

## ON TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ESL

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### ABSTRACT

The competence level of most learners of English as a second language has continued to decline in spite of the adoption of the Communicative Competence model in the teaching of English to those learners in Nigeria and other parts of the world. This paper reviews the inadequacies of the Grammatical Competence and the Communicative Competence models which render them inadequate for the teaching of English as a second language in non-EMT situations. It argues that grammatical competence is as desirable a goal of English language learning as communicative ability and recommends Communicative Grammar as a compromise that combines the virtues of the two earlier models while avoiding their shortcomings.

### 1. Introduction

The Grammatical Competence model (GCM) was, for many decades, ending at about 1980, the dominant model for the teaching of English as a second language to learners in most parts of the world. It has, however, been rejected in favour of the Communicative Competence model (CCM) in the teaching of that language to learners in Nigeria and many other non-native environments.

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It has, however, become obvious from recent research as well as from the results of public and internal examinations in schools in Nigeria, as elsewhere, that the CCM is as ineffective in developing in the learners, an acceptable degree of communicative ability in the functional use of English, as the GCM which it supplanted. The present paper reviews the failure of each of the two competence models and argues for Communicative Grammar as a compromise model that combines the virtues of the previous ones while avoiding their pitfalls. The paper outlines the nature of Communicative Grammar and illustrates its application with reference to the teaching of the English Present Tense as an expression of habitual actions in the ESL classroom.

## **2. The Grammatical Competence Model (GCM)**

The Grammatical Competence model (GCM) has, as its immediate goal, the learners' mastery of the syntactic structure of English, otherwise referred to as Grammar. Within that model, the explanation of the grammatical rules governing each particular syntactic structure is often followed with appropriate exponents of that structure in what Adetugbo (1989) refers to as "learning about the language rather than learning the language". In plain language, the Grammatical Competence model focused attention exclusively on the systematic presentation of the structural and formal properties of the language in the form of its lexis, morphology, syntax and phonology. For example, in that model, learners were given a few English sentences such as *I laughed yesterday* and *Peter ran yesterday* as structural exponents of the Simple Past Tense in English. A brief explanation of the grammatical rule(s) governing the structure followed. Learners were made to repeat these exponents a few times after the teacher, in an apparent bid to enable them to internalize the structure. They were then, after a few more illustrative examples, required to construct their own sentences of the same structural pattern, in turns, while the teacher signaled his approval or disapproval of each sentence, as the case might be. The students' ability to construct sentences of that pattern was taken as adequate

evidence of their mastery of the logic underlying that structural pattern and of their ability to use it in actual communication in real life.

The philosophy underlying that model is that language is logical, and can, therefore, be more easily learned through rules that the foreign learner can thereafter employ to construct grammatically well-formed sentences for verbal interaction in real life communicative situations. The idea is that the second language learner of English can, through school instruction, acquire grammatical competence in the target language, by internalizing the rules of its grammar in the same manner as the native speaker does in the environment of the language.

That model, which was the bedrock of English language teaching till about 1980, has been severely criticized and discarded because of its inadequacies that are regularly enumerated by linguists and practising teachers alike. Its most obvious shortcoming is its failure to produce non-native users of English that are capable of using the language appropriately in real-life settings. In other words, the products of that teaching model failed to achieve communicative competence. They learned how to construct grammatically well-formed sentences but were deficient when it came to using the language for actual communicative purposes. Widdowson (1972:16) explains the problem with that teaching model in the following words:

The difficulty is that the ability to compose sentences is not the only ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of acts of an essentially social nature. ... Knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly is only part of what we mean by knowing a language, and it has very little value on its own; it has to be supplemented by a knowledge of what sentences count as in their normal use as a means of communicating.

Widdowson (1978) expresses his genuine concern about the same phenomenon in other words as follows:

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When we acquire a language, we do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose. We are not just walking grammars.

