Setting Up New Standards: A Preview of Indonesia's New Competence-Based Curriculum

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Abstract: This paper aims at describing some theoretical foundations as well as practical considerations underlying the new competence-based curriculum. First, a pedagogically motivated model of communicative competence (CC) suggested by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) is discussed. Second, a systemic functional view regarding the relations between text, context of situation and context of culture (Halliday, 1985) relevant to the production of various genres is also a central issue. Third, literacy levels – performative, functional, informational, epistemic (Wells, 1991) – have also been taken into considerations. Fourth, the curriculum regards meanings as its top priority and, metafunctions (Halliday, 1978) are of primary importance. Finally, similarities and differences of spoken and written language (Halliday 1986) that tend to be overlooked in the previous/existing curricula are now illuminated.

Key words: competence, based curriculum

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

To prepare a competence-based curriculum, one needs to refer to a model of competence that defines what kind of competence learners have to develop so that every step taken in planning a language education program can be geared around certain axes leading to the desired targets. Some authors have made efforts to define the kind of competence one

needs to acquire in order to be able to communicate in a language and Hymes (1972) coined the term *communicative competence* to represent the competence needed for communication. Since then, other researchers have tried to define the notion according to the aims of their studies (excellently reviewed by Taylor, 1984) so that communicative competence has never received a single and agreed-upon interpretation. To use the term in a research context one needs to decide in advance what one means by communicative competence.

In the area of language learning, there exist several models of communicative competence, but so far Celce-Murcia et al.'s model (1995) is the one that is developed for the purpose of language pedagogy informed by the previous models especially the ones by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). Celce Murcia et al.'s pedagogically motivated model includes five components: (1) *discourse competence,* (2) *linguistic competence,* (3) *actional competence,* (4) *sociocultural competence,* and (5) *strategic competence.* The schematic representation of the model can be seen in diagram 1.

In model discourse competence is placed at the heart of the communicative competence construct where "the lexico-grammatical building blocks, the actional organizing skills of communicative intent, and the sociocultural context come together and shape the discourse" (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995: 9). Strategic competence is a competence that allows a speaker to compensate deficiencies in the process of communication.

The model defines communicative competence as discourse competence because communicating is creating a discourse or creating a text in context and the text produced is a unified whole that makes sense to the people sharing the language culture. When two people converse, they are involved in the creation of text in context, in the creation of discourse. When one reads or writes, s/he is also involved in the creation of discourse although the communicating parties are not involved in face-to-face communication. In both spoken and written modes people are involved in the exchange of meanings. Thus, if language education is aimed at acquiring communicative competence, the program should be aimed at the acquisition of discourse competence. With this understanding, a competence-based EFL curriculum should be understood as a curriculum that facilitates the learners to achieve communicative competence or discourse competence

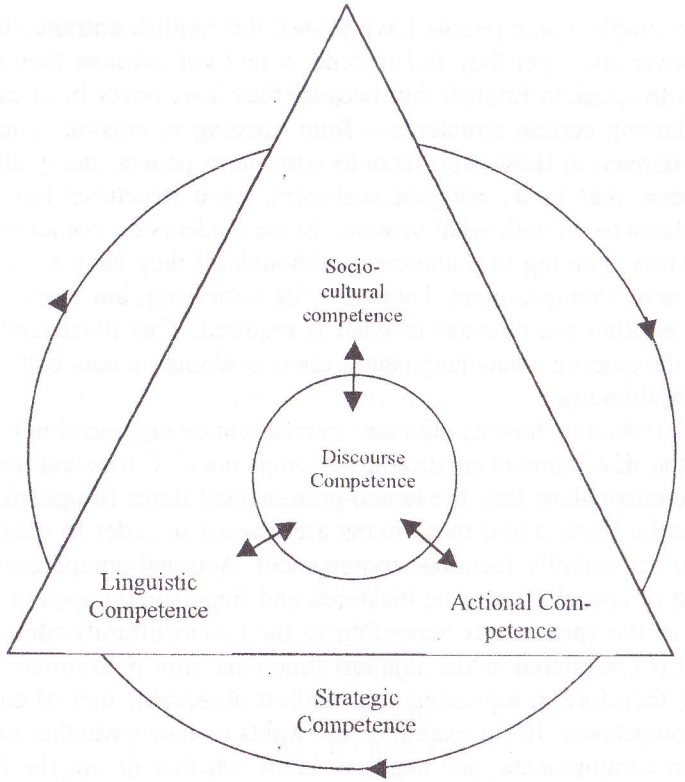

Diagram 1: Celce-Murcia et al, (1995) schematic representation

This way of looking at the ultimate goal of a curriculum implies that linguistic competence and the other competencies are introduced for the sake of creating English texts in contexts both in spoken and written modes. The word ENGLISH needs to be emphasized here because texts are culturally constructed and are not universal. This implies that if we want to teach learners how to communicate in English we need to expose them to the English texts; texts that are not just spoken or written using English words, but those that are structured or developed the English way to achieve different communicative purposes. Teaching lexicon and grammar is one thing; developing English texts or discourse is quite another.

