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**Communication Competence:
A Malaysian Perspective**

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Introduction

Communication competence has been studied in a diverse array of scholarship such as human-computer interaction, marketing, gerontology, institutional contexts, conflict, and intercultural relations (for more, see Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Interesting to note though, despite this vast literature, communication competence lacks definitional consensus (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Even though a plethora of studies on communication competence exist, scholars studying the concept are still perplexed with what constitutes communication competence and also there are others who express concern about the lack of theory (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Tracing the related literature on communication competence might provide some insights into the underlying elements of communication competence. This essay attempts to put forth those elements.

Definitions of the Term

For decades, linguists have been interested in the notion of competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Chomsky's (1965) earlier conception that competence is "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" (p. 4) omits performance which to Hymes (1972) lacks the interactional (behavioral) element of communication. Based on this critique, Hymes (1972) offers a description of communication competence as:

I should take competence as the general term for the capability of a person. Competence is dependent on both (tacit) *knowledge* and (ability for) *use*. ... The specification of ability for use as part of competence allows for the role of noncognitive factors, such as motivation, as partly determining competence. In speaking of competence, it is especially important not to separate cognitive from affective and volitive. (p. 282-283)

Basically, Hymes suggests that knowledge and ability for use (skill) are required to be perceived competent and that cognition, affection, and volition as part of achieving that level. For us to understand an individual's communicative performance (and hence competence), one has to take into consideration the individual and his or her interlocutor's competence and the interactional event (Hymes, 1972). Even though both Chomsky and Hymes contribute to the understanding of competence, their early definitions of the concept lack detailed explanations to be useful as a theoretical concept of competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984).

Moving away from the linguists whose interest on competence is language-based, scholars of communication are more concerned with the pedagogical aspect of communication competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984; McCroskey, 1984). Similar to Hymes, Wiemann and Backlund's (1980) review of work in competence noted two similar categories of competence, namely the cognitive and behavioral perspectives, noting that communication is situated in the behavioral category. Arguing that competence should involve both cognition and behavior, Wiemann and Backlund view communication competence as:

The ability [i.e. cognitive ability] of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he (she) may successfully accomplish [by employing skills] his (her) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (her) fellow interactant within the constraints of the situation [adaptation and appropriateness]. (p. 188)

Other scholars, Cooley and Roach (1984) offer three criteria on coming to terms with a general theorizing of the concept. They suggest that a theory of competence would take into consideration the physiological (age, sex and the like), psychological (that is cognitive constructs, affective constructs, personality constructs, and motivation) and social/cultural

makeup of the individuals suggesting physiological and psychological categories as the minimal requirements to be perceived competent. Hence, a general definition which might fit into this suggestion would be: “Communication competence is the demonstration of communication knowledge through the appropriate use of communication skills.”

In addition to knowledge and skill, two other features often emerge in the discussions of communication competence: adaptability and appropriateness. In his research, Spitzberg (1988) found that appropriateness and effectiveness were mostly present in his assessment of the communicative competence literature. Duran (1992), on the other hand, claims that adaptability is the most pertinent feature, where adaptability seems to be a universally accepted component in the communication competence construct. Several other researchers who share similar views assert that communication competence is:

- (i) “a function of one’s ability to **adapt** to differing social constraints” (Duran, 1983, p. 320).
- (ii) “an individual’s ability to **adapt** effectively to the surrounding environment over time” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 5).
- (iii) important in interpersonal interactions asserting that “**adaptation** is an essential, defining feature of interpersonal communication” (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995, p.5).

Additionally, communication competence,

- (i) is “the ability of an individual to demonstrate knowledge of the **appropriate** communicative behavior in a given situation” (Larson, Backlund, Redmond & Barbour, 1978, p.16).
- (ii) “can be demonstrated by observing a communication situation and identifying behaviors that would be **appropriate** or inappropriate in that situation” (McCroskey & Beatty, 1998, p. 227).
- (iii) “*the knowledge of **appropriate** communication patterns in a given situation and the ability to use the knowledge [italics in original]*”(Cooley & Roach, 1984, p.25).
- (iv) is interculturally dependent. “ICC (*intercultural communication competence*) involves the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and **appropriately** with members of different cultures” (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208). “*competent* communication consists of behaviors that are regarded as effective and appropriate” (p. 209).

Those who disagree with these two features, question the validity of what is appropriate and effective (Wilson & Sabee, 2003), which differs when context is taken into consideration.

Individuals can accomplish effective communication through adaptation which can be seen in four patterns of behavior (Burgoon et al., 1995). First, *behavioral matching* occurs when behaviors of both interactants are very much like one another. These patterns include mirroring, interactional synchronicity, reciprocity, and convergence. *Complementarity* is when each individual’s patterns are different from the other but complements the other in some ways. Then *divergence*, as the name implies, shows a pattern dissimilar from at least one of the interactants such as dissynchrony where there is an obvious lack of coordination between the interactants. And finally, *compensation* occurs when interactants have opposite but avoidance patterns of behavior. So, when adapting, individuals follow patterns which assist them in creating a debonair, comfortable, and conducive environment. In most

instances, adaptation to a particular communication situation employs appropriate and effective use of knowledge and skills.

