formal expression may misinterpret the
informal formulas and communication may break down. In this way,
we can see that linguistic competence alone is not adequate for

communication. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for communication. In order to communicate adequately and without misunderstanding, interactional and variational competences are needed.

B. Interactional Competence

Interactional or strategic competence includes strategies such as : how to approach people, how to start a conversation and get other's attention, how to maintain the floor, how to pursuade others to accept an idea, how to interrupt , etc. These are all examples of interactional strategies. Much of what is needed for interactional competence depends on cultural awareness. For example, Americans are uneasy about silence and have a higher degree of directness than some other groups. Once a person has achieved this awareness and strategies, he has gained an important part of interactional competence.

Besides verbal communication, there are non-verbal communication factors to consider. Non-verbal interactional communication strategies include proxemics, haptics, kinesics and oculesics. Proxemics refers to the appropriate distance one speaker should keep when conversing with another speaker. Haptics consists of the patterns of touching and how much touching one speaker can be allowed when talking to another speaker. Kinesics refers to the kinds of gestures and body movements that help convey the meaning of what a speaker is talking about. Oculesics relates to the frequency and duration of eye contact appropriate in a culture.

These interactional strategies vary from culture to culture,

from country to country and even from one region to another within the same country. For example, a person who was brought up traditionally in China may find it hard to accept and understand the ways Americans talk to each other because in the Chinese culture when talking to others, people usually keep a greater distance, they almost never touch, their eye contact is less frequent and one person can never look into another's eyes for more than half a minute. As far as gestures are concerned, the Chinese ways of gesturing are quite different from those of Americans. Even if some gestures are similiar, the meanings may be quite different. For instance, unless s/he has been influenced by American or Western culture, a Chinese never shrugs her/his shoulders to mean "I do not know" or "It can not be helped;" instead s/he usually shakes her/his head to express the same meaning.

It is not necessary for a second or foreign language learner to behave exactly like a native speaker, but what is important is that s/he should be aware of and understand the different ways in which people interact with each other in the culture of the target language so as to avoid misunderstandings when s/he is communicating with native speakers of the target language. In teaching communicative competence it is the teacher's responsibility to inform the students of the interactional features of the target language in order to foster the students' awareness of, and sensitivity to these features.

C. Variational/Sociolinguistic Competence

Variational competence refers to the ability to converse in authentic situations that represent everyday occurrences with emphasis on language meaning and appropriateness rather than on the correctness of form. Variational competence involves the use of sociolinguistic rules and formulas governing the appropriateness of various forms according to topic, setting, participants (age, sex, profession etc.) and purpose.

The fact that a person sometimes shifts from one style to another on different occasions reflects her/his sociolinguistic competence. According to Ervin-Trip(1976),there are three kinds of sociolinguistic rules: alternation rules, sequencing rules, and co-occurrence rules. Alternation rules refer to special choices that must made within the language system. One such system is the address system: it is illustrated in a number of languages by the problem of when to use a second person singular form and when to use the more polite second plural form. There are two dimensions in the use of address: a power dimension related to non-reciprocal use(the teacher uses first name to a pupil, who replies with title and last name; an older relative uses first name to a younger, who replies with kin title, "Uncle Bill") and the solidarity dimension, where two people move, e.g. from mutual "title plus last name" to "first name" as soon as they are reasonally well accquainted.

The second kind of sociolinguistic advanced by Ervin-Trip is the sequencing rule or rules which describe the structure of speech events. Within the various kinds of speech acts, there

are specific rules about the possible order and nature of ut-
terances. Acts which might be analyzed include greeting, leave-
taking, invitations and narratives. Violation of these rules
results in breakdown in communication. For example, to give
detailed medical information in response to a first "How are you
doing?" is a violation of the normal English greeting routine.