Four years earlier, Stevenson (1974) had lamented the inability of many Nigerian university undergraduates and even junior academic staff who write “impeccable English” to “fluently express themselves orally” in the language. Akere (1979:23), noting with unhidden indignation, the inadequacy of the GCM also expresses the general disillusionment with that pedagogical strategy in the following words:

It is being argued that a purely grammatical approach to English language description and/or teaching can only describe or teach the formal resources to be put at the disposal of a language learner for the performance of communicative acts, and that this approach has hitherto not been able to incorporate the description or the teaching of how these resources are actually used to produce appropriate utterances in context.

The fears expressed by these scholars were confirmed, not only by casual observation, but also in actual research on the performance of the consumers of this teaching strategy in public examinations. To cite one example, Adejare (1987), in a comparative analysis of candidates’ performance in the grammar (lexis and structure) and the written discourse (continuous writing) aspects of the West African School Certificate Examination in English, found out that the candidates’ apparently good knowledge of English grammar was not matched by a correspondingly good communicative use of the language.

Expressing his concern about the poor results of the GCM on the international scene, Corder (1973:48) puts the blame squarely on the syllabus designers in the following words;

Syllabuses for language teaching operations have

tended to be expressed in terms of a list of linguistic forms to be learned. Perhaps too little attention has been directed to what these forms are to be used for. One hears frequent complaints from teachers that learners seem to be able to cope with the language while in the classroom but fail to make use of it satisfactorily outside.

This, as that writer further explains, “suggests that the learners have acquired speech functions appropriate to the classroom, or to the role of language learner but no other.” A similar observation by Ubahakwe (1974) on the tendency, amongst Nigerian learners to use the grammar-governed classroom English outside school, led him to describe the English of those students as “bookish English”.

The general consensus was that the GCM was not a good enough model for teaching English to non-native learners of the language. The need was felt for a new language teaching model that would, to use Akere’s words, “incorporate the description or the teaching of how the resources” of English “are actually used to produce appropriate utterances in context”. That new model was the Communicative Competence model. With the adoption of that new model, the textbooks abandoned the analytic, building-block method of the GCM and introductory textbooks on English began with the *Good morning;* ‘*what is your name?*’ and ‘*My name is John*’ stuff right in the first lessons on English. The era of the Sentence Method, a less attractive but equally less notorious euphemism for the Communicative Competence model had dawned on us. The *Peter and Jane* series of Primary English books took over in Nigeria, teaching the learners to use English rather than teaching them its grammar.

### **3. The Communicative Competence Model**

The distinguishing feature of the Communicative Competence model, initially, was its insistence on teaching the learner, not the linguistic structures of language, but its actual use in various contexts, otherwise known as registers, a development that led to

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the production of 'situational syllabuses'. An adequate description of the nature of and the thinking underlying the Communicative Competence model is offered by Aremo (1994:34) in the following words:

It was felt that since language is always used in social contexts, it cannot be taught out of such contexts if the learner is to acquire communicative competence in it. Hence, the approach initially consisted in specifying as much as possible the social situations in which the learner would use English, and, then, systematically teaching him those register features - particularly the grammatical structures and lexical items - that he was likely to meet and need most frequently in such situations. Thus, for instance, the variety of English required for a particular social situation might contain, apart from particular lexical items, a predominance of complex rather than simple sentences, passive instead of active sentences, or present as distinct from past verb forms. It was such distinctive structural and lexical features that were accorded emphasis in the language matter to be taught to the learner. Accordingly, the syllabus was not structural (i.e., consisting essentially of linguistic structures to which the learner would be methodically exposed) as used to be the case. Rather, it was situational, its content being typically classified in terms of the relevant situations – “at the post office,” “at the theatre,” “at school,” etc.

As also observed by Aremo (1994), the communicative approach to language teaching has, “in various versions, become the vogue in the teaching of English at all levels of education” so much so that Harmer (1982:164) has had to comment upon its stupefying influence in the following words:

Everything is “communicative” these days. Published courses almost exclusively advertise themselves as being the latest in “communicative methodology” and as having “communication” as their main aim.

