Micro-Paper 20: *Communicative Competence*

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Defining the Term

Communicative competence, a notion that draws back to the work of Chomsky and Hymes around the 1960s, describes the features that language users should keep in mind to use said language meaningfully in social settings. In that sense, communicative competence explores four aspects that are essential in the language learning process: the use of grammar and structures (*linguistic competence*), the proper use of language according to the social situation (*sociolinguistic competence*), the actual production of text, including language choices (*discourse* or *pragmatic* competence), and the ways users compensate or enhance their language use (*strategic competence*).

The idea of communicative competence, then, intends to promote a more holistic framework to understand language learning. Communicative competence operates under the assumption that language (and literacy) practices are socially and culturally situated and that language use has a deeply interpersonal nature. That implies that any attempts at communication must keep in mind how nuanced language is. In terms of language teaching, communicative competence neither isolates oral and written literacy practices nor overvalues one set of practices over the other (as sometimes the traditional idea of language skills may). Rather, the idea of communicative competence argues that all practices are necessary for any language user to be successful

Connecting it to LSLP

The notion of communicative competence lies very close to the work we do at LSLP. This notion has been the basis of the curricular transformation of the preservice English-Spanish education program at our university. In addition, the way communicative competence looks at language use as an encompassing, comprehensive phenomenon with a strong socio-cultural emphasis aligns closely to how we understand literacy in our project.

From a more practical standpoint, LSLP has managed to introduce ideas such as literacy, multimodality, or WebQuests, to name a few as integrated to the overall proposal for communicative competence in our program.

Expanding Second Language Research

If read carefully, the notion of communicative competence provides a solid counter-proposal to the traditional idea of language skills that still seems to permeate some language teaching contexts. The strong value to the social nature of language, the importance of developing a strong grammar foundation as key to understand the nuances of language in specific settings, and the value of interpersonal communication are three essential elements that should be part of the language learning and teaching curricula today.

We still need to inquire further about how teachers actually understand communicative competence and how those socio-cultural elements of the language for which this concept advocates are emerging in the language curricula in our schools.

References

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