For example, some people have passed the English entrance tests at foreign universities, yet they fail to order a taxi not because they do not know how to speak in English, but because they have never been exposed to a text having certain structures – from opening to closing. The same problems happen to those who have to write term papers; many students fail to notice that texts, not just sentences, have structures too. Other problems have to do with what to write. Some students do not know what to write when applying to a university although all they have to do is responding to written questions. They do write something, but most of what is written is often not relevant to what is required. This illustration indicates that developing a new language is also developing a new culture or a new way of thinking.

The question is: how can the new curriculum be organized in order to facilitate the development of discourse competence? Consistent with the model, the curriculum lists the lexico-grammatical items (linguistic competence) to be learned and these items are learned in order to enable the learners to act verbally (actional competence). Actional competence suggests a list of speech acts to be mastered and linguistic competence realizes each of the speech acts according to the (sociocultural) contexts. A speech act is considered as the smallest functional unit of communication move and, therefore, it represents the smallest observable unit of communicative competence. If, for example, one wants to assess whether or not a learner can communicate, one needs to know whether or not the learner can, for instance, demand information. One act of demanding information can be linguistically realized in different lexicogrammatical constructions since there is no one-to-one relation between speech act and linguistic realization. It is the duty of those in charge of teaching or developing materials to provide as many options as possible to the learners so that the learners can perform the act in different ways according to the context of situation. In real communication, one act assigns another act. A demand of information is responded by a giving of information that should also be linguistically performed in the way that is acceptable in the given context of situation.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Speaking about context of situation, we come to the third major element of the curriculum; sociocultural competence or the learners' awareness with regard to participants and situations of communication, stylistic appropriateness, non verbal factors etc. All of these factors determine the linguistic choices and the way a discourse is structured. For example, a talk about health on the phone among colleagues will produce a text which is different from a text about health written by an expert. The stylistic difference resulted from different contexts of situation need to be noticed if the learners are to develop sociocultural competence.

When a class is exercising a casual or phone conversation, say about what to do to stay healthy, the class needs to look at different sources (written or audiovisual) about a similar topic and to explore how conversations are different from written text in, some respects. Exploring and giving opinions about what learners find out can develop the sense of orderliness and sensitivity towards texts. Diagram 2 may help illustrate the relationships of context of culture, context of situation and text.

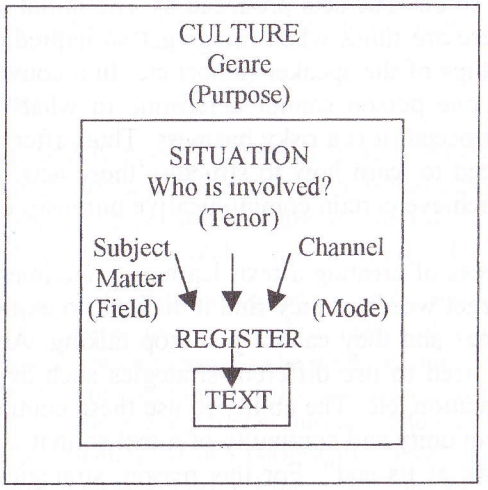

Diagram 2: The model of language (NCELTR, 1992)

From the previous discussion it is understood that a text created in a context of situation is a discourse because a text, in one way or another, is a representation of context of situation. Context of situation has three ele-

ments: field (what we talk about), tenor (the relationships of those involved in communication), and mode (the channel used in communication). The texts people produce constitute these three elements so that everyone sharing the same culture can easily predict the three elements surrounding the texts when they overhear a conversation or read a written text. One can say "well... this is a father and son thing" or "this is a recipe" because people in the same culture share similar ways of creating texts. Thus context of situation determines our language choices and our way of structuring texts so that people know some text types or genres "produced" within the shared context of culture.

This illustration gives rise to a question: if we teach learners English what text types are to be introduced? One obvious answer would be the text types or the genres used and studied by native speakers of English. Therefore, being able to perform a speech act such as demanding information is not the end of the story. In a conversation, this act will "produce" another act, and this other act also has the potential of producing another act and so on. The acts produced by one initial act are often predictable, but there are times when things get so unpredictable depending on the relationships of the speaker (tenor) etc. In a conversation, a text is jointly created; one person cannot determine to what direction the exchange should proceed; it is a risky business. Thus, after mastering speech acts, learners need to learn how to structure those acts, both in speaking and writing, to achieve certain communicative purposes or to create a unified text.

