
Exploring Pedagogical Strategies and Assessment Practices for Improving English Communication Competence in ESL Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores how English is taught as a second language to foster meaningful communicative ability in ESL learners. It argues that effective communication goes beyond grammatical accuracy, encompassing sociocultural awareness, psycho-emotional growth, and the ability to navigate multilingual environments. The paper traces the conceptual evolution of communicative competence, from Hymes' foundational critique of Chomsky's grammatical model to more contemporary frameworks involving intercultural and symbolic competence. Three widely referenced theoretical frameworks are reviewed and compared: the Canale and Swain model, the Bachman and Palmer model, and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The study further examines existing tensions in assessing oral and pragmatic competence in both classroom and high-stakes testing environments. Based on this theoretical grounding, the paper proposes foundational pedagogical recommendations and assessment strategies for ESL teachers aiming to cultivate holistic communicative competence in diverse learner contexts.

Keywords: *ESL Instruction, Communicative Competence, Second Language Acquisition,*

Introduction

Rapid globalization and increasing cross-border mobility have transformed the role of English in modern communication. Today, English functions not only as a native tongue but as a global lingua franca that facilitates interaction across diverse linguistic and cultural communities. Within this context, the notion of communicative competence has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary second language education. Rather than focusing narrowly on grammatical knowledge, communicative competence encompasses the full range of language skills, strategies, and sociocultural awareness required for effective, contextually appropriate interaction. Despite its recognized importance, the integration of communicative competence into both language instruction and formal assessment remains contested and incomplete. Many academic institutions continue to prioritize written grammatical accuracy over spoken fluency and pragmatic appropriateness, leaving learners underprepared for real-world communication. Additionally, standardized testing frameworks have been slow to incorporate the sociolinguistic complexities inherent in global English use, including exposure to regional dialects, code-switching, and culturally specific pragmatic norms. This paper examines the development of communicative competence as both a theoretical construct and a pedagogical objective. It reviews key frameworks that have shaped the field and discusses current challenges in assessment, ultimately proposing practical strategies for educators working with ESL learners in diverse settings.

Statement of the Problem

A persistent gap exists between what learners are taught in formal ESL classrooms and what they require for authentic, real-world communication. Traditional language instruction has historically privileged syntactic correctness and written performance, marginalizing the oral, pragmatic, and intercultural dimensions of language use. This narrow focus produces learners who may score well on grammar-based assessments yet struggle significantly when engaging in spontaneous, context-dependent communication. The problem is further compounded by assessment practices that fail to capture the multidimensional nature of communicative competence. Most standardized language tests continue to evaluate discrete linguistic elements such as vocabulary recall, sentence structure, and reading comprehension rather than a learner's capacity to negotiate meaning, adapt to varied speech communities, or navigate sociolinguistic nuances. As a result, the construct validity of these evaluations is increasingly questioned in a world where English is spoken by more non-native than native speakers. Teachers are also placed in a difficult position. Many report lacking the training, instructional frameworks, and assessment tools necessary to evaluate oral communicative performance effectively. Without structured guidance, communicative competence risks becoming a theoretical ideal that rarely translates into classroom practice. This study addresses these interconnected challenges by examining the theoretical foundations of communicative competence and their implications for more effective ESL instruction and assessment.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To trace the historical development and theoretical evolution of communicative competence as a construct in second language education.
- To critically examine and compare established frameworks of communicative competence and their applicability to ESL teaching contexts.
- To identify the key challenges ESL teachers face when assessing communicative competence in classroom and formal testing settings.

Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How has the concept of communicative competence evolved since its initial formulation, and what theoretical tensions have emerged from this evolution?
2. In what ways do existing frameworks of communicative competence address or overlook the demands of multilingual and multicultural communication environments?
3. What barriers do ESL educators encounter when attempting to assess oral and pragmatic dimensions of communicative competence?