The task of considering whether or not a communicative behavior is appropriate is a difficult one. Who gets to say that a speech is appropriate, or by what standards is a behavior appropriate? (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). In a study of cultural differences on the perception of appropriate skills in communication, Hwang, Chase, & Kelly (1980) found that Chinese Americans and Chinese differ in their perception of some aspects of the communication competence in the scale developed by Kelly. A principal components analysis shows that Chinese construe effectiveness as both efficacy and problem-solving while Chinese Americans differentiate efficacy from empathy. Another interesting result shows that in the Chinese sample, “opinion leadership” emerges as one of the factors of competence while in the Chinese American sample, “charisma” was factored.

In the Malaysian context, culture plays a big role in communication. As a country which is comprised of three ethnic groups; the Malays (52 %), Chinese (30%) and Indians (8%) (Wikipedia, 2007), perceptions of communication competence can be varied. However, Asma (1996) asserts that, “while we differ in many symbolic expressions, our common denominator lies in our deep-seated Asian values” (p. xiii). A study of the three groups on Malaysian workplace communication competence, Choon (2004) found that three dimensions of communication competence emerged: self-confidence, respect-relational and, self-image. Looking at the communication style of one of these ethnic groups, the Malays, Lailawati (2006) contends that for the Malaysian Malays, their communication is partly shaped by the religion they embrace. On this note, Asma (1996) has earlier recommended that Malay leaders and managers who wish to win the hearts and minds of their subordinates are expected to role model their behaviors based on the cultural and religious values of their subordinates. Asma continues to provide suggestions on Malaysian effective leadership behaviors (and hence communication) which include building relationships, demonstrating expertise in both technical and human management, expressing concern for subordinates’ welfare and development through *IMAN* (faith in God), and sharing stories through talks and chats.

So needless to say, judgment of appropriateness is contextually, situationally, and culturally bound, and for that matter appropriate communicative behavior in one situation may not apply in another. However, with adaptation, a particular behavior may seem appropriate in other cultures (or context or situation) depending on how well one is able to use one’s skills.

Communication competence and communication skills have at times been used interchangeably as though to mean the same. So, a distinction between competence and skill has to be made. According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2002), ‘an individual’s interpersonal skills, along with his or her knowledge and motivation, enable the occurrence of certain outcomes that are judged interpersonally competent in a particular interactional context’ (p. 574). Relatedly, McCroskey and Beatty (1998) assert that competence lies “within the cognitive domain” while skill is demonstrated “within the psychomotor domain” (p. 227) claiming that skill is still necessary in competence (McCroskey, 1984). In this respect, competence has both knowledge and skills component. The difference, then, between competence and skill is that competence is the use of knowledge and the appropriate application of that knowledge in adapting to a situation while skill is a specific behavior

which someone is good at and demonstrated based on the appropriate knowledge adapted to a particular situation.

Therefore, communication competence resides in the human cognitive domain, but both the process and product are demonstrated through the use of skills in the expression of verbal and nonverbal communication. Cognitive intelligence would be the internal processing mechanism of *communication* messages while the communicative behaviors would take these messages beyond the confinement of the cognitive domain.

Narrowing the concept of communication competence, Spitzberg (1983) suggests that relational competence involves five assumptions: that are contextual, appropriate and effective, judged as a continuum of effectiveness and appropriateness, functional, and an interpersonal impression formed between the communicators. In another examination of the competence criteria, Spitzberg and Capuch (2002) delineate six qualities that they found related to interpersonal relations: fidelity, satisfaction, efficiency, effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethics. Of these, appropriateness and effectiveness are the most common hybrid (Spitzberg & Capuch, 2002). These propositions suggest that both appropriate communicative behavior and relationship maintenance require an individual to utilize his or her reasoning ability and to be able to demonstrate the chosen skills for effective interactions.

Other reviews of the competence literature include competence as goal achievement, effectiveness, and successful relationship building in addition to the existing categories of behavior and social cognition. Discussions of these elements of communication competence can be found elsewhere (e.g. Farace et al., 1978; Jablin, Cude, House, Lee & Roth, 1994; Jablin & Sias, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Zeroing In On the Definition of Communication Competence

Wilson and Sabee (2003) assert that definitional problems and lack of theory of communication competence are interrelated concerns which can possibly be treated by employing a “theoretical term” rather than a construct. According to these researchers, a construct is defined individually and can be “in isolation from larger theories ... and their meaning arises from, vertical connections with observables” (p. 6) whereas a theoretical term “derives its meaning not just from summarizing observables, but primarily ‘from the part it plays in the whole theory in which it is embedded, and from the role of the theory itself’ [Kaplan, 1965, p. 55 cited in Wilson and Sabee, 2003]” (p. 6). So, proposing a theoretical term in defining communication competence (rather than treating it as a construct), Wilson and Sabee argue that:

a call to explicate communicative competence no longer is satisfied solely by a conceptual definition, nor even by an accompanying measurement procedure. Rather, a call to explicate communicative competence is an appeal to analyze its meaning and role within a theory of communication (i.e., its horizontal connections) (p.7)

With a theoretical approach in mind when explicating the communication competence construct, Wilson and Sabee draw together five theories of communication they believe related to communication competence and present these theories as families of communication theories: four psychologically-based (subdivided into message processing and message production) and one socially-driven (see Table 1). As can be seen from the choice of theories, communication competence is heavily situated in the realm of cognitive processing and the products of these processes demonstrated in the interactional exchanges of verbal and nonverbal communication in the social domain.