In the process of creating a text, learners sometimes get into trouble because they forget words or they find it difficult to express certain interpersonal meanings and they cannot just stop talking. At least for politeness sake, they need to use different strategies such as repetition, paraphrase, approximation, etc. The ability to use these communication strategies helps to form unity and continuity of a text so that eventually the text can safely "arrive at its end". For this reason, strategic competence becomes the fourth competence to take care of to help learners sustain conversations and to encourage them not to give up when they face difficulties. Learners need to learn how to negotiate meanings interpersonally or logicosemantically in order to survive conversations.

My studies (Agustien, 2000) indicate that logicosemantic negotiation

can be achieved in early stages so that conversation texts for junior high schools need to be geared around this axis. In the new curriculum one can see that beginners are more exposed to transactional conversations or conversations that have certain pragmatic purposes such as buying and selling, demanding and giving information whereas the senior high school students will have to deal more with interpersonal negotiations. At this stage, conversations can have no pragmatic purpose; people talk simply because they have to talk because they happen to sit around the same table or when they have to negotiate their moods, feelings, or attitudes.

In written texts, the communicative move is called rhetorical move (a parallel of speech act in spoken language). In this mode, too, learners need to learn how to go about developing a text. For example, an English descriptive genre usually consists of minimally two rhetorical moves: *general classification* and *description*. There are at least ten types of text to be introduced from junior to senior high schools and these texts are those that are systematically learned by English children in their literacy programs. At the end of senior high school, the learners are expected to be able to create both spoken and written English texts: to be orate and literate.

LITERACY LEVEL

A simple but widely quoted model of literacy levels is that of Wells (1991) that classifies literacy levels into four broad categories. The first level is the *performative* level where learners are able to write what they say or to say what is written. In Wells' words (cited in NCELTR, 1992)

> The emphasis at this level is on the code as code. Becoming literate, according to the perspective, is simply a matter of acquiring those skills that allow a written message to be decoded into speech in order to ascertain its meaning and those skills that allow a spoken message to be encoded in writing, according to the convention letter formation, spelling and punctuation. At this performative level it is tacitly assumed that written messages differ from spoken messages only in the medium employed for communication. (Wells, 1991: 52-53)

Probably, if English is taught at primary schools, this performative level can be a realistic literacy target. However, since our junior high school learners are expected to be able to communicate to read manuals or

popular newspaper, or to ask for directions, tthem Wells' functional level would be a reasonable literacy target for our junior high school. According to Wells, to be literate is "to be able as a member of that particular society to cope with the demands of everyday life that involve written language" (Wells, 1991). In our new curriculum junior high school graduates are expected to be able to communicate or to participate in the creation of texts that serves their daily needs to entertain themselves, to read manuals, to carry out transactional exchanges and to write simple narratives, descriptions, reports, and recounts. *Functional* level is the literacy target for our junior high school graduates.

The literacy target for our senior high school is the third level or the *informational* level meaning that senior high school graduates are expected to be able to access the accumulated knowledge because they are expected to communicate for academic purposes too. The learners are expected to be able to listen to short lectures, talk about serious matters, read popular and scientific texts, and write for different purposes. The kind of genres they learn should include those they are likely to encounter in their academic lives. Wells' *epistemic* level is not considered to be feasible for the high school level in our EFL context. This level can be the target of English-department graduates at our universities.

In short, at junior high level, learners are expected to learn daily expressions especially fixed expressions and idioms that are needed in daily lives to accompany their actions when playing at the school yards, when attending the class, when interacting with their friends etc. They should be encouraged to read English for fun and to collect English texts that they like from different sources such as fairy tales, jokes etc. At the senior high level, they develop those skills further and they move to more distant communications involving subtleties of nuances of meaning: interpersonal, ideational and textual meanings (Halliday, 1978).

NUANCES OF MEANINGS

Communicating is creating and exchanging meanings and there are at least three different kinds of meanings we create when we communicate: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. These meanings are realized in the grammar of English. The implication is that when we prepare teaching materials for the learners we need to be

aware what kind of meanings we are dealing with and what meaning we want to emphasize at certain communication contexts. Bearing this in mind, the grammar we teach will be more meaningful since we know exactly which part of a sentence expresses what meaning.

Ideational meaning is the meaning representing "who does what where or when or under what circumstances". Consider the following sentence:

He hit me repeatedly in front of the crowded theatre.

