

# THE ACQUISITION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS ONE IMPORTANT ASPECT OF CULTURE: HOW SHOULD COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE BE BUILT?

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## ABSTRACT

As the arts and the manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, culture, which is realized in the way members of a community communicate through language and behavior, as the reflection of their minds, is an integral aspect of life to look into. One element of this is communicative competence. In order for people to succeed in their sharing anything being communicated, besides being able to produce the language in spoken or in written form accurately, they must also know which word and sentence pattern to use as well as its appropriate prosodic features. This implies that in actual communication both linguistic competence and communicative competence are equally needed and they for a successful acquisition both aspects of communication should be taught simultaneously, with theory and examples. As the acquisition of communicative competence is a long process – similar to learning language, both of these crucial competences should be taught as the child start learning the language. This method of communicative competence is usually applied in Japan – a nation that puts losing face as a loss of existence. Therefore, as a reflective value which can be gained by Indonesia from the practice of such things in that advanced country is that children in Indonesia should also be exposed to explanations and examples of communicative competence along with linguistic competence.

*Key Words: communicative competence, acquisition, politeness, role and status*

## INTRODUCTION

To study a language, for example, English language, every learner has to study the culture of English people because language and culture are inseparable. Language functions as a means of communication; meanwhile, culture helps people know how to communicate in the language being used. In communication, people as social beings and community members who cannot live alone, have to take and give life necessities by using a language.

However, in order for them to succeed in their sharing anything being communicated, besides being able to produce the language in spoken or in written way accurately, they must also know what word and sentence pattern to use as well as its appropriate prosodic features. In other words, in communication or interaction, it is not enough just to know what to say in a language, but also to consider an appropriate way to convey what the speaker or writer means to say. The content of a communication can be any aspect of life in a shared community such as ways of doing things, ways of expressing oneself, ways of looking at things, what things they should value and what things they should avoid or despise, what is expected from other people and what other people expect from him or herself.

Such an explanation implies that culture is behavior. Likewise, to learn culture may also mean to learn to behave. This is to say that communicative competence includes

linguistic competence and behavioral competence. Thus, it is not exaggerating to say that these two main requirements of communication skills, being so broad and extensive, covering both linguistic aspects and cultural aspects, make communication competence learning take a long-time. From very young age to old age learning does not end. To help make us aware of this matter it is important to uncover how communicative competence is built in a society, ethnic or nation.

This article talks about "The Acquisition of Communicative Competence of some Japanese, American and Samoan Children" written by Bonvillain (2003) and Its Reflection for Indonesian People To make the aim come into realization I will go through three main stages. Firstly, I will present some theoretical information about communicative competence. Secondly, I will forward the main points of the aspects written by Bonvillain. Thirdly, I will give my viewpoints about the building of communicative competence as a reflection for the people of Indonesia, particularly the ethnic group of Simalungunese.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Some Theoretical Information about Communicative Competence

Communicative competence means the ability to function according to cultural models for communicative behavior (Bonvillain, 2003:272). Meanwhile, models of language that children develop based on its social functions as they mature and have social experiences, according to Halliday (1973: 2) are:

- Instrumental : Getting things done, satisfying needs
- Regulatory : Controlling others, giving instructions
- Interactional : Establishing and maintaining social interactions, defining and consolidating groups
- Personal : Expressing one's individuality, emotions and thoughts
- Heuristic : Exploring one's environment, learning about the world, questioning others, and gaining information
- Imaginative : Creating and expressing one's fantasies about oneself. Others and the world
- Representational : Communicating about ideas, conveying messages.

From both ideas mentioned above it can be asserted that one's ability to communicate is supported by at least two types of knowledge namely language knowledge and cultural knowledge. With only one of these two types of knowledge no one can be successful in communication although we may accept an argument that one can be familiar with a certain culture but not familiar with the language of it. What is certain is that culture teaches us how to behave in communication, linguistically and behaviorally. Knowing how to behave and familiarity with the language concerned according to the culture of communication participants can maintain good oral or written communication. Therefore, it is after having these two kinds of skills someone can be said to have had good communicative competence. Some of behavioral skills are politeness, how to express one's feelings, how to dispute and awareness of status and role.