Third and most complex sociolinguistic rules are those
concerning co-occurrence of linguistic dimensions. Here we are
specially concerned with the use of appropriate language for
situation, topic and participants. There are various styles of
language such as formal and informal styles. It is unusual to
mix formal vocabulary with slang or non-standard pronunciation.
One of the most obvious cases of co-occurrence rules concerns
code switching; there are situations in which it is appropriate
to use formal style rather than informal style or to switch from
formal to informal or from informal to formal. In addition there
are rules which relate choice of style or register to the use of
particular speech acts. For example, in everyday American English,
greetings and leave-taking are accomplished through informal
register.

Because socio-linguistic rules vary depending upon geography,
culture, and tradition, it is necessary for the teacher to acquaint
the EFL students with the social and cultural patterns of the
target language so as to facilitate intercultural and trans-
cultural communication.

In sum, it is generally agreed upon among teachers and

linguists that ultimate goal of second or foreign language acquisition is to achieve communicative competence on the part of the learner. The teacher's task is to facilitate communication in every possible way in the course of her teaching.

It is virtually impossible for me to deal with every component of communicative competence in detail in this paper. What I intend to do is to discuss some feasible ways in which communicative competence can be taught to those who have already crossed the threshold of basic English grammar at the ESP program where I will be working upon my return to China.

III TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

A. General Considerations

Learning to communicate in a second language requires active involvement in the learning process. This observation is reflected in current trends in second language learning – especially in the teaching of communicative competence. "The trend towards a more active use of the student's mental powers probably represents the most important effect of the cognitive theory of language acquisition. The mental activity goes beyond the more passive "activity" that the Audiolingual Method called for."[1]

Clearly the process of acquiring communicative competence is a creative rather than a habit formation process. In the course of language teaching, the teacher should provide guided practice in thinking in the language, which enables students to be mentally engaged in the language learning process, to enjoy their learning.

As a result of the students' full participation in the language classroom and their mental involvement in the process, their natural curiosity will be aroused and their mental energies will be used. The more students practice and use the language, the quicker and better their language proficiency will be.

William Littlewood has summarized the objectives of communicative competence:

-The learner must attain as high a degree as possible
of linguistic competence. That is, he must develop

skill in manipulating the linguistic system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended message.

–The learner must distinguish between the forms which he has mastered as part of his linguistic competence, and communicative functions that they perform. In other words, items mastered as part of a linguistic system must also be understood as part of a communicative system.

–The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete situations. He must learn to use the feedback to judge his success, and if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.

–The learner must become aware of social meaning of language forms. For many learners, this may not entail the ability to vary their own speech to suit different social circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms and avoid potentially offensive ones.[2]

I believe these objectives for teaching communicative competence are also the relevant ones for the ESP program in Beijing, China.

In the course of second language teaching, especially in the teaching of communicative competence, the most important thing is that the teacher should create an atmosphere in which students

feel free to speak. So, the teacher needs to create situations
for students to use and improve their language. In order to
provide students with this kind of learning situation - the
chance to practice what they are learning - the teacher should
encourage students whenever they make a little progress rather than
always looking for weaknesses. In order to create a friendly,
lively learning atmosphere in which it is enjoyable for students
to acquire a language, there are several factors that the teacher
should be aware of.

First, it is essential for the teacher to stimulate or
enhance student motivation while teaching. The students in the
language program in China are highly motivated when they enter
the program. They have clear objectives in mind, and they know
that there is much important work waiting for them when they
master English. As a result of their motivation, they are very
eager for knowledge of English, American culture, etc. It is the
teacher's job to keep their motivation high while they are learning.
In Developing Second Language Skills, Noar describes the two
emotional needs that are crucial to motivation in classroom
instruction (1972, P. 3): "First, the student must be accepted,
and second he must achieve. Motivation in the classroom involves
each individual's efforts to satisfy these two needs.".[3] In other
words, when the student can discover that he is making progress
in learning, although he has difficulty from time to time, he
can keep his motivation high. When he is highly motivated, he
can speed up his learning process. So it is the teacher's job,

in presenting materials, to make sure that the student is interested in the material and that it is useful for him. In addition, the teacher must make sure that the student is achieving.