From the ideational angle the meaning is clear: it was *he* (not she) who *hit* (not kissed) *me* (not you) *repeatedly* (not only once) *in front of* (not behind) *the crowded* (not quiet) *theatre* (not house). Thus, the words/phrases carry the ideational meanings. This kind of meaning is usually the focus of language teaching; when learners can answer questions to do with this aspect, the job is done. This can be acceptable if the focus of communication is mainly getting some ideas across: the 'content' is of primary importance. However, communication is not all about ideas; when we communicate, sometimes the main purpose is exchanging feelings of mood – we are dealing with interpersonal meanings.

From interpersonal perspective, the above sentence should be interpreted as *He hit* (not *he hits*, or *he doesn't hit* or *he didn't hit*, or *he can hit* etc.) meaning that among those possibilities the speaker chooses only one interpersonal meaning, that is 'it was he who did hit me'. For many learners, making this kind of choice is not always easy probably because the Indonesian languages do not contain Finite verb so that interpersonal choices tend to be made around the positive pole (*He hit*), the negative pole (*He did not hit*) or the happy medium (*Maybe he hit*). The grey area between the two poles such as *might, could, could have, should have* etc. and also conversation gambits indicating similar meanings tends to be taken for granted. Many learners do not want to learn these complicated interpersonal meanings. They do not seem to realize that without mastering this interpersonal part of grammar there is no way they can express or exchange their attitudes or feelings accurately. It is, therefore, necessary to make the learners notice this interpersonal area popularly known as '*tenses*'. In this curriculum, grammar regains its place because internationally acceptable English is English that is grammatical and appropriately used in given contexts.

From the textual perspective, learners need to learn that textual variations of a sentence, for example, carry meanings too. Whatever comes at the beginning of a sentence becomes the context of the rest of the sentence; the beginning part is called the Theme. The aforementioned examples can have variations of Theme:

a. *He hit me repeatedly in front of the theatre.*
b. *Repeatedly, he hit me in front of the theatre.*
c. *In front of the theatre, he hit me repeatedly.*

These three sentences have exactly the same ideational and interpersonal meanings, but textually speaking they create slightly different meanings since each sentence chooses a different Theme thereby emphasizes, different meaning.

The implication is that the syllabus or materials developed based on this curriculum need to attend to these nuances of meanings although there is no urgent need for the writers to mention the technical terms. What is needed is awareness that these nuances of meaning are in operation in any language communications.

SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

The differences and similarities of spoken and written language are seriously taken into account in this new curriculum. Naturally speaking, people learn spoken language first before they learn the written version. Cameron (2001) also suggests that children should speak the language before they write it. This implies that in the first year of junior high school the language taught will be primarily spoken in that the teaching materials are geared around language that accompanies actions or activities learners do in the classrooms and schools. At this stage learners are expected to do a lot of listening; listening to all kinds of instruction, invitation and other speech acts relevant to the circumstances. Thus the language introduced here is highly interactional having the features of spoken language.

Halliday (1986) indicates that spoken language is characterized by grammatical intricacy; it contains many clauses with all kinds of relations; it uses personal pronouns as Subjects etc. Unlike spoken language, written language is characterized by lexical density; it uses noun phrases to realize Subjects; it often uses passive constructions, etc. The following examples may help illustrate the point.

Spoken:

I tell you what... Yesterday I bought some apples, you know. They were imported ones... you know? The ones from Australia? Quite expensive though. They call it... mm... I think Granny Smith or something... But really delicious... You should try.

Written:

Yesterday I bought some delicious expensive imported Granny Smith apples from Australia.

The above examples demonstrate that in spoken language many clauses are needed to express one noun phrase in the written version. Learners are expected to start with the spoken version and end up with highly written language when they graduate from senior high school.

Along the way, from year 7 to year 12 the move from the most spoken to the most written language is gradual. For example, in year 9 the learners can write using the spoken style such as when they write Emails, or personal letters. However, at the end of year 12, they are expected to write using the written style.

The implication is that the types of text learners are exposed to in year 7 would be those that are transactional; small dialogues having certain pragmatic purposes for classroom use and gradually moving to more interpersonal conversations, to monologues involving different genres. As for written language, year-7 students start writing the words focused on spelling and written conventions and gradually move to writing in various genres. Consequently, those who teach at junior high schools need to be proficient in spoken English.

CLOSING REMARKS

There has been a shift of paradigm in this new curriculum in that the ultimate competence (communicative competence) is defined as discourse competence that enables learners to participate in the creation of English texts: spoken and written. This way of understanding communicative competence implies that English education should be aimed at developing English oracy and literacy; the kinds of oracy and literacy that native English children learn in their schools.

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