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Convention papers deal with the “communicative use” of language, and the teaching of English as communication has changed from the title of an important article in an earlier issue of ELT journal (Widdowson 1972) into a received truth of the English language teaching profession. No self-respecting teacher, materials designer, or applied linguist would think of teaching English as anything else.

Before taking a look at some of the problems inherent in the implementation of the CCM, it is necessary to consider the nature and scope of communicative competence, which it purports to teach to the learners. Some of its published descriptions are cited here to underscore the magnitude of the task that the advocates of its teaching set for themselves. According to White (1974), communicative competence relates, amongst other things, to “a good knowledge of the various registers of a language.” For Sanders (1977:281), it includes authentic communication and the native speakers’ intuition about his language, “spontaneous meaningful communication” and the “ability to handle everyday situations, to react to them with annoyance, surprise or pleasure, as the native speaker does.” These, as Sanders further explains, demand “speed and spontaneity, a sensitivity to register and a command of the expressive devices of the syntax and lexis of the language as well as of its intonation, exclamatives and hesitation phenomena, including any slang which occurs with high frequency in the language.”

Considering the diversity and the comprehensive nature of the linguistic skills enumerated as aspects of communicative competence above, it is obvious that no learner of English as a second language in a non-English as a mother tongue (non-EMT) situation can ever hope to acquire it through school instruction, if at all. As observed by Okanlawon (1997), the difference between the learning of English as a second language in a host environment and its learning as a second language in a non-host environment is so great that theories of language learning which work in situations of the former type often do not work in the

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latter. That observation is no less true of learning and teaching strategies.

Even in English-as-a-mother-tongue (EMT) situations, such as England and America, the school does not solely or even largely perform that function, for communicative competence is not taught but is acquired like all the other aspects of culture. So, it is beyond the school. Copi (1982:138) makes the following observation on the issue:

Language is a very complicated instrument. People learn to use it the same way that they learn to use other tools, such as automobiles or kitchen equipment. Youngsters who do much riding with their parents seldom need to be given formal instruction in driving the family car; they acquire their knowledge by observing and imitating their parents. Those who spend much time in the kitchen learn the same way to use the kitchen appliances. It is the same way with language; certainly in childhood and for many of us throughout our lives we learn the proper use of language, by observing and imitating the linguistic behaviour of the people we meet and the books we read.

A similar view on the acquisition (not teaching nor learning) of communicative competence is expressed by Hymes (1972:279) in the following words:

Within the developmental matrix in which knowledge of the sentences of a language is acquired, children also acquire knowledge of a set of ways in which sentences are used. From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with socio-cultural features, they develop a general theory of speaking appropriate in their community, which they employ like other forms of tacit cultural knowledge.

Considering the nature and acquisition of communicative competence in English-as-a-mother tongue (EMT) environments as described in the two passages above, it is not surprising that



the attempt to teach it in the school in non-EMT situations, such as Nigeria, has proved a big disaster as the products have acquired neither communicative competence nor grammatical competence. It is no wonder, therefore, that many teachers continue to lament the alarming deterioration in the students' level of grammatical competence as observed in the written English of students at all levels of the educational system. Even those who manage to speak English fairly fluently write it without the slightest regard to its grammar or punctuation. A vivid description of the Nigerian situation today is provided by Professor Obemeata in a recent write-up on the teaching of English in Nigerian schools (Obemeata 2002:2) in the following words:

Probably the most serious of the problems of the education system of Nigeria is low proficiency in the English language. Even though many Nigerians started to speak English from childhood, they are not proficient in the English language. Various investigations have shown that at the end of Primary education in Nigeria, primary school leavers are hardly able to speak, read and write English. At the secondary school level, low proficiency in English is also noticeable. An examination of results of secondary school leavers over a period of fifteen years revealed that only between 6% and 9% of the candidates in the Senior School Certificate Examination passed English Language at Credit level. Secondary school leavers are also poor in oral expression in English. At the tertiary level, university graduates, according to research findings, on the whole, acquire only poor communication skills. A World Bank study revealed that Nigerian university graduates who were employed in industry and administration could not write satisfactory memoranda because of their low proficiency in English.