Second, the teacher should also consider student' personality. Personality to some extent affects learning for better or worse. For instance, some learners are very expressive, talkative and brave; they dare to imitate, to use the language; they are not afraid of sounding strange, making mistakes or being laughed at, while others are shy and not talkative; they are very timid when learning a new language. Consequently, the former often pick up the new language more quickly than the latter. The teacher should not look down upon the shy student; instead, she should give as much confidence and encouragement as she can to the more timid students and encourage them to speak in class. "The individual learner's first task is to be confident in himself. The teacher's role is to assist in the development of an adequate realistic ego image. Once this prerequisite is attained, learning will be enhanced."[4]

Third, the teacher needs patience. Once the student is highly motivated and he feels that the teacher is always stimulating him and considering his personality in her teaching, he will be more likely to participate actively in the classroom. Due to his lack of language proficiency, he will sometimes perform not only slowly but also with mistakes and hesitaions. At this time, the teacher may think it is a waste of time to wait for the student's answer; she may give the correct, fluent answer herself. Gradually, the student will feel inferior and he may withdraw.

His enthusiam for learning will be diminished. A good teacher, therefore, should wait patiently for the student's utterance, giving him some hints while he is performing. Slowly the student will gain more courage and participate in class more actively; he will master the language more quickly. In summary, student motivation and personality are important factors that a teacher should take into consideration. In addition, the teacher's own patience also influences the learning environment.

Once the teacher takes student motivation, personality and her own patience into consideration in conducting a language class, another important factor which increases student motivation and desire for learning is to create a relaxing, friendly and non-threatening learning environment for the students. In teaching communicative competence, a student-centered classroom format is much better than a totally teacher-centered class. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, director and manager rather than as the fountain of wisdom. The teacher should attempt to stimulate the student's interest in what he is learning and make sure that he is progressing. However, the teacher can never learn for the student; it is the student who does the learning. The teacher's task is to direct the student to the right path while fostering renewed interest in what he is learning.

In the course of learning, the student will inevitably make mistakes. The teacher's approach to error correction can sometimes affect the student's motivation and confidence in learning. If the teacher does it in the right way, it will result in increased

motivation. I believe there are two guidelines in error correction:

In the first place, one need not correct all the mistakes the

student makes; instead one can choose those mistakes that block

communication. In the second place, one should be gentle and

patient with the student because when he makes mistakes, the

student in fact may be very nervous and vulnerable. The teacher

should make him feel relaxed and aware that it is natural to make

mistakes while learning. For example, when a student say "He do

not go to work at 8:00 every morning," the teacher can let him

say it in this way, for it does not block communication. Or

instead of pointing out his mistake, the teacher may ask: "Does he

go to work at 8:00 every morning?" Hopefully, the student will

give the teacher the correct answer. Or the teacher may simply

repeat the student's incorrect sentence with the mistake, emphasi-

zing "He don't". The student will probably sense something wrong

with that part. He may attempt to figure out where the mistake

lies. In this way the student is stimulated to use his mental powers.

When the teacher conducts class in this way, the students

will feel relaxed. They will not feel nervous when performing

tasks in class. However, to create a friendly and relaxing learning

environment, the teacher must be kind and warm to the student,

while maintaining a high standard of performance.

The main objective of communicative competence is to be able

to use the language in real situations. So in teaching this

competence, the teacher should create an environment as similiar

to the "real-world" as possible. Thus, we should teach the students

language structure combined with use of language in real situations.
As Wilkins states: " Although languages are usually described as
general systems, language is always used in a social context and
can not be fully understaood without reference to that context."[5]
Generally, it is believed that language structures are engendered
by situations and only in terms of these situations can they be
understood. When teaching communicative competence, the teacher
should try to put the students in a situation of realistic language
use and actual communication, such as with roleplays, games, dia-
logues etc. Communication activities involve students in realistic
situations, and they prepare them for the transition from classroom
practice to using the language in the target culture. Teaching
for communicative competence bridges the gap between the language
classroom and real life experience.

