

# Improving interpersonal competence in the communicative classroom

## Keywords

interpersonal competence, intercultural competence, communicative language teaching

Current practice in language teaching based on the communicative approach emphasizes the development of language skills. Opportunities are given for students to develop their language skills through interaction based on pair and group work. Such social interaction requires the use of interpersonal skills. If students do not feel confident about their interpersonal skills, they may be reluctant to take part in communicative activities that require social interaction. Interpersonal skills are also important if students are to effectively and confidently use the language skills they have been studying in real life situations. This article describes the importance of introducing interpersonal skills in the language classroom and gives practical suggestions on how to develop such skills.

コミュニケーション・アプローチに基づく現行の言語教育では、コミュニケーション能力を重要視している。そのため、学生はペアおよびグループワークを行い、対人関係を築きながら言語能力を育成している。対人関係はすべてのコミュニケーションの基礎となるからである。学習中の言語能力を実生活の中で、学生が自信を持って活用するためには、対人関係のスキルを学ぶ必要がある。本論では、語学の授業に対人関係のスキルを導入することの重要性を述べ、スキル向上の実際的な提案を行う。

## Ronald Schmidt-Fajlik

Ibaraki University

Current foreign language teaching methodology based on communicative methods stresses the importance of developing language skills as a way to communicate effectively, as may be found in the statement "The aim of language teaching worldwide is to enable learners to use the language they have learned in school or college to communicate confidently and effectively with other users of English in the world outside" (Willis & Willis, 2009, p. 3). Although it is obvious that communicating effectively in a foreign language depends on developing one's language skills, developing effective communication skills resides not only in one's language abilities, but also in one's confident use of interpersonal skills. A survey of 197 Japanese university students found that 73.1% of them come away with negative feelings after speaking with someone, 60.4% feel nervous when speaking with someone for the first time, and less than half (45.2%) are satisfied with their interpersonal skills (Schmidt-Fajlik, 2010). Foreign language teaching methodology should not only concentrate on developing language skills for effective communication, but should also include the development of interpersonal skills, as communication takes place in a social context. If students lack interpersonal skills or lack confidence in using such skills, they will not be able to effectively use the language skills they have been studying. In other words, to become a competent communicator requires both language and interpersonal skills.

Communicative language learning (CLL) involves the use of activities that require interaction with others. These activities include the use of role plays, interviews, information gap, pair work, and group work. Although CLL activities involve real or meaningful communication as a way to develop language skills (Widdowson, 1978; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1991), such activi-

ties may not be sufficient for developing communicative competence if interpersonal skills are not addressed as well. If a student does not have appropriate social or interpersonal skills, or does not feel confident in using such skills, he or she may not feel successful in interacting with others. Developing interpersonal skills is therefore an important factor in determining the communicative competence of students learning a foreign language.

The following sections give practical examples of how to develop interpersonal competence in the language classroom. The first section discusses how one's self-image may impact how one views interacting with others. A diary assignment with a visualization exercise is described to address this area. Developing rapport is subsequently described in terms of improving listening, speaking (including asking questions and responding verbally), and nonverbal communication skills. The influence of cultural expectations regarding interpersonal communication is also touched upon as "cultural awareness helps us understand that interpersonal competence is specific to a given culture" (Devito, 2008, p.33).

### **Self-image and interpersonal communication**

Taking part in a social exchange is not only an interpersonal process, but an intrapersonal one as well. Social exchanges can be satisfying, unsatisfying, or neutral on many levels. For those who feel that they have inadequate social skills, taking part in an interpersonal exchange may be colored by a sense of dissatisfaction with interpersonal skills after taking part in a social exchange. This may lead to a cycle of self-fulfilling prophesy where a speaker comes to believe or expect that a social exchange will be an uncomfortable experience, which further adds to creating a self-image as someone with poor interpersonal skills. The following suggestions may aid to develop students' self-image in terms of interpersonal competence.

#### **Diaries**

The use of a diary may be an opportunity to encourage seeing social exchanges as a positive

learning experience that may increase a student's desire to engage socially. Students may record the knowledge they gained in terms of the content discussed as well as make notes about what they appreciated about the exchange. If misunderstanding took place during the exchange, they could view that in a positive sense as knowledge to be used in a future exchange, such as asking more clarifying questions, reacting more to the other speaker to build rapport, using more eye contact, smiling more, and asking more in-depth questions. This may serve to develop confidence by allowing students to become better aware of their increasingly effective use of such skills.

#### **Diary activity example**

The use of a diary in order to improve confidence in one's interpersonal skills involves writing and reflecting about a recent interpersonal experience. Students may keep a diary for a decided amount of time. Some of the following questions may be used as a guide: What did you discuss? What was positive about the experience? What did you learn? How did you keep the conversation going? What nonverbal behavior did you use? What did you learn about your interpersonal skills? What would have made the exchange better? What could I have done better? What interpersonal skills did the other person use? What could the other person have done better?

