

# A Study of Chinese College Students' English Communicative Competence

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## Abstract

Developing communicative competence plays a very important role in Chinese college students' English learning. This study investigates how well the students do in using English to communicate with others with the help of questionnaires, which may help them find out some practical strategies to overcome their difficulties in communicating using English. After careful analysis of the means of the subjects' scores, some causes for the students' weak communicative competence are found out. They are students' lack of enthusiasm in using English to communicate, lack of the related cultural background knowledge of English-speaking countries, being afraid of making mistakes, lack of necessary communicating skills, lack of English linguistic knowledge, etc. Some measures should be taken by English teachers to help their students to actively participate in English communication. They should try a lot to encourage their students to make more efforts in order to improve their English communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Chinese college students; English; communicative competence; questionnaires

## INTRODUCTION

As is known to all, language is a tool used in people's communication. The purpose of learning a foreign language is to develop the learners' communicative competence. Since the policy of reform and opening up of China was carried out, the communication and cooperation between China and other countries have been greatly strengthened. In recent years, people pay more and more attention to the cultivation of communicative competence in college English teaching in China.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of communicative competence was firstly put forward by a famous linguist called Hymes in 1972. Later, many other linguists discussed the concept in detail and raised some different views.

Hymes[3] establishes the theory of communicative competence in order to contrast a communicative view of language with Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence. In Hymes' view, communicative competence refers to one's ability with which one can not only apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also know when and where he may use these sentences to communicate with others. In other words, a person with communicative competence should know that his language is appropriate in a given situation and he knows how to use it.

In Hymes' view [3], a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to: whether something is formally possible; whether something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available; whether something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used; whether something is in fact done and what its doing entails. Among the above four points about communicative competence, the third one plays a central part because it determines the other three aspects. So it is clear that Hymes stresses the learning of language application rules.

According to Hymes, communicative competence refers to the ability of using the knowledge of language rules to understand and produce appropriate language in a variety of sociocultural settings, and he thinks communicative competence includes: knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language; knowledge of the rules of speaking (e.g. how to begin and end conversations); knowing language function (e.g. agreeing, disagreeing, arguing and advising, etc.); knowing how to use language appropriately (e.g. talking to a friend is different from talking to your boss).

After Hymes, many other linguists try to interpret the term of "communicative competence" in different ways.

In her claim of "teaching language as communication", Hedge [2] holds that, communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essential social nature. Thus we communicate by using sentences to make statements of different kinds, to describe, to record, to classify, to ask questions, to make requests, to give orders and so on. She presents a view of the relationship between linguistic system and their communicative values in some discourses. It can be seen that Hedge's theory focuses on the communicative acts underlying the ability to use language for different purposes.

The point that the goal of English teaching is to cultivate learners' communicative competence has been accepted by researchers and English teachers, so communicative language teaching has been widely applied in many countries. It is known that the overlook of cultivating students' communicative competence may bring about bad consequences, that is, students may get high scores in exams but they can not communicate well using English.

Later, Canale and Swain [1] develop a new interpretation of communicative competence consisting of the following four components: (1) Grammatical competence. It is the knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence, grammar, semantics and phonology; (2) Sociolinguistic competence. It is the knowledge of social-cultural rules of language and discourse; (3) Discourse competence. It is the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances; (4) Strategic competence. It is the verbal or nonverbal communicative strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence.

Canale and Swain [1] agree that both grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence are important elements in any theoretical framework of communicative competence.

Littlewood[4] suggests that the following four domains of skills may make up a person's communicative competence and they must be recognized in foreign language learning and teaching:

First, the learner must try to get as high a degree as possible of linguistic competence; that is to say, he must develop the skills of manipulating the linguistic system to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended messages.

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

Third, the learner must develop some skills and strategies of using language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete situations. Also he must learn to use the feedback to judge his success, and if necessary, remedy some failures by using different language forms.

Fourth, the learner must become aware of the social meanings of language forms. For many learners, this entails their ability of using generally acceptable language forms and avoiding the potential offensive ones.

In Littlewood's definition of communicative competence, linguistic competence also occupies an important position [4]. He thinks that mastery of the structural system is still the basic requirement for using language to communicate one's own meanings [4].

From the above analysis and statements, it can be safely concluded that communicative competence has received more and more attention in society and it has become very necessary to develop the students' communicative competence in college English teaching.