Table 1 Theoretical Perspectives on Communication Competence

	Psychological Perspectives				Social Perspectives
	Theories of message processing		Theories of message production		Dialectic Theories of Relationships
	Expectancy Theories	Attribution Theories	GPA Theories	Hierarchical Theories	
Central theme	Competent communicators are responsive to expectations	Competent communicators are optimistic yet realistic about success	Competent communicators possess an anticipatory mind-set	Competent communicators implement action programs skillfully and gracefully	Competent interactions are sensitive to the demands and possibilities of contradiction
Qualities needed for competence:					
a. Knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Situationally and culturally relevant expectancies 2. Factors affecting own reward valence 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Factors influencing success/failure (obstacles) 2. Behaviors that increase chance of success 3. Possible mitigating information 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Factors relevant to forming goals 2. Obstacles to achieving goals 3. Plans for achieving goals 4. Plans for integrating multiple goals 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Programs/plans for achieving goals 2. Concrete behaviors to enact programs 3. Conditions under which to enact programs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal, relational, and cultural standards for judging competence (evolving)
b. Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying relevant expectancies 2. Recognizing strategic violations 3. Following or positively violating expectancies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognizing when obstacles are/aren't controllable 2. Enacting behaviors that increase chance of success 3. Recognizing multiple potential interpretations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying "situationally relevant" goals 2. Enacting plans 3. Monitoring and adjusting plans 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recalling/integrating levels of procedural knowledge 2. Implementing programs quickly, smoothly without error 3. Adjusting attention based on task 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Behaviors that promote dialogue (listening, negotiating, etc.)
Potential source of incompetence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of knowledge 2. Inaccurate assessment of reward valence 3. Conflicting expectancies 4. Narrow latitude of acceptable behavior 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Learned" helplessness 2. Lack of knowledge/skill about behaviors that lead to success 3. Depression/stress 4. Attributional biases(automatically) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forming "inappropriate" goals 2. Lack plan alternatives 3. Impaired online planning focus 4. Cognitive overload 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of programs 2. Lack of rehearsal 3. Time demands 4. Too much arousal 5. Multiple task demands 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Power discrepancies 2. Disapproval by larger social network 3. Relationship reconfigurations 4. Individual qualities (need to control others; attachment)

Adapted from Wilson & Sabee (2003), *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction Skills*.

Looking across Table 1, the theories are divided into a cognitive and a social dimension. The cognitive dimension emphasizes the need to have knowledge for message processing and the ability to process the knowledge for message production. Apart from the need to have knowledge, relevant skills are required to process and produce messages. These skills are used in accurately perceiving, identifying and recognizing stimuli, particularly important messages which are implied and buried under nonverbal behaviors. A skillful communicator, then, would be one who is able to recognize the discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal cues, who associates those messages which appear to be related, and then transforms the perceived and stored information into appropriate and adaptable responses. So, in message processing and message production, knowledge and skills are critical in developing and producing effective messages.

The social dimension of this theoretical explication delineates the interactional aspect of the communication process. Knowledge involves knowing the personal, relational, and cultural standards of competences and the skills are depicted in the behavior of the communicator. Inability to perform the "standards" of what is considered competent results in perception of incompetent communication.

From the explication of the theoretical concepts of communication competence above, a common thread which seems to run through all the theories is that communication is a psychological as well as a physiological process, at the minimum, and sociological/cultural make-up at the best (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Even though "communication competence will not have one set meaning" (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p.41), the least that such diverse usage of a term would depict is some common underlying basic characteristics of what constitutes communication competence. Otherwise, with so "many" meanings for a single term,

communication competence could mean “almost anything related to communication effectiveness.”

So, even though no consensual agreement on what constitutes communication competence has been reached (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Redmond, 1985; Wilson & Sabee, 2003), some common features seem to appear in the definitions of communication competence presented in this review. Based on the viewpoints and expositions of these concepts, four elements largely emerge: knowledge, skill, adaptation, and appropriateness. So, drawing from these viewpoints, we can say that communication competence refers to one’s adaptation of a communication situation by demonstrating skills in appropriating knowledge relevant to the communication situation and context. Said differently, to be competent, one has to have the communication knowledge in order to develop the appropriate skills that can be used to adapt to situational demands.

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