Significance of Study

This study holds significance across several dimensions of second language education. Theoretically, it contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding communicative competence by synthesizing and critiquing major frameworks, highlighting their strengths and limitations in contemporary multilingual contexts. By incorporating perspectives from intercultural communication and symbolic competence, the study extends beyond conventional linguistic models and introduces a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be communicatively proficient in a globalized world. From a pedagogical standpoint, the study offers ESL educators a clearer conceptual map for designing instruction that targets communicative skills holistically. Teachers who understand the theoretical underpinnings of communicative competence are better equipped to create learning experiences that prepare students for authentic communication scenarios rather than examination performance alone. This is especially relevant in contexts where learners are expected to engage with speakers from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In terms of assessment, this research underscores the urgent need to reform language testing practices in ways that more accurately reflect communicative demands in real-world settings. By advocating for performance-based and context-sensitive assessment tools, the study provides a basis for rethinking how educational institutions measure language proficiency. The proposed implications are of direct relevance to curriculum designers, language test developers, and policy makers involved in shaping ESL education systems.

Literature Review

From Grammatical Competence to Communicative Ability: A Conceptual Shift

The conceptual roots of communicative competence lie in a direct challenge to Chomsky's (1965) notion of grammatical competence, which defined language knowledge as the internalized system of rules shared between an idealized speaker and listener within a homogeneous speech community. Chomsky's model prioritized linguistic form and treated language as an abstract cognitive system, largely divorced from social context and use. Hymes (1972) considered this framing fundamentally incomplete for understanding real communicative behavior. He proposed communicative competence as a broader concept that incorporated social appropriateness, contextual variation, and the pragmatic dimensions of language alongside its formal structure. For Hymes, knowing a language meant not only knowing its grammar but also knowing when, where, how, and to whom to speak in ways that are socially acceptable and communicatively effective. Widdowson (1978) extended this line of thinking by distinguishing between knowledge of language rules and the ability to deploy those rules purposefully in communication. He argued that exposure to grammar alone did not ensure communicative ability and that years of formal instruction without communicative practice could impede learner fluency. This insight reoriented language pedagogy toward meaning-making, authentic language use, and interactive skill development, laying the groundwork for communicative language teaching as a dominant instructional paradigm.

Intercultural Communicative Competence and the Limits of Native Speaker Norms

As globalization accelerated and cross-cultural encounters became more frequent, scholars began questioning the adequacy of communicative models rooted in monolingual, monocultural assumptions. Byram (1997) introduced the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) to address the cultural dimension of language use. ICC extended Hymes' framework by incorporating attitudes toward otherness, knowledge of other cultures, and the skills to mediate between different cultural perspectives. Byram argued that language learners engaged in intercultural encounters needed more than linguistic proficiency; they required sensitivity to cultural difference, the ability to interpret unfamiliar cultural practices, and a willingness to suspend judgment and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. Empirical evidence supporting the importance of ICC has been documented in various educational settings. Brown (2009), for instance, found that international students at British universities frequently encountered communication difficulties not rooted in grammar but in unfamiliarity with local cultural norms, social expectations, and informal communicative conventions. Host students who served as cultural mediators played a crucial role in helping international peers adapt to unfamiliar linguistic and social environments, illustrating how intercultural awareness operates as a practical communicative resource rather than an abstract academic concept. Young and Sachdev (2011) further found that both teachers and learners recognized the value of ICC in classroom contexts, though its systematic integration into curricula remained inconsistent. Critics such as Kramsch (2006) noted that ICC frameworks tied to national cultural boundaries risked oversimplifying the complexity of identity, belonging, and communication in increasingly globalized and hybrid linguistic environments.

Symbolic Competence as a Contemporary Reconceptualization

In response to the limitations of both communicative and intercultural competence models, Kramsch (2006, 2010) proposed symbolic competence as a more expansive and reflexive framework for understanding language proficiency in the contemporary world. Symbolic competence refers to the ability to read and interpret the symbolic, cultural, and historical dimensions of language, including metaphor, subtext, and the power structures embedded in communicative acts. Unlike communicative competence, which emphasizes functional language use, symbolic competence acknowledges that language is not merely a tool for exchanging information but a site of identity construction, ideological negotiation, and cultural positioning. Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) clarified that symbolic competence is not simply an additional layer of communicative ability but a qualitatively different mode of engaging with language that becomes especially important in multilingual settings. Learners with symbolic competence are better positioned to navigate the complex, often ambiguous communicative landscapes of contemporary multicultural environments where meaning is frequently contested, contextual, and culturally mediated. This framework has begun to influence both research and curriculum design in advanced ESL contexts where learners interact across multiple languages and cultural registers.