B.Techniques and Procedures in Teaching Listening Skills

In this part, I will address two main areas of communicative
competence - listening and speaking, followed by some techniques
dealing with these two areas; the emphasis will be on listening.

Human communication is a process involving at least two
people. Speaking does not of itself constitute communication
unless what is said is comprehended by another person. In other
words, communicative competence requires listening and speaking
abilities. Listening and speaking abilities are the basic skills
for communication. They overlap and the development of both may
be regarded as a necessary prerequisite for developing communica-
tive competence. To speak a language, the first priority for the

learner is thus to develop his listening skills, for it is quite impossible for him to respond appropriately in different situations without a correct understanding of the spoken language. Therefore, understanding native speakers, native speech at normal speed in unstructured situations, is the first step before one can communicate with others.

Unfortunately, some language learners, such as those in China, may not have an opportunity to be exposed to native speakers. But, the teachers can compensate in various ways. Tape recorders can be quite valuable; radios are available in language institutes, and it is not difficult to get authentic radio recordings.

What kind of materials should the teacher record? The main concern here is to record authentic listening materials such as scenes in a bookstore, library, supermarket, restaurant, cinema, asking for directions, making telephone calls, asking for the time, etc. News reports, book reviews and interviews are also very useful. When choosing these materials it is important to keep the students' language proficiency in mind. Materials chosen should reflect authentic situations and be at an appropriate level.

The students should keep listening to as many native speakers as possible to reinforce what they have acquired until they reach the point where they can begin to anticipate what is going to be said and focus primarily on non-redundant elements. The first difficulty, then, is that the learner may not understand what is being said to him. So in teaching communicative competence, lis-tening skills are the first priority. Following are some techni-

ques and appropriate procedures in teaching listening skills.

First, one needs to get the students ready for listening. If someone pushes you very hard from behind without giving any warning, you will surely be surprised. It is the same with listening. We can probably imagine what would happen in this situation: A teacher goes into a classroom with a tape recorder under her arm, and without preparing the students in advance for what they are going to hear, she presses the button and asks them to listen to the tape. The students will, more often than not, get muddled up with the listening exercise because: 1) they do not know what the subject matter of the passage is, and 2) they are not familiar with some of the key words and expressions in the passage. Consequently, they may feel frustrated. In planning a listening class, therefore, the teacher should address these considerations.

In addition, the students also need background knowledge before they listen to the real life material. The teacher should tell the students where the event takes place, or at least give them some clues, explain key words and expressions; and finally, the teacher should demonstrate particular pronunciations and intonations so as to better prepare the students.

Based on the above observations, we may sequence a listening class in the following way:

1) Select the teaching point according to the students'
   level and needs so as to use class time efficiently.

2) Inform the students of the setting of the event so that

their attention can be focused.

   3) Have the students complete a set of tasks prepared in
advance. These tasks may include some wh-questions and
yes/no questions which serve as clues to help the students
connect one sentence with another. As a result, the stu-
dents can get the idea of the passage more easily.

   4) Elicit student feedback on the listening exercise and
their own performance.

From the students' own performance in class, their ability to
answer the questions and recall the event, the teacher can get
feedback on their understanding of the listening passage. More-
over, the teacher can turn the end of a listening comprehension
class into a speaking class, checking the students' listening
ability through the way they express their ideas verbally. The
listening comprehension class, however, is focused primarily on
listening skills.

C. Communication Activities

In this part of the paper, I will discuss effective commu-
nication activities which can serve as stimuli for students to
communicate through speaking. I will begin by listing three
preparatory steps that the teacher should take in order to introduce
communication activities.

First, the teacher should give clear instructions to the
students. This includes 1) telling the students the purpose of the
activity, whether it is to practice the listening points or to
practice speaking ability. 2) The subject matter of the activity,

whether it is to practice persuasion, ask for directions, or information, etc. 3) A clear statement of the procedures of the activity.

Second, the teacher should reduce the vocabulary barrier before doing the activity. For this, the teacher should determine whether the students will come across a lot of new words that may block their communication by asking the students questions or using her knowledge of the students' language proficiency.