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While Obemeata believes that the poor performance of Nigerian learners in English is a direct result of poor teaching occasioned by “unqualified and incompetent teachers,” Adejuwon (2002) argues that it arises from the use of English, both as a subject and as a language of instruction for learners, too early in the education system. Any keen observer of the Nigerian education system would agree that the problem is traceable both to poor teaching and the exposure of learners to English using the Communicative Competence model from their first day in school, to the detriment of their mother tongue.

It is clear from the evidence cited by these authors, however, that the Communicative Competence model, with its emphasis on the learners’ oral communicative ability in English, has produced and continues to produce candidates who have neither grammatical nor communicative competence in the language; a much more depressing situation than that of the sixties and seventies when candidates could, at least, be accused of speaking 'bookish' English that boasts of correct grammar, if of nothing else. The situation is so bad nowadays that a great majority of university students, including the postgraduate ones, can no longer write or speak grammatically accurate English as was the case in the seventies and early eighties. The experiment with the Communicative Competence model has, therefore, proved an abysmal failure. The failure is probably more damaging in the primary school where many pupils now recite whole English textbooks from memory by merely looking at the pictures without being able to identify a single word in the text. The greatest irony of the CCM is the fact that the neglect of grammar, which was to have been its greatest asset, appears to have proved its greatest weakness. It has now been realized that it is useless to talk about learners' acquisition of communicative competence in English unless they already have a good grounding in the grammar of the language.

Everybody is complaining about falling standards, wondering about the way out of the present predicament. One school of thought believes that a reversion to the original position, concentrating on the teaching of grammatical competence, is the

only way out. To the members of this school of thought, the school should concentrate on the teaching of grammar while allowing matters of proficiency and communicative competence to take care of themselves. As Aremo (1994:44) concludes:

The main thrust of the paper has been that the way to the effective teaching of communicative competence in English to learners in second language situations is to ensure that grammatical competence in the language is effectively taught to them at the school level - where the foundation ought to be firmly laid.

To members of another school of thought, however, what is required is a teaching model that will be devoid of the shortcomings of the two earlier models while retaining the positive inputs of each of them. A Communicative Grammar model, whose major features are outlined in the next section of this paper, is recommended as the desired remedy.

#### **4. The Communicative Grammar model**

The Communicative Grammar model (CGM), being here recommended, unlike the Communicative Competence model, does not only recognize the importance of grammatical competence but, in fact, holds that a firm grasp of grammatical structures is an essential aspect of the knowledge of English to be acquired by any successful foreign learner of the language. Here, it is in full agreement with the proponents of the grammatical competence model that grammatical competence is indeed a prerequisite for communicative competence. Deprived of the exposure to authentic natural data, which the native-speaker child or the L2 learner in an EMT situation enjoys, as rightly observed by Okanlawon (1997), the learner of ESL in Nigeria and other non-EMT situations must formally learn the grammatical structure of the language so that he can construct grammatically acceptable sentences, including those that he has not encountered before. Classroom grammar is therefore the ESL substitute for the native speakers' gradual exposure to and internalization of the rules of English.

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That view coincides with the one expressed by Bright and McGregor (1970:236) on the value of grammar in the following memorable words:

Nobody disputes that the foreign student must learn the grammar of English in the sense that the sentences which he produces must conform to English patterns in the accepted model. We cannot allow him to write "She give him a change but when he counted the money they were not enough."

In an apparent reference to the craze for communicative competence at the expense of grammatical competence, the authors assert further as follows:

We cannot be content with communication, however clear the plain sense, if it carries also such depressing messages to the reader about the writer's level of literacy. The learner has got to master the conventional use of the grammatical signals of the language.

That a firm grasp of grammar is the very foundation upon which the learner's linguistic edifice is built is also acknowledged by many objective proponents of the Communicative Competence model. Leech and Svartvik (1975:11), for example, concede that fact in the preface to their book in the following words:

The type of student we have in mind when writing this book is fairly advanced, for example, a first year student at a University or Training College. Usually, he already has grounding in the grammar of the language after several years of school English. Yet his proficiency in actually using the language may be disappointing. This, we believe, may be partly attributed to grammar fatigue.