#### **Visualization**

Some people who feel that they lack social skills and therefore avoid taking part in social exchanges may tend to visualize future social events negatively. They may visualize a future social event and 'catastrophize' it, telling themselves that things may not go as they "want them to (a rational belief), and adding that if they don't, it will be 'terrible,' 'awful,' or 'horrible,' and that you 'won't be able to stand it'" (Garner, 1997, p. 161). Often, people who are afraid of socializing imagine a worst-case scenario—saying or doing something embarrassing, being ignored, not knowing what to say, or not knowing how to act.

Visualization may serve as a way to rehearse future social encounters in much the same way

as athletes mentally rehearse before an event, which has proven to increase the chances of success (Janssen & Sheikh, 1994). This type of rehearsal not only helps to anticipate possible social encounters and the type of interpersonal skills which may be required, but may also help prepare for such encounters emotionally by replacing any negative images of such encounters with positive ones. Such mental picturing may aid in creating a new image of oneself as a successful communicator by building “new ‘memories’ or stored data into your mid-brain and central nervous system” (Maltz, 1960, p. 46). Visualization may also serve as a way to reduce anxiety in future social encounters through a process called ‘imagery desensitization,’ where one visualizes a successful outcome in steps, which has shown to benefit those with social phobias (Bourne, 2005). Rehearsing future social encounters may also serve as a way to mentally practice language skills in conjunction with interpersonal skills.

### **Visualization assignment example**

Visualize yourself taking part in a successful social exchange. Visualize the place, setting, and time of day. See the person you are socializing with (the way they look, their age, gender, etc.). Try to be as detailed as possible in your visualization to make it seem as real as possible. What are you discussing? Visualize the types of conversation you may have. Include in your visualization the reactions, as well as gestures and other nonverbal behavior you and the person or people are using. What sort of things did you visualize which made you feel good about the exchange? Write down your visualization from beginning to end. In your written visualization write down the dialogue you are having. After you have written your visualization down, play it back in your mind. Record your visualized successful social exchange and play it back if you prefer to learn by listening (for auditory learners). For kinesthetic learners, act out your visualization using gestures. You can also practice the dialogues you visualized with another student in class using what you have written. Not only may this type of visualization help develop confidence in social skills, but it is an excellent way to study English independently by anticipating conversational topics.

### **Developing Rapport**

Being able to create rapport with someone is important in having a successful interpersonal exchange. If rapport is not established, it is unlikely that a conversation will carry on for very long. Rapport is considered as “paying another person or group of people the compliment of meeting them where they are, physically and mentally, at a given time” (Walker, 2000, p. 41).

### **Listening Skills**

When engaging in a conversation, listening skills will play a large part in developing rapport. Listening skills will determine whether the person you are speaking with sees you as having good interpersonal skills. Showing interest in what the other person is saying will give the impression that you have excellent communication skills.

There are a number of ways students can develop rapport through listening skills. This includes both verbal and nonverbal behavior. Verbal behavior may include paralinguistics consisting of the use of vocalizations and reaction words while listening. Paralinguistics may involve the use of sounds which take the place of words such as “*uh, uh huh, shh,* and other clicks, snorts, and sniffs” (Caputo, Hazel & McMahon, 1997, p. 162). Such paralinguistics is often not discussed in textbooks, and although students may be aware of their use in their own language, such as the Japanese use of reaction words such as *so desu ka, naruhodo,* and *he* to show surprise, they may not be aware of their English equivalents. The following are some reaction words and sounds that students may use to show that they are actively listening to build rapport:

- Wow, that's great!
- Is that so?
- I see...
- Hmmm
- Oh really!

Students should be encouraged to use such reaction words and sounds during conversation activities, which may be integrated with the current textbook in use, or during fluency practice. Encouraging the use of such responses may eventually lead students to become better aware of the importance of their use in active

listening as a way to build rapport. Eventually students may come to use such reaction words and sounds spontaneously as they do in their native language.

### **Asking questions and responding verbally**

Listening actively to what someone else is saying builds rapport by showing that you are interested in the other person and what they are saying. Listening actively and building rapport also involves asking questions about what the other person is saying. Questions may involve asking for further explication about the topic under discussion. Responding verbally may involve self-disclosure by contributing your own ideas, opinions, and experiences in support of the topic under discussion, or initiating a new topic in order to keep the conversation going.

Self-disclosure may take place on many levels, from simply describing your experiences, talking about your job, or what you enjoy doing during your free time when initially speaking with someone, to more intimate personal information usually shared only with close acquaintances. When meeting someone for the first time, self-disclosure may involve describing simple experiences, discussing what you enjoy doing in your free time, or sharing simple factual information about yourself. As you get to know someone, self-disclosure may involve disclosing information on a more personal level.