Theoretical Frameworks for Operationalizing Communicative Competence

Several models have attempted to operationalize communicative competence for purposes of instruction and assessment. The Canale and Swain (1980) model identified three initial components: grammatical

competence (phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and morphology), sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness of language use in social contexts), and strategic competence (verbal and nonverbal strategies used to maintain communicative effectiveness in the face of breakdowns). Canale (1983, 1984) subsequently refined the framework by differentiating discourse competence, defined as the ability to produce coherent and cohesive spoken and written texts, as a fourth distinct component. Bachman and Palmer (1996) offered a more elaborated and systematic model organized around language knowledge and strategic competence. Language knowledge was further divided into organizational knowledge, encompassing grammatical and textual components, and pragmatic knowledge, which included functional competence and sociolinguistic competence. This model was influential in language testing research due to its systematic structure and its attention to the interface between language use and test task design. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) proposed a three-part structure comprising linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. Designed to serve as both an instructional guide and an assessment framework across European educational contexts, the CEFR provided a common descriptive system that could be applied across different languages and learning environments. Its pragmatic competence strand highlighted discourse competence and functional competence as central concerns for language learners operating in real communicative contexts.

Assessment Challenges and the Push for Communicative Language Testing

Despite theoretical progress, the translation of communicative competence into assessment practice has remained challenging. Oliver, Haig, and Rochecoste (2005) documented the difficulties teachers experienced when evaluating oral language tasks, noting that curriculum frameworks that emphasize written work create structural disincentives for investing in the assessment of spoken communication. Teachers frequently cited insufficient training and an absence of validated tools for assessing communicative performance, particularly in real-time oral interaction. Canagarajah (2006) called for a shift away from discrete-item grammatical tests toward instruments capable of capturing communicative repertoire, pragmatic awareness, and negotiation strategies. Savignon (2018) similarly advocated for reforms in school practice and teacher education, arguing that pre-service and in-service training must be reoriented to equip educators with the skills needed to support communicative language development. Harding (2014) argued that test constructs must evolve to reflect real-world communicative demands, including adaptability to diverse English varieties, tolerance for unfamiliar accents, and the ability to manage communication in digital environments. More recent research by Elder et al. (2017) demonstrated that non-language specialists in professional communication contexts tend to prioritize a speaker's ability to convey messages effectively over formal grammatical accuracy, suggesting that the broader population of communicative stakeholders already implicitly operates with a more functional definition of language proficiency than current testing frameworks acknowledge. Morrow (2018) advocated for authentic, task-based assessment formats that draw on test-takers' genuine language use in realistic contexts, positioning communicative language testing as a legitimate and necessary evolution of the field.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in an interpretive paradigm. Given that the primary objective is to examine, synthesize, and critically analyze existing theoretical frameworks and scholarly debates surrounding communicative competence in ESL contexts, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth examination of conceptual constructs, contextual meaning, and the complexity of educational phenomena, all of which are central to the concerns of this study. Rather than seeking statistically generalizable outcomes, this research aims to generate rich conceptual understanding and theoretically grounded recommendations relevant to ESL instruction and assessment. The study employs systematic literature review as its primary methodological strategy. This involves the structured identification, selection, evaluation, and synthesis of published scholarly work related to communicative competence, second language acquisition, intercultural communication, and language assessment. By reviewing literature across multiple decades and theoretical traditions, the study is positioned to trace conceptual development, identify patterns of scholarly consensus and debate, and assess the practical implications of competing frameworks for ESL pedagogy.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, specifically a systematic review of theoretical and empirical literature. A descriptive design is appropriate here because the study seeks to describe, interpret, and synthesize established knowledge rather than test experimental hypotheses or manipulate variables. The design draws on document analysis as its core technique, involving the careful reading and thematic coding of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, theoretical monographs, and policy documents related to communicative competence in ESL contexts. The research follows a clearly structured review process. First, relevant literature was identified through a targeted search of academic databases including ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus using keywords such as communicative competence, ESL instruction, intercultural competence, language assessment, pragmatic competence, and second language acquisition. Second, sources were screened for relevance, recency, and academic credibility. Third, selected sources were read in full and coded according to major themes. Fourth, synthesized findings were organized thematically to address the study's research questions. This systematic approach ensures rigor, transparency, and reproducibility in the review process.