Some Chinese scholars also conducted researches about the communicative competence of English learners in China. They have found that many Chinese students can not do well in using English to communicate with other people [6, 8]. There are many reasons for that, such as students' lack of confidence and enthusiasm in using English to communicate, knowing few communicative strategies in English communication, etc.

## RESEARCH REPORT

This study is designed to examine Chinese students' English communicative competence with the help of questionnaires.

### Research Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate the main situations of Chinese students' English communicative competence and figure out some feasible and practical strategies to help them improve their communicative competence in English learning and teaching.

### Subjects

The subjects in the study are all sophomores majoring in Maths, Management and Architecture in the University of Jinan. They are 210 students including 125 boys and 85 girls. The subjects range in age from 18 to 22, with an average of 20. All of them have learned English for about 9 years and many of them learn English in traditional classroom setting. Their English teachers usually use both English and Chinese to explain the English texts and other linguistic items; after class, the students don't have many chances of talking in English with English native speakers or their English teachers.

## **Instrument**

A questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Communicative Competence Scale" (CCSECCS) is designed by the researcher in order to investigate students' communicative competence in English communicating. While compiling the items, specific attention is paid to not only the characteristics of Chinese college students in learning English but also the general manners of their expressing their internal feelings. When conducting the investigation, the researcher mainly used this questionnaire, coupled with some interviews with a few students.

The questionnaire consists of 14 items about college students' English communicative competence. For the subjects to get their scores in the 14 items, each item is on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (point 5) to "strongly disagree" (point 1), the middle point being neutral (point 3). The higher a subject scores, the higher level of English communicative competence he/she shows.

## **Data Collection**

In their classroom, 210 students were asked to finish the questionnaire in 10 minutes. Before they started, the researchers explained the items in the questionnaire in order to avoid misunderstanding. After the subjects finished, all the questionnaires were collected and 206 copies were found to be valid after careful examination. 4 copies were invalid because the subjects' scores in these copies were not clear.

## **Results and Analysis**

In order to effectively investigate the situations of Chinese college students' English communicative competence, the researcher adopted the method of analyzing the means of the subjects' scores in each item.

Table 1 shows the means of the subjects' scores for the questionnaire items about Chinese college students' English communicative competence.

**Table 1**

Items	Number	Means
Item 1	206	1.74
Item 2	206	1.28
Item 3	206	1.69
Item 4	206	2.75
Item 5	206	2.51
Item 6	206	2.83
Item 7	206	3.94
Item 8	206	3.57
Item 9	206	4.65
Item 10	206	4.72
Item 11	206	4.32
Item 12	206	4.71
Item 13	206	3.86
Item 14	206	4.18

From the statistics in the table, it can be seen that the means of the subjects' scores for the first six items are below 3.00, which shows that Chinese students' communicative competence is weak. The items are "I love to communicate with others in English in my daily life."(Item 1, M=1.74), "I often communicate well with other people in English in my daily life."(Item 2,

M=1.28), "I usually communicate well with my classmates in English in the school." (Item 3, M=1.69), "I often answer my English teacher's questions in class." (Item 4, M=2.75), "I try to grasp the chances of talking with foreign teachers or students on campus." (Item 5, M=2.51), "I often take part in the activities in the English corner to improve my communicative competence." (Item 6, M=2.83). Another item may also reveal the fact. It is "I don't like to communicate with others in English because I am afraid to lose my face when making mistakes in speaking English." (Item 7, M=3.94). From the above data, some reasons may be found about why Chinese college students' English communicative competence is weak. Many of them don't like to communicate with others in English in their daily life, which is very bad.

Another point that can be found is that most of the college students know much about how to improve their English communicative competence. The following items are involved here. They are "I like to see English movies in order to learn to communicate in English." (Item 8, M=3.57). "I desire to improve myself in English speaking in order to do well in communication." (Item 9, M=4.65). "The students' cultivation of English communicative competence has close relationship with their teachers' teaching methods." (Item 10, M=4.72). "I think the main difficulty in cultivating my communicative competence is the lack of environment in which I may speak English." (Item 11, M=4.32) "I think it is good for the cultivation of English communicative competence that teachers tell their students much knowledge about western countries' cultural background." (Item 12, M=4.71) As is shown in these data, most students have some knowledge about the cultivation of English communicative competence. What they lack is the enthusiasm and perseverance in practicing their English in communication.

From the means of the subjects' scores for the last two items, it can be said that many students do have motivation to improve their English communicative competence. The two items are "I think that improving my English communicative competence may help me a lot in my future work." (Item 13, M=3.86), "I try my best to improve my English communicative competence in order to make more friends." (Item 14, M=4.18). It seems that most students do want to enhance their English communicative competence for various reasons.

