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How can I help my students increase communicative competence using an action research approach?

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This paper is about my study conducted in my module of English Teaching Methods during the 2019 spring semester and discusses the potential of action research conducted in a university module of increasing a lecturer's (my) and students' communicative competence through working together. In my view, communicative competence means how we can effectively communicate with others so as to reach mutual understanding (Kondo, 2018). My question to the government policy, which has tended to equate communicative competence with scores or levels in popular English proficiency tests, led to my co-conceptualising the meaning of communicative competence, as shown in Figure 1, through working with junior high school English language teachers in Japan in my PhD study. This shows that communicative competence consists of the following six factors: willingness, empathy, openness, creativity, originality and confidence. It illustrates the idea that the six factors can interrelatedly help us communicate with others effectively and that we can develop these qualities through practice in the context of actual communication.
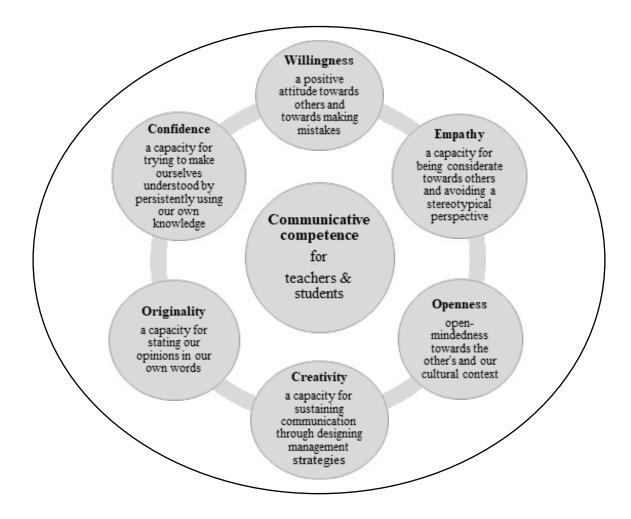

Figure 1. How one can become a competent communicator from a holistic viewpoint (Kondo, 2018).

My PhD study in turn encouraged me to investigate how I could incorporate these ideas into the preservice teacher education setting and develop an idea for a systematic form of preservice teacher education based on an action research approach and which aimed at increasing preservice teachers' communicative competence. I organised the module as follows:

1. the students designed a 50-minute demo class in pairs (each student was in charge of the first or last 25 minutes) and other students joined the demo class as students;

2. during post-demo class discussions, the students divided into small groups and shared their reflections on the demo class;

3. after the group discussion, each group provided a one-minute group discussion summary.

This series of activities and my comment on the demo class formed synchronous reflection activities within one class. In addition to this:

4. the students wrote and submitted their reflective journals regarding the week's demo class;

5. a week later, I distributed the newsletter which contained all the students' reflective journals so that they were able to read their classmates' reflective journals and also read what they had written and re-interpret their learning on their own;

6. further, the students watched the video of their demo class and re-reflected on it and submitted a final report.

Another series of activities formed asynchronous reflection activities outside the class as seen in 4 to 6. We were in these continual "synchronous and asynchronous" (Ioannidou-Koutselini & Patsalidou, 2015, p. 128) reflection cycles. I will look at how the continuity of our synchronous and asynchronous reflection cycles might have affected or increased the students' communicative competence with the data from the students' journals and final reports.

Empathy

First, the students have learnt to show a great deal of empathy with their classmates through sharing their reflective journals. In particular, they have learnt to elaborate in writing "points to be improved without hurting the classmates' feelings" (Student A, August 7, 2019). Another student also mentioned the value of "analytical" writing, not "emotional" writing and explained it as "a significant skill for enhancing each other" (Student B, June 21 and August 7, 2019). This quality of suggesting points to be improved empathetically might have helped mitigate power relations between student teachers and observers (other students) and created an empathetic atmosphere in the module. Along these lines, it might also be added that the Japanese new Course of Study suggests "fostering a positive attitude towards communicating in foreign languages, being considerate towards the others (listeners/readers/speakers/writers)" as one objective of foreign language learning (The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017, my translation).