Target Population

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the concept of population refers not to human participants but to the body of scholarly literature relevant to the research focus. The target population of literature includes published works addressing communicative competence in second language acquisition and ESL education. This encompasses theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, review articles, and policy documents produced by applied linguists, language educators, and assessment researchers from diverse international contexts. The literature population spans works produced from the early 1970s, when Hymes first introduced the concept of communicative competence, through to 2021. This temporal range is essential for capturing both the historical roots of the construct and its most recent reconceptualization's in response to globalization, digitalization, and the spread of English as a lingua franca. Geographically, the included literature spans multiple national and regional educational contexts, including North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia, reflecting the global scope of ESL education and language assessment research.

Sampling Technique

This study employs purposive sampling to select literature for review. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique in which sources are selected based on specific, predefined criteria directly relevant to the research objectives. This approach is particularly well-suited to qualitative literature reviews, where the goal is not statistical representativeness but conceptual depth, theoretical relevance, and analytical richness. The inclusion criteria for literature selection were: (a) direct relevance to communicative competence, ESL instruction, intercultural communication, or language assessment; (b) publication in peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, or reputable institutional documents; (c) availability in full-text format; and (d) publication in English. Sources focusing exclusively on language learning technologies unrelated to communicative competence, non-ESL language learning contexts, or informal educational settings without clear connections to the study's themes were excluded. Seminal works by foundational theorists such as Hymes, Canale, Swain, Byram, and Bachman were included regardless of publication date due to their enduring theoretical significance.

Sample Size

In qualitative research, sample size is guided by theoretical saturation rather than numerical sufficiency. For this literature review, a final corpus of approximately thirty to thirty-five scholarly sources was selected for in-depth analysis. This corpus includes foundational theoretical texts, empirical studies, and critical review articles covering the major themes identified in the study. The selected works collectively address the historical evolution of communicative competence, its major theoretical models, intercultural and symbolic extensions of the construct, and assessment debates in both classroom and high-stakes testing contexts. The sample size was determined by the principle of analytical sufficiency, meaning that additional sources were reviewed until recurring themes stabilized and no substantially new conceptual categories emerged from the review process. This approach, known as theoretical saturation in qualitative methodology, ensures that the literature corpus is sufficiently comprehensive to generate credible and well-supported conclusions without including redundant or tangentially relevant material.

Data Collection Tools

In accordance with the qualitative and document-based nature of this study, data collection was conducted using a structured literature search and retrieval protocol rather than fieldwork instruments such as questionnaires or interview guides. The primary tools for data collection were as follows:

Academic database search engines including Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and Scopus were used to identify relevant publications. Boolean search strings combining terms such as communicative competence AND ESL, intercultural competence AND language teaching, and language assessment AND pragmatic competence guided the initial retrieval process. Systematic search logs were maintained to ensure reproducibility and transparency. An inclusion-exclusion checklist was developed to systematically evaluate the relevance and quality of retrieved sources. This checklist assessed each source against the predetermined criteria regarding subject matter, publication type, and linguistic medium. A data extraction template was also developed to organize information retrieved from each selected source, capturing details such as author, year, theoretical framework discussed, key arguments, and methodological approach where applicable. This tool facilitated consistent and systematic handling of information across the entire corpus.

Data Analysis Instrument

The primary instrument for data analysis in this study is thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a body of textual data. Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for systematic literature reviews because it allows for flexible, theory-driven or data-driven categorization of complex conceptual content across multiple sources. The analysis proceeded through six stages: familiarization with the source texts, generation of initial codes, searching for themes across codes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Content analysis was employed as a complementary analytical instrument, particularly for identifying the frequency and consistency with which specific theoretical constructs, such as strategic competence or pragmatic appropriateness, appeared across the reviewed literature. This allowed for both depth of interpretation and breadth of coverage within the analysis. Conceptual mapping was also used to visualize the relationships between different theoretical frameworks, illustrating how models of communicative competence have expanded, overlapped, and diverged over time. Together, these instruments provided a rigorous and multidimensional approach to analyzing a complex and evolving body of scholarly knowledge.

Data Analysis

Theme One: The Social Turn in Language Competence Theory

Analysis of foundational literature reveals a decisive theoretical shift from abstract cognitive models of language toward socially situated understandings of communicative ability. Chomsky's generativist framework, which treated competence as an idealized mental grammar, was challenged by sociolinguists who argued that real language use is inherently variable, contextually embedded, and socially negotiated. Hymes' introduction of communicative competence in the 1970s marked the beginning of a sustained effort to account for the social dimensions of language learning. Widdowson's subsequent work reinforced this perspective by demonstrating that syntactic knowledge and communicative fluency operate as distinct but interdependent capacities. This social turn has continued to shape second language acquisition research and pedagogical practice, gradually displacing purely structural approaches to language teaching in favor of meaning-focused and interaction-centered methodologies.