### 2. The Main Aspects of Discussion Presented by Bonvillain with Reference to Japanese Children's Communicative Competence Acquisition

In the article, Bonvillain discusses some important aspects of the Japanese children's behavior and communicative competence about 1) Acquiring Communicative styles, consisting of a. Learning Politeness, b. learning to Express One's Feelings, and c. Learning to Dispute; 2)

Learning Status and Role consisting of a. Status and Role in American English, b. Status in Samoa, and c. Relationships in Hungarian and 3) Learning to Converse consisting of a. Knowledge of Structure, b. Cohesion in Conversation, c. Interactional in Cooperation, and d. Narratives.

## **2.1 How children's behavior as well as their communicative competence are built in Japanese communities.**

As behaviors are consistent with Japanese that stress harmony and agreement in social relations, children are equipped with such qualities by theory and practice by the older people around particularly by their mother. Globally known, as a cultured nation Japan maintains a culture of shame. Loosing face is a loss of existence in that country of sun.

According to Bonvillain, parents are absolutely responsible to educate their children about behaving. In educating their children to behave in any communication encounter, they explain and show examples. Children are consciously taught about how to live and behave as a member of society. How to say what to whom and under what circumstances seems to be directly exposed to the children by the older ones in the family, especially by the mother. Through the two dialogues below, the writer shows how children are taught to behave and avoid direct refusals or rejections. Unlike the norm of refusal to Batakese communities which can accept a norm of direct refusal, to the Japanese, it is impolite to make a direct refusal. A direct refusal may induce a loss of harmony and agreement in social relations.

The following are three dialogues (translated into English) indicating how to behave with others: how to comply with other people so as to maintain harmony and agreement one of which is through politeness.

### **2.1.1 Learning Politeness**

In learning politeness, here are the things they go through:

Dialogue 1: (An Interaction between a Japanese mother and her child (translated into English))

Adult : What color is this?

Child : No!

Mother: What are you saying? You should say "Green."

Child : Green.

Dialogue 2: (Child, age 2; 1 is pretending to eat food from a toy dish)

Adult: Are you eating something? What is in there?

Child : [No response]

Mother: I wonder what could be in there. Older sister is asking "What is in there?"

Child : Pudding.

Dialogue 3: (Child, 2;3)

Adult: Show me your fire engine.

Child : [No response]

Mother: She said, "Fire engine".

Adult : Fire engine.

Mother: Well, quickly, Patricia is saying, "Show me it." You must hurry. You must hurry. Oh! Oh! (Bonvillain, 2003: 272, 274 and 275).

It is obvious that through these dialogues, the mother is teaching the child to interpret others. Here, children are taught to respond positively regardless of their personal inclinations. Japanese culture highly values the expression of accommodation and agreement and the avoidance of over conflict.

Functions of language, which are of seven basic themes (Halliday, 1973), are universal but they receive different emphases among different peoples. In Japan it is empathy that is the priority (Clancy 1986:214) in Bonvillain, N (2003:274). Indirect expression is favored over explicit statements of opinions and wants. Therefore, they must learn to interpret speakers' underlying intentions and opinions from inexplicit surface statement. To help children achieve this valuable point, Javanese caregivers teach communicative skills to children by examples and direct admonition (criticism or warning about behavior). Children are taught to be sensitive to interlocutors' wishes and needs as expressed in questions and directives. (See dialogue 1)

### **2.1.2 Learning to Express One's Feelings**

To explain this sub-title, Bonvillain compares between two cultures: that of Japanese and of Samoan. When in Japanese they should guard their feelings and defer to others, in Samoan is the reverse. Children are even encouraged to display both their positive and negative feelings or emotions. Sentiments, reactions and attitudes are openly talked in Samoan culture. It was reported that through the teaching by examples and children begin to use such affect markers typically by 20 months of age. So, before the age of 4 they already acquire most of the positive and negative affect markers.