Those authors believe, therefore, that the student may benefit from "looking at grammar from another angle, where grammatical structures are systematically related to meaning,

uses and situations.” Though the available evidence from the written or spoken English texts of the Nigerian students, at any level, does not justify Leech and Svartvik’s grammar-fatigue hypothesis, one cannot but agree with them that grammatical competence is indispensable. For, as observed by Aremo (1994) the problem of the ESL school leaver brought up on the Grammatical Competence model, even in the best of times, was probably that of inadequate knowledge of the grammar of English.

The major problem with the CCM then, it would appear, was its pretence to do away with grammar altogether in an attempt to make native speakers of people who, for all practical purposes, are learners of English as a second language in a non-EMT situation such as Nigeria.

If the communicative ability of ESL learners is neglected in the Grammatical Competence model while their grammatical competence is neglected in the Communicative Competence model, it is logically sound to argue for the adoption of a teaching model that avoids those shortcomings. For such a model to be appropriate and adequate for teaching the non-native learners of English in non-EMT situations, it should combine, as part of its goal, the ability of its products, both to construct grammatically accurate sentences and to use them to communicate appropriately and spontaneously in real life communicative settings. This is what Communicative Grammar strives to achieve.

The CGM differs from the Communicative Competence model, which is concerned mainly with the teaching of a variety of registers, and the types of linguistic structures commonly employed in them. In the Communicative Grammar model, it is accepted that the teaching of grammar is the basic function of the English lesson in the ESL classroom. In this model, however, some knowledge of the potential uses of each of the grammatical structures taught to the learner is integrated into the grammar lesson. It is at this point that one must disagree with Aremo (1994) when he opines that it “would be hard to imagine how, within the time normally available in the schools, the teacher would be able to give the foreign learner the necessary grounding in

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grammatical competence and yet, have time enough for emphasizing the communicative use of the language in social contexts.”

Indeed, the explanation of the potential uses in social contexts, of each of the structures taught, should form an important integral part of the classroom lesson since it is only by so doing that the English language lesson can cease to be a lesson in learning “about the English language” as observed by Akere (1979). One is aware of the fact that not even grammar, which is much more finite than its communicative use, can be exhaustively taught in a language program in the ESL classroom. It is however important to let the learners know the value of any structure being taught to them as a means of social communication. This, it is hoped, is a practicable way in which the missing link between grammatical knowledge and communicative ability can be re-established. After all, the learning of grammar without any idea of its potential use is only a little better than the random learning of linguistic structures that are peculiar to particular communicative settings as is done in the Communicative Competence model. In order to explain how Communicative Grammar works, an illustration of how the teaching of a specific grammatical structure can be linked to its communicative value is given in the following section.

### **5. Illustration**

The sentence ‘*John runs*’ is an exponent of the Simple Present tense in English and most textbooks would very gleefully use it as such without informing the learner as to the kind of communicative situations in which it could occur. But, in the passage from Turner (1973:10) reproduced below, an elaborate communicative setting for its occurrence is established such that it comes alive as a meaningful utterance token rather just a sentence token or a mere grammatical structure:

Consider for example, two men standing together by the bar in the clubhouse of a golf club. It is an overcast day in September. There are bottles on the shelves behind the bar. Glasses have left wet rings on the

counter. One of the men, Mr. Appleby, an architect, notices that two of the wet rings touch, making a neat figure eight. He says to his companion, Mr. Charles Plumtree, a draper, whose eyes, he notices, have been drawn by his own gaze to the wet rings, "Makes a neat figure eight." Mr. Plumtree says, "It does." As the conversation lapses, Mr. Appleby says after a while, "I hear your young John was doing very well in his hurdles at the school yesterday." The reply is "John? No, that was Roger, the younger boy. Roger's the hurdler. John runs."