To sum up, from the findings of the study, we get some reasons why Chinese college students' English communicative competence is weak. Many of them don't try to communicate with their classmates or other people in English in their life. They can't make good use of the opportunities such as the activities in the English corner to improve their communicative competence. Some of them don't like to communicate with others in English only because they are afraid to lose face when making mistakes, which shows their lack of self-confidence. Therefore, in spite of the fact that most of them know much knowledge about how to improve their English communicative competence, they still can not make much progress in doing this job.

From the above analysis, it can be said that some strategies should be applied by the students to improve their communicative competence.

First, the students must try to communicate with other people in English in their life. They may gradually improve their ability of overcoming difficulties and solving problems in communication by themselves, which may help them to learn to use some communicative strategies. They should make efforts to solve many communicative problems on their own.

Second, students must try to know more cultural background knowledge of western countries. Only when they know a lot of cultural background knowledge can they have deeper understanding of some English expressions, especially those idioms and make better use of them in communication.

Third, students must try to learn as much linguistic knowledge as possible. If a student can not master enough language knowledge, it is difficult for him to communicate successfully. So, it is necessary to store enough linguistic knowledge, especially new vocabulary [5].

Fourth, Chinese college students must learn to make use of some non-verbal communicative methods to assist them in English communication. In reality, non-verbal communicative methods are also important communicative methods in human society. They include various kinds of body language, which may help people express some ideas that can't be conveyed well in words.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

According to the above analysis, developing communicative competence plays a significant role in Chinese college students' English learning. However, Chinese college students' communicative competence is weak and this phenomenon does exist widely among them.

Firstly, English teachers should try to encourage their students to take part in the activities on campus or in society in which they may use English to communicate with others. Only when they have many experiences of communication can they improve their confidence in using English to communicate [7].

Secondly, teachers should introduce some useful communicative strategies to their students so that they may have some good ways of overcoming difficulties in communication. It is inevitable for them to have some trouble in using English to communicate with others. Some possible strategies they may use in communication include having deep breath, pausing for a short time, repeating what has just been said, etc. These good communicative strategies may help students to use English more efficiently in communication. Therefore, college English teachers should give their students some explicit instructions about how to use these communicative strategies and help them to select and apply these strategies appropriately when necessary.

Thirdly, English teachers' introduction of more cultural background knowledge of the major English-speaking countries is an efficient way of developing their students' English communicative competence. More lectures on the culture of western countries are suggested to be made by the teachers in order to broaden their students' academic horizon. In this way, the students' communicative competence will be developed.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the help of questionnaires, some reasons have been found about why Chinese college students' English communicative competence is weak in this investigation. They include students' being afraid of making mistakes in using English to communicate with others, being unfamiliar with western cultural background knowledge, having difficulty in learning English linguistic knowledge, lack of confidence and so on. According to these findings, some strategies are put forward for teachers to help their students enhance communicative competence.

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## APPENDIX

### **Chinese College Students' English Communicative Competence Scale**

A questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Communicative Competence Scale" (CCSECCS) is designed by the researcher in order to investigate students' general English communicative competence state as well as the reasons for it. The results of the survey are only used in the study of English teaching and learning.

Items 1-14 are about your feelings when you learn to communicate in English. Please choose the number after each item, which may embody your true condition concerning the item. The five numbers 1-5 after each item stands for "strongly disagree", "disagree", "uncertainty", "agree", "strongly agree" respectively.

Thanks for your cooperation!

1. I love to communicate with others in English in my daily life.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
2. I often communicate well with other people in English in my daily life.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
3. I usually communicate well with my classmates in English in the school.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
4. I often answer my English teacher's questions in class.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
5. I try to grasp the chances of talking with foreign teachers or students on campus.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
6. I often take part in the activities in the English corner to improve my communicative competence.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
7. I don't like to communicate with others in English because I am afraid to lose my face when making mistakes in speaking English.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
8. I like to see English movies in order to learn to communicate in English.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
9. I desire to improve myself in English speaking in order to do well in communication.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
10. The students' cultivation of English communicative competence has close relationship with their teachers' teaching methods.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
11. I think the main difficulty in cultivating my communicative competence is the lack of environment in which I may speak English.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
12. I think it is good for the cultivation of English communicative competence that teachers tell their students much knowledge about western countries' cultural background.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
13. I think that improving my English communicative competence may help me a lot in my future work.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
14. I try my best to improve my English communicative competence in order to make more friends.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]