### **2.1.3. Learning to Dispute**

To get explanation about this sub-type of communicative competence, Bonvillain presented data obtained from the study of pre-adolescents in a working class African – American neighborhood of Philadelphia by Marjorie and Charles Goodwin (1987). It was found that these children did not avoid conflict by deferring to others or mitigating criticisms but instead frequently engaged in open verbal communication. The children clearly signaled opposition, often at the beginning of their turn, resulting inexplicit, unambiguous rejections or refusals.

Speakers not only do not mitigate (make less harmful) their disagreements with the previous talk, but they emphasize opposition both by repeating or substituting for the opposed word and by employing strong stress and changes in the pitch.

### **2.1.4 Learning Status and Role**

The status and role in social relations and interactions are started at home. Children should be made familiar with the different categories of people based on age, gender and status. To acquire this awareness as onlookers and participants they are to observe the varied interactions among family the members. Children have restricted rights and limited ability to control others. For example, in a speaking turn a child may not know when he/she can interrupt.

### **2.1.5 Status and Role in American English**

In American family settings as found by Susan Ervin-Tripp (1984) quoted in Bonvillain (2003:279), children of ages 2 and 4 still failed to get the attention of someone who was already engaged in conversation. And children of ages 4 to 7 fared somewhat better to do so. The following is information about the expressions relating to such a conversation:

Who interrupt more often?

Parents interrupted more often than children;  
Father more often interrupts the children than mother does.  
Both parents interrupt daughters more often than sons.  
Children themselves replicate this gender– differentiated pattern quite early.  
Among adults women tend to become silent when interrupted by men.

Fathers socialize sons into imperative behavior not only by using direct imperatives but also by adding threats or insults. Commands such as “Don’t go in there again or I ‘ll break your head and references such as “wise guy” and “nutcake” are addressed to sons. Thus, children themselves acquire gender-sensitive patterns for expressing directives.

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### **2.1.6 Status in Samoan**

Children in all cultures are sensitive to status of individuals in their households and their society and need to learn to recognize people’s rights. In Samoan culture, within households, people’s status is based on age; therefore, children are of lower rank than adults; older children have higher status than younger ones. For example, the word ‘come’ (*sau*) which is considered higher in status than give or bring (*aumai*) is supposed to be used by the older ones to the younger ones. The former has the authority to control the latter. Samoan children learn the culturally prescribed social meanings of *sau* and *aumai* at a very early age.

### **2.1.7 Learning to Converse**

#### **2.1.7.1 Knowledge of Structure**

One’s ability, linguist to perform successfully in social interaction or conversation depends on cognitive, linguistic and social maturation. Conversation is based on alternation of turns. These three aspects are progressing toward full social engagement.

- Audible Sound filler: mm
- Gambit : something you say to someone in order to start a conversation with him/her. E.g. “Been sick?”
- It is not until 3 years old that children learn to take speaker turns.

#### **2.1.7.2 Cohesion in Conversation**

Cohesion is achieved through content and linguistic form. In English, cohesion is achieved through various means, including use of pronouns and demonstratives (this, that) and processes of substitution, comparison, conjunction and clausal dependency. Pronouns and demonstratives relate or refer to previously mentioned entities. Comparatives (same, other, more) have similar functions. These devices also serve to eliminate redundancies that could potentially overwhelm verbal output.

Cohesion is also achieved through substitutions of words, such as use of synonyms or paraphrases that minimize the appearance of repetitiveness but link current to prior talk. They are an aspect of language’s economy, allowing speakers to delete long sequences and replace them with single words. (p.289). Garvey’s research indicated that children acquire some cohesive devices by the age of 2.6 to 3 years (1984:86) as cited in Bonvillain (2003: 289). Another cohesive devices that reduces output is ellipsis which involves omission of textual material that is assumed to be shared by co-participants.

3. According to Garvey (1984) children begin to use ellipsis systematically by the age of 3.

### 2.1.7.3 Interactional Cooperation

To build the ability of children in terms of interactional cooperation which must exist in a conversation, they are taught about markers of politeness such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, forms of address, ritualized greetings and partings, and apologies.

In children’s encounters interactions often involve requests especially a request for permission, including entreaties ( humble and serious requests) for use of toys and play areas or admission play to play groups as indicated in the following conversation:

Tom: Can I play here?