Theme Two: Cultural Mediation as a Core Competency in ESL Learning

Literature analysis consistently highlights the central importance of cultural understanding and cross-cultural mediation in ESL competence development. Byram's ICC framework introduced the idea that effective intercultural communication requires far more than linguistic knowledge. It demands attitudinal openness, interpretive skills, and the capacity to position oneself as a cultural mediator rather than a passive language user. Empirical evidence reviewed in this study supports this claim: learners who lack intercultural awareness frequently experience communication failures not attributable to grammatical deficiency but to unfamiliarity with pragmatic conventions, social etiquette, or culturally specific discourse patterns. The reviewed literature also indicates that native speaker norms are increasingly inappropriate as the sole benchmark for communicative success in global ESL contexts, calling for a more pluralistic and culturally responsive framework for competence assessment.

Theme Three: Structural Inequalities in Communicative Assessment Practices

A recurring pattern across the reviewed literature is the structural mismatch between theoretical definitions of communicative competence and the actual design of language assessments. High-stakes examinations, including standardized university entrance tests and professional language certifications, continue to emphasize discrete grammatical items over integrated performance tasks. As documented by Oliver et al. (2005) and Elder et al. (2017), this creates a systemic inequality: learners who communicate effectively in real-world contexts may underperform on tests that prioritize form over function, while learners who perform well on grammar-based tests may lack the communicative strategies needed for authentic professional or academic communication. The literature calls for urgent reform toward task-based and performance-oriented assessment models that better reflect the communicative demands of contemporary life.

Theme Four: Teacher Readiness and the Implementation Gap

The analysis reveals a significant implementation gap between theoretical knowledge about communicative competence and its practical application in ESL classrooms. Multiple studies indicate that teachers, while aware of communicative goals, often lack the training, resources, and institutional support required to effectively teach and assess oral and pragmatic competence. This gap is particularly pronounced in educational systems where written examinations dominate assessment culture and where oral tasks are treated as supplementary rather than central to language development. Savignon (2018) argues that systemic reform is necessary at both the teacher training and curricular design levels. Without equipping teachers with evidence-based strategies for facilitating communicative language development, even theoretically sound curricula risk being delivered through traditionally narrow instructional practices.

Theme Five: Technology and Multimodality as Emerging Dimensions of Communicative Competence

A forward-looking strand of the literature situates communicative competence within increasingly digitalized and multimodal communication environments. Reviewed sources suggest that the proliferation of digital communication platforms, including social media, video conferencing tools, blogs, and collaborative online writing environments, has extended the repertoire of communicative acts that ESL learners must be prepared to navigate. Kung (2016) demonstrated that integrating media literacy into ESL instruction positively influenced learners' oral communicative competence by exposing them to authentic digital texts and interactive communication scenarios. Harding (2014) similarly noted that future assessment frameworks must account for the communicative norms of digital contexts, including formulaic language patterns associated with specific online registers. These findings suggest that twenty-first century communicative competence is inherently multimodal and that ESL instruction must evolve accordingly.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a systematic theoretical and analytical review of communicative competence as a construct central to ESL instruction and assessment. Beginning with Hymes' foundational challenge to Chomsky's grammatical competence model, the review traced the concept's evolution through intercultural communicative competence, symbolic competence, and contemporary frameworks responding to the demands of digital and globalized communication. Five major analytical themes were identified: the social turn in language theory, cultural mediation as a core competency, structural inequalities in assessment, the teacher readiness gap, and the emerging role of technology and multimodality in communicative practice. The evidence reviewed consistently demonstrates that existing language assessment systems lag behind theoretical understanding of communicative competence. High-stakes tests remain anchored to grammatical accuracy, while real-world communicative success depends increasingly on pragmatic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and strategic adaptability. Addressing this gap requires coordinated reform across teacher education, curriculum design, and assessment policy. Future research should explore how communicative competence frameworks can be operationalized in diverse national ESL contexts and how digital tools can be leveraged to create more authentic, performance-based assessment experiences. Longitudinal studies examining the relationship between communicative instruction and real-world communicative outcomes would further strengthen the evidence base for reforms in ESL pedagogy.

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