Third, the teacher should demonstrate the activity, asking questions to make sure that the students understand it.

The activity should lead to spontaneous communication. During the activity, the teacher should look at the content of the students' communication, not at the form. Activities are used to develop communicative competence, not primarily to drill accurate grammatical sentences. So it is not necessary to correct pronunciation or grammar when students are communicating with each other; otherwise, it will destroy the spontaneity of the communication. Besides this, the teacher should try to relax students and protect their egos. Relaxed students learn easily and perform better. These activities can be found in such books as Communicative Language Teaching, Communication Starters and Index Card Games for ESL. Activities described in these books include roleplays, problem solving activities and simulations.

D. RolePlays

Besides communication activities, roleplays are another suggested means of developing communicative competence. Roleplays

are most closely related to real life situations in the society.
They reflect things that happen in daily life in society. There-
fore, roleplays can best prepare students for real-life situations.
Second, when students are engaged in roleplays, they feel free and
relaxed in the role, and, as a result, they are less nervous and
perform well. Thirdly, based on my own experience, I feel that
roleplays do help second language learners face the situations
in the target culture. I will, therefore, suggest some effective
and useful topics and situations for roleplays after suggesting
procedures for conducting a class with roleplays. These roleplay
situations are directly related to my experience in China and
deal with situations that Chinese students will face in U.S. The
three preparatory steps that I mentioned in communication acti-
vities are also suitable here. The following is a suggested
procedure for roleplays.

1) Select one comparatively advanced student in class and
prepare him to play the assigned role. At least one
day of advance preparation is suggested.

2) Do the demonstration in class with the student.

3) Ask two other students to do the demonstration again.
This time, the two students are not prepared beforehand.
They improvise the roles after watching the teacher and
the student demonstrate them. Their second performance
is a check on the students' understanding.

4) Divide the class into several groups according to the
number of students in class, thus giving each student a

chance to use the language in roleplays.

5) Get the whole class back together and choose another group to do it again to see whether students have mastered the main point.

I will now present some specific roleplays based on my own experience in the U.S. These roleplays are appropriate and relevant to be used in the language classroom in the ESP program in China.

Telephone Calls

Situation 1 (local call)

You have just arrived in New York City and now you are staying at the Chinese Consulate there. You have to make a local call to Columbia University, where you are going to study biology, to inform them of your arrival and ask how to get to the university. The secretary of the Biology Department receives the call.

Role Assignments

1 Telephone Caller

2 The secretary of the Biology Department

Useful Expressions

Caller: Hello, this is...

May I speak to/ Could I speak to...?

Secretary: I am sorry, he is not here. Can I take a message?

Just a minute please/ Hang on please.

Cultural Awareness

Local calls can be made by using your own phone or a public pay phone. Public phones usually can be found on street corners.

If you use your own phone, just dial the local number you want.
If you use a public pay phone, you are required to insert into
the slot a dime or a dime and a nickel depending upon the state
you are in.

Steps:

1. Pick up the receiver and listen to the dial tone.

2. Insert coins into the slot on the left top of the phone
   box according to the amount indicated.

3. Dial the local number only.

Situation 2 (long distance call)

You are making a long distance call from New York City to
your friend who is living in Brattleboro, Vermont.   The phone
number is (802) 257-7751.   Assume you use your own phone or a
public pay phone.

 Role Assignments

Mr. Li

His friend, Tom

Cultural Awareness

Long distance calls consist of two kinds: direct calls and
collect calls.   When making a long distance call, you may use a
public phone or your own phone.   When using a public phone, be
sure to bring enough coins because you can only use coins.

1. Direct Long Distance Call (Be sure to use your own phone)

Dial one plus the area code and the number.   You will
be put through directly to the number you want.

2. Collect Call

A collect call means that the cost of the call will be paid by the person whom you are calling. There is only one way in which a long distance collect call can be made. Dial the operator (O) plus the area code and the number. When the call goes through, the operator will intervene to ask if she can help you. Then you will tell her that you want to make a collect call; she will ask your name and the name of the person you are calling. If he accepts the call, you may speak to him.