Judy: Yeah, you can.

Tom: (Sits down by Judy and points to a plate). Can I have some muffins?

Judy: Don’t touch them, ‘cause they’re very hot.

Tom: I’m gonna put a little sugar in your muffins, *all right?*

Judy: (Judy watches as Tom pretends to sprinkle sugar on the imaginary muffins.)

(Bonvillain, 2003: 290-291)

### 2.1.7.4 Narratives

Another aspect of communicative competence which is taught to children is about narrating ability, namely to report one’s experiences. This skill is believed to develop gradually in children. A child’s limited experiences naturally restrict the kinds of events he or she can report. According to Labov and Waletzky (1967) in Bonvillain (2003:293) personal narratives are constructed with six different components:

1. Abstract: Summarizes the main point or result of the story

2. Orientation: Identifies time, place, characters

3. Complicating action: Recounts events in chronological sequence

4. Evaluation: Transmits attitudes or emotions of speakers and/or other characters

5. Result or resolution: Provides points of story

6. Coda: Terminates story, so that listeners do not ask “And then what happened?”

Note: Narratives must contain Complicating action and Resolution, but the other components are optional.

How to get used to learning how to express attitudes ambiguously so as to avoid potential conflict?

## 2.3 Reflective View for Indonesian People Regardless of Ethnic Groups

Communicative competence is the knowledge of cultural rules for appropriate use of language in social interaction. To achieve this competence children are equipped with the ability to utilize these rules in situated speech events, recognizing the intentions of speakers and the needs and rights of listeners. This communicative competence is acquired by children through example, prompting, and correction, and they are encouraged to adopt communicative behaviors consistent with prevailing values about the propriety of expressing one’s opinions, directing another’s actions, or deferring to co-participants. Both linguistic and sociolinguistic skills must be learned in order to have good communicative competence.

What has been shown by the writer of *The Acquisition of Communicative Competence* is crucial for Indonesian people to realize and apply. The teaching of communicative competence should be taught and exemplified by the adults. Since children upon birth spend most of the time at home, the family should be absolutely responsible for building their communicative competence which teaches good behaviors in their interaction with people of

younger, the same and older age. Also, role and status awareness should be taught and exemplified to them. This act of building communicative competence becomes so crucial for Indonesian people because lately, especially since the era of reformation in 1988, this nation has been facing a serious problem with ethics and morality. A show of misconduct and misbehaviors has been a common view. Nice words are sounded in many occasions by high officials and functionaries but all just remain words – not actions. We should learn from these Japanese caregivers who teach communicative skills to children by example and direct admonition (warning about behavior). Children's behavior is commented upon and corrected in order to instill virtues of politeness and attentiveness toward others.

As far as I am concerned, as a Simalungunese person who was born and grew in a remote village, the teaching of this communicative competence awareness has undergone a dramatic shift. In the village how to speak to whom was so strictly maintained. Although the teaching of it was not formally done, parents always practiced this proper act of communication as they were communicating among them in the hope that their children would imitate. And when the children misbehaved or talked in a wrong way, they would reprimand them. This is what I have and keep until today. Whereas, in the city, I notice that such things feel like being abandoned gradually. This surely will lead to a serious misconduct and will contaminate the culture itself. Therefore, I should say that communicative competence is worth teaching. As an essential aspect of culture it must be restored and maintained so as to build cultured people. This, I believe, will restore the many recurring problems arising in Indonesia as can be seen frequently these days.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

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### **2. Suggestion**

It has been concluded that in actual communication both linguistic competence and communicative competence are equally needed. Or it is true to say that the two of them are just like two sides of a coin. By the time language is in use, the communicative aspects must also be present. Since both aspects of communication are so crucial and need much time to learn, it is suggested that both aspects be simultaneously and consciously taught in Indonesia as what is practiced to the children in Japan, America and Samoa. This suggestion is based on consideration that communicative competence is intended to educate people how to behave properly in an act of speech event, particularly oral interactions. Lastly, it is important to conduct research on the aspects involved in oral interactions as shown in the article in Indonesian context of oral interactions.

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