From the way it is used in this passage, it is clear that *John runs* is neither a commentary nor an out of context sentence to merely illustrate a grammatical structure as was the case in the ESL classroom in which the Grammatical Competence model was in vogue. It is not only a statement of fact by Mr. Plumtree but also a subtle correction of Mr. Appleby's erroneous impression that John was a hurdler. The kind of context created for the simple sentence *John runs* in the passage gives it meaning in a way that the memorization of a list of similar sentence structures by the ESL learner cannot do. Consider also the communicative import of some of the other grammatical strings in the passage. Mr. Appleby's *Makes a neat figure eight* with its deleted subject; Mr. Plumtree's *It does* and his *Roger's the hurdler* are all examples of grammatical structures that have been given communicative value because they are not quoted in isolation but are put in context.

I have deliberately used the elaborate contextual setting from Turner's book above to enable the reader understand very well the point being made about the contextualization of linguistic structures. The teacher of English to ESL learners certainly does not need to establish such an elaborate setting for every grammatical structure that he has to teach. For example, the sentence *I am walking* was usually taught at school as an exponent of the present continuous tense, without giving the learner the slightest idea of its possible occurrence. That sentence

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can, however, be presented as a meaningful structure as in the short dialogue below, rather than merely as a communicatively useless sentence in isolation as is done in many grammar books:

Mohamed: "I will be going to the hostel after lectures."

Razak: "Are you going by bus or by bike?"

Mohamed: "No. I am walking!"

The highlight of the Communicative Grammar model, therefore, is the contextualization of grammatical structures so that they rise above the status of mere sentence tokens and become, instead, utterance tokens. One would then not need to wonder with Widdowson (1972) about the communicative situations in which such sentences as *I am walking* would be relevant. The learners, on their part, would be saved the ordeal of learning grammatical strings that are communicatively useless as the contexts in which they could possibly occur are quite difficult to contemplate as the ones bellow:

"I rise" or "I forget" (Maciver 1986, pp. 67).

"We take" (Montgomery et al 1980, Book 3, pp. 20).

Sentences such as those cited above communicate nothing but they are regularly used as exponents of grammatical structures in textbooks designed for the use of learners of ESL in non-EMT situations. In fact, such structures are only a little different from the one referred to by Obediat (1997:35) in a comment on the difference between mere grammatical competence and expressive potential. That author, in a paper on the merit of teaching communicative English language through English Literature to students in Universities in the Arab world, cites the notorious, grammatically well-formed but semantically deviant *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously* and observes concerning its valuelessness as a discourse item in the following words:

What we get here is a sequence of words that are considered acceptable on mere grammatical grounds, since it clearly responds to linguistic criteria, but it can



hardly be considered an acceptable part of any meaningful discourse in standard varieties of the English language. It is, therefore, rather difficult to find a reasonable context in which that particular utterance could be used meaningfully.

The time spent on the contextualisation of a grammatical structure, as part of its teaching in the communicative grammar model, it should be pointed out, cannot be more than the time that was usually spent on the useless repetition of similar structures, by way of drills in the Grammatical Competence model; and the profit to the ESL learners will be certainly greater. After the contextualization of grammatical structures for the benefit of the learners, they can be given practice in the communicative use of the structures through class speaking activities such as debates, picture reading and role playing as suggested by Yang (1999).

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, the Communicative Grammar model acknowledges the importance of both grammar and communicative ability. It agrees that communicative competence is acquired gradually with practice but argues that the learner of ESL in non-EMT situations can be helped to acquire the tools necessary for it faster if his knowledge of the grammar of the language is complemented, at every point, with a set of real life communicative situations in which the relevant grammatical structures could be used as has been here illustrated. Any knowledge of the grammatical structure of English by any learner will be of little or no value if it does not include a good idea of the potential use of such grammatical structures. Both aspects of the knowledge of English, or of any language, are of equal importance and should be given equal weighting in its teaching. One's disagreement with the Grammatical Competence model, therefore, is one's rejection of the teaching of grammatical strings without regard to their communicative value, all in the forlorn hope that communicative competence will take care of itself later.

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