3. A Long Distance Call by Using the Public Pay Phone

Insert a dime or a dime and a nickel depending on the state or city. This information is given on the upper left side of the phone box. Dial the operator and deposit the amount of money in coins requested by the operator. Dial the area code and the local number.

Library

Situation

You are studying literature in the English Department in American University in Washington D.C. Your teacher requires you to read several novels and has given you the book list. Now you are in the university libray looking for the books.

Role Assignments

1 Mrs. Hu

2 A librarian

Useful Expressions

Mrs. Hu: Excuse me, could you please tell me where I can find these books?

> I can not find this book in the stacks.
>
> Could you help me?

Librarian: Go to the novel section down there. The books are arranged alphabetically by the author's last name.

The book has been checked out.

Let me check the computer.

Come again in a couple of days.

Cultural Awareness

Always bring your ID card when you go to a library.

Find the book yourself, don't expect the librarian to find it for you.

If the book you want is out, you can call the library to reserve it for you. When the book is available, they will inform you of it.

Shopping in the Supermarket

Situation

This is your first time in America. Supermarkets here are quite different from those in your country. You first look around to see how people get the things they want. Then you look for yours, but you can't find them. At this point a woman passes by. You stop her and ask her for the location of the items you want. Finally, you get them and pay at the counter.

Role Assignments

Chang— a foreign student

Susan— a young woman who is shopping there

Sally— the cashier

Useful Expressions

Chang: Ma'am could you please tell me where I can get...?

Susan: It is in aisle 6 on the left side.

Sally: Ten dollars and forty-five cents.

Here is your change.

Have a nice day.

Cultural Awareness

1. In the supermarket, you are expected to pick out whatever you want and take it to the cashier.

2. If you have less than 8 or 10 items, you can go to the express line which is quicker.

3. Except for food, you have to pay tax for anything you buy. (The percentage of tax depends on the state, the specific tax laws differ from state to state.)

Opening a Bank Account

Kyoko, a Japanese girl in the U.S. to study at Harvard University, needs to open a savings and checking account. Later, she is given a form to fill out. A bank teller helps her.

Role Assignments

Kyoko — a Japanese girl

Mr. Kuritz — a bank teller

Useful Expressions

Kyoko: I would like to open a savings and a checking account.

Mr. Kuritz: Good afternoon. May I help you?

I need your name, address, telephone and social

security number.

What account would you like to open?

Okay. Let me have your check and I will deposit

it for you and bring you the receipt.

Cultural Awareness

1. Bring your passport when you open an account if you do
not have a social security number.

2. Note the differences between a savings account and a
checking account. And the differences between regular and deluxe
accounts.

Looking for an Apartment

Situation

After staying on campus for one week, you are not accustomed
to the food and are tired of the noisy environment. You decide to
move off campus. After you find a house for rent in the newspaper
advertisement, you call the landlord and go to see the apartment.

Role Assignments

Tenant

Landlord

Useful Expressions

Tenant: Does Mr... live here?

I am...

How much does it cost a month?

Does it include electricity? heat(utilities)?

Landlord: Let me show you the apartment.

I require a lease for at least six months.

I require a security deposit.

Cultural Awareness

1. Once you sign the lease, you can not break it because you are held responsible by the law.

2. Even if you understand the conditions under which you rent the apartment, you had better ask the landlord again to make sure that it is the same as it is stated in the advertisement, such as: including electricity, heat, etc.

3. Do not forget to ask a receipt for your deposit if you pay in cash.

At the Post Office

Situation

You are in the post office buying some stamps, at the same time you are asking the clerk at the counter to give you some information on how to mail books to your country by sea.

Role Assignments

Rosemary - a Polish girl

Mr. Berger - a postal clerk

Useful Expressions

Rosemary: Good morning Sir.

I'd like to get some information on how to mail books to Poland by sea.