Creativity

Second, the students have learnt to develop the way they design their own writing style through reading their classmates' reflective journals, which may be relevant to increasing their creativity.

One student wrote, "I have learnt new word choices and writing structure through copying the classmates' writing skills which I liked very much" (Student C, August 7, 2019). Another student found that her writing tended to be "flat" and reading the classmates' journals made her aware of "the necessity of avoiding repetition and using paraphrase" (Student A, August 7, 2019). In classic literatures on communicative competence, "paraphrase" is also mentioned as one of the "coping strategies" to help us sustain communication (see Canale 1983, Savignon 1997). "Simplicity" and "appropriateness" in writing were also referred to as aspects which they were "not aware of by themselves until they read the others' writing" (Student B, August 7, 2019). These findings in turn encouraged them to "avoid boring the readers" (Student D, August 7, 2019), which might also be relevant to the quality of empathy as explained above.

Originality

Third, the students have begun to take the initiative to adapt themselves to sharing their journals with other classmates for mutual learning. One student wrote, "caring how other classmates respond to my writing led to my careful consideration of coherence and search for better writing structure" (Student E, August 7, 2019). Another student referred to "the need to take [his] responsibility as an observer" and co-learner "for the sake of the classmates" (Student F, August 7, 2019). Kondo (2018, p. 113) explains that this spontaneous act of "adapting oneself so as to make meanings may be a way of demonstrating one's originality." The idea is inspired by Widdowson (2003, p. 42) who identifies "proficiency" as the act by which you "take the initiative and strike out on your own."

Openness

Fourth, the students have considered what their classmates' demo class meant to them and what it meant to their own learning, and they have started to "practice" their learning "in further practices" (Student G, August 7, 2019). One student learnt a new viewpoint from another classmate and tried to observe further demo classes from the same viewpoint as this other classmate (Student H, August 7, 2019). The other student wrote that the classmates' journals revealed how they had felt before or during their demo classes and reading their journals enabled her to appreciate their demo classes more deeply (Student I, August 7, 2019). In this way, they have shown their open-mindedness towards the process of sharing, co-constructing and enhancing each other's learning and coming to appreciate each other. As one outcome of their open-mindedness towards the learning process and their classmates, one student mentioned that "the content of demo classes got better and better over time" (Student D, August 7, 2019). This may be in line with Canagarajah (2013, p. 5) who includes "openness to difference, patience to co-construct meaning, and an acceptance of negotiated outcomes" in the meaning of communicative competence.

Willingness

Fifth, the students have shown their willingness to learn. One student mentioned the need to make her "Japanese writing skills" better and her "attempt to copy the classmates' writing style which she liked" for improvement (Student I, August 7, 2019). Another student mentioned her weekly attempts to consider better expressions, having been inspired by the classmates' journals (Student E, August 7, 2019). This conforms to my interpretation of willingness which includes "willingness for our own language learning" (Kondo, 2018, p. 104). In relation to this, relevant literatures include the quality of "risk-taking," accepting errors, and learning from practice in their understanding of communicative competence (see Savignon 1976, Canagarajah 2014).

Confidence

Lastly, we had a journal-sharing session in which the students explained what they liked about their classmates' writing. It appears that this session helped them increase their confidence about their own writing skills. One student wrote that she felt more confident in her words when she knew a classmate appreciated her writing (Student I, August 7, 2019). Reading the weekly newsletters also enabled them to recognise the development in their writing skills, in terms of word choices and writing structure, as also mentioned in the section for creativity. Relevant literatures identify becoming confident with feeling relaxed (see Savignon 1997, Canagarajah 2014), which might lead to the students' feeling more comfortable with their writing.

In this way, it might be that the data possibly shows that that the students have increased each aspect of communicative competence specifically through sharing reflective journals as part of the asynchronous reflection activities. Although this study only looked at the students' writing data, the findings might suggest that continuous cycles of synchronous and asynchronous reflection activities in a university module could help preservice teachers learn from each other and increase the quality of their communicative competence.

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