Although describing experiences or discussing what you enjoy doing in your free time is a com-

mon way for people to achieve rapport based on self-disclosure, you should avoid disclosing too many personal details too soon as this may make the other person uncomfortable, and have the opposite effect of distancing themselves (Caputo et al., 1997). Another reason to avoid disclosing personal thoughts and feelings too soon is that such disclosure may be uncomfortable to some people based on different cultural norms as,

The notion of self-disclosure as a necessary ingredient for developing strong, healthy interpersonal relationships is not accepted in many cultures. The Japanese believe it is better to put on a 'good face' rather than displease their listener or guest by being honest and open. (Caputo, et al. 1997, p. 114).

In terms of self-disclosure, you should match levels of self-disclosure to that of your speaking partner to establish a comfortable level of rapport.

### **Nonverbal behavior**

Showing that you are listening and interested in what someone is saying not only involves verbal behavior, but nonverbal behavior as well. This may be in the form of nodding your head to show agreement or empathy, maintaining the appropriate amount of eye contact, paying attention to how close you stand to or away from someone, and the use of touch, all of which may be based on cultural norms (Ratliffe & Hudson, 1988). When taking part in an interpersonal exchange involving

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someone with a different cultural background, rapport may be achieved by sensitively adjusting and positioning yourself if signs of anxiety or discomfort are noticed. Such sensitivity will not only assist in developing interpersonal skills during intercultural social situations, but will also assist in building interpersonal skills in general in that “the reading of body language, therefore, is one of the most significant skills of good listening” (Bolton, 1986, p. 78). This may be achieved by being aware of how the other person is using nonverbal communication such as gestures, eye contact, touch (if any), proximity, and posture. Try to match it or ‘synchronize’ yourself with how the other person is using nonverbal communication without ‘parroting’ them. By matching or synchronizing with the nonverbal behavior of the person with whom you are speaking, you will create an unconscious response in the other person that might help them feel that they are understood.

### **Initiating a conversation assignment**

Teachers may provide practice for initiating conversations by having one student (or a pair of students) sit or stand somewhere in the classroom with another student coming up to them to initiate a conversation. Before doing so, they may prepare to tell about an experience or comment about a recent event. If trying to take part in a conversation already taking place (which the other students may prepare beforehand), they may ‘hover’ and listen in to initiate an opening with a comment. The comment may be in the form of adding extra information to the topic under discussion. The comment may create an opening for further conversation. Comments may also begin with the words *That’s interesting, I know how you feel, I think....* Students should be encouraged to also use a means of an entry such as smiling, making eye contact, giving a compliment, or saying *hello*.

### **Conversation style**

As with nonverbal communication and self-disclosure, the way you handle conversations may also be influenced by cultural norms. Sakamoto (1982) compares the differences between Western and Japanese conversation style to tennis and bowling, Western style conversation being like tennis where you serve the ball in the form of

the conversational topic and one’s partner hits it back by adding their own spin on the topic. The object of the tennis match is to keep the ball going with the ball being hit back and forth quickly. On the other hand, Japanese conversation style is more like bowling. The speaker is given time to roll their topic ‘bowling ball’ while their conversation partner or partners listen carefully as it rolls down the lane. The other speaker or speakers do not quickly respond or interrupt as this is happening. You only respond after being certain that the ‘bowling ball’ has made its run. Once this is ascertained, then it is the other person’s turn to bowl. Such an exchange does not require a quick succession of exchanges as in the Western ‘tennis’ style conversation.

If unaware of these cultural differences, unfair conclusions could be drawn about the interpersonal skills of your partner. A Japanese person may think that the Westerner is impolite for not allowing their partner to complete what they are saying. A Westerner may think that the conversation style of a Japanese person is unexciting in that the Japanese person does not quickly ‘serve back the ball.’

In developing interpersonal skills for differing conversation styles, students may watch films or television dramas to observe how the characters interact during a conversation. Students may take notes regarding how topics develop and change during the conversation.

### **Conclusion**

Developing interpersonal competence as part of the language learning process will actively engage students in communicative language learning activities as well as give them confidence to use their language skills outside the classroom. This requires a balance between developing such skills within the current cultural background as well as anticipating future social situations that may be intercultural in nature.

It is simply not enough to develop the language skills of students without also developing their interpersonal skills. This must be done in a way that will make them competent, confident, and effective communicators who are willing and able to interact with others in a positive manner, both inside and outside the classroom. Developing both language skills as well as interpersonal skills should be the basis of any

communicative language teaching approach.

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**Ronald Schmidt-Fajlik** has been teaching in Japan for over 10 years. He has an M.Ed. ELT from the University of Manchester. His research interests include educational psychology, pedagogy, intercultural communication, and visual culture. He is currently an associate professor at Ibaraki University in Japan.



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