Clerk: Only books?

How many books do you have?

How many pounds do the books weigh?

The price per pound is different depending on whether it is a small package or a big package.

Cultural Awareness

When the thing you mail is not insured, do not expect to get a receipt.

At the Party

Situation

Your friend introduces you to her friend at the party. You start a conversation.

Role Assignments

Yang — a Chinese student

Leslie— an American student

Yamasaki— a Japanese student

Useful Expressions

Leslie: Let me introduce my friend Yang to you.

This is ...

Yang: I am glad to meet you.   I have heard a lot about you.

What are you studying here?

How long are you going to stay here?

Hope to see you again.

Yamasaki: It is a pleasure to meet you.

Hope to see you again.

Cultural Awareness

When you are offered some food, take whatever you like .   Do not expect to be offered more than once.   (People won't insist that you have it.)

Complimenting the food is a courtesy.

Bring something to the host family e.g. flowers, some souvenirs from your country or some drinks. (B.Y.O.D.=Bring Your Own Drink)

Thank the host again the next time you see her/him.

Turning Down an Invitation

Situation

Your friend invites you to his house to spend Easter. But you must finish your psychology paper on behavior modification. Tell your friend about that and decline his invitation.

Role Assignments

Li - a Chinese student

Steven - a friend of Li's

Useful Expressions

Steven: I would like to invite you to my house during Easter Vacation.

That is alright.

Li: I really appreciate it.

I appreciate your kindness.

I have already made plans for the holiday.

Too bad I can't spend Easter with you.

Eating at a Restaurant

Situation

You have not seen your friend for a long time. When you are together again, both of you are very glad, so you go to a restaurant to have dinner together.

Role Assignments

Mei

David

Waitress

Useful Expressions

The waitress: Where do you prefer to sit? By the window?

May I help you?

May I bring you a drink?

David/Mei: By the window please.

We'd like to have some beer.

We haven't decided yet. Could you come in a

couple of minutes?

Cultural Awareness

1. The customer can ask for a particular place to sit.

2. It is normal to leave a tip for the wait/waitress.

Usually it is fifteen percent.

Eating at a McDonald's or Burger King

Situation

You and your friend are driving to Niagara Falls and Buffalo.
Both of you begin to feel hungry. So you decide to stop at a Mc-
Donald's or Burger King on your way to have some quick lunch.

Role Assignments

1 The waitress

2 Mr. Wang

3 Peter - Wang's friend

Cultural Awareness

McDonald's and Burger King are chain restaurants charaterized

by quick service, standard fare, low price and no tipping. They are examples of American fast food. At McDonald's or Burger King, you have to go to the counter to ask for the food you want. The menu is on the board over the counter. There is no tipping at McDonald's or Burger King.

Dinner at an American Home

Situation

An American family invites you to dinner on Thanksgiving. They pick you up and take you to their house. They are very nice and try to make you feel at home. They made a special dinner for you. You are very grateful to them. Unfortunately, you do not like the food.

Role Assignments

The guest

The host and hostess

Useful Expressions

Guest: The dinner /food is very good, but I am not very hungry.

The food is quite different from food in my country.

I am not yet used to American food.

I think it will take some time before I am used to foreign food.

Host/hostess: In America, people usually eat roast turkey on Thanksgiving. It is a typical American food.

Please eat more.

If you can't finish the meat, just leave
it there.

You are welcome.

These roleplay activities, which are designed on the basis of real life situations and my own experiences can be incorporated into our curriculum to facilitate and improve the students' communicative competence.

The fact that each student is assigned a role to play provides him/her with an opportunity to respond instantly to the real life situation. This will make it easier for the students to adapt themselves to a foreign environment in the future.

IV ASSESSING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

No matter what we do, we must always have a goal in mind and a way to assess whether we have accomplished it. It is the same with teaching. Assessment is inseparably related to both objectives and we must give it proper attention as the class proceeds through the course.

In assessing the students' learning, their communicative competence, the teacher needs to determine the students' progress, and in this way the effectiveness of her own teaching. Assessment can also be seen as an aspect of learning. It can give the learner another chance to grasp what was missed previously. To sum up, assessment can be 1) a way to judge the students' achievement, 2) another chance for students to make up what they have missed, and 3) a way for the teacher to evaluate and improve her teaching. In this sense, assessment is essential to language learning.

Another question is how to assess. In my opinion, evaluation of communicative competence needs to be primarily subjective rather than objective. The teacher should be aware of students' performance in daily classroom activities, because it is from their responses, the students' participation in the activities, that the teacher can assess their communicative competence. When examination time comes, some students may be very nervous and, as a result, they may not perform well, while some students may have a testing strategy and do better than usual. In everyday classroom activities, students performance will better reflect their real language ability.

Another way to assess the students' communicative competence is: 1) To create question-answer dialogues between the teacher and the student. By doing this, the teacher can assess the students' mastery of structures, understanding of spoken language, the ability to respond. 2) To ask the student to prepare a story or a news report or any orderly narrative of an event of 5-minute duration and presentation in the class. DO NOT INTERRUP HIM while he is presenting. During this time, the teacher should take notes. 3)To give the student a role in a roleplay, allow him 5 minutes to get familiar with the role. The roleplay can be performed by a student and a teacher or by two students. From the roleplay, the teacher can assess the students' linguistic, interactional and sociolinguistic competences. It is the best method of the three to assess the students' communicative competence.

To standardize the assessment, I would suggest ranking in these five areas, using this form:

	1+	-2+	-3+	-4+	15
Accent	Foreign	_____	_____	_____	native
Comprehension	Incomplete _____	_____	_____	complete
Fluency	Uneven	_____	_____	_____	even
Grammar	Inaccurate _____	_____	_____	accurate
Vocabulary	Inadequent _____	_____	_____	adequent

The scale rates from 1-5, 5 being the highest for each dimension. And overall score can be determined by averaging all scores.

The teacher should remember that in teaching communicative competence clearly transmission of the message is of primary

importance. At low level, the teacher should assess mainly the ability to perform the task, rather than formal accuracy.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, communicative competence has been conceived of as the goal of ESL/EFL teaching and learning. Communicative competence is concerned with the who, when, what, where and why of real-world language use. These questions can not be ignored when teachers are urged to accept communicative competence as the primary goal of language learning. It is a goal which, if pursued realistically and with a broader spectrum of learners in mind, can be the most intrinsically motivating language-learning objective that the teaching profession has ever conceived.

Everybody knows that mastery of a language is not measured by how much a learner has learned about the grammar of that language but rather by how well he communicates in the language. In order to be able to use the language communicatively, not only must a learner develop linguistic competence, which enables him to form correct sentences grammatically, but he must also learn the cultural and social rules by which the appropriate use of the language is determined. However, teaching communicative competence requires that the teacher be well equipped with socio-linguistic rules of the target language in addition to a good mastery of the grammar of the language.

It is still arguable as to how communicative competence should be defined and taught. But as teachers become more and more concerned with the teaching of communicative competence, the definition and techniques will be perfected in the years to come. It

is hoped that the communication activities suggested in this paper will be of some help to teachers of English in China when they consider incorporating communicative competence into their curriculum. It is evident that communicative competence is and will be a primary concern of all ESL/EFL teachers. It is a goal eminently worthy of further discussion and research.

Notes

[1] Anne Cavell Newton, "Current Trends in Language Teaching." in A TEFL ANTHOLOGY: Selected Articles from the English Teaching Forum 1973-78, ed. Donald L. Bouchard and Louis J. Spaventa (Washington D.C.,1980), PP. 21.

[2] William Littlewood, Communicative Language Teaching (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), P. 6.

[3] Kenneth Chastain, Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice (New York: Rand MaNally College Publishing Company, 1976), PP. 72.

[4] Kenneth Chastain, OP.CIT.PP.70.

[5] D.A. Wilkins, Notional Syllabuses (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), PP. 16.

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