THE 12 Cs FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS:
What is Communicative Competence?

Language ability consists of different competencies which enable us to communicate in a variety of circumstances. Language includes not only the pronunciation, structure, and vocabulary which form one's knowledge of a language, but also the ability to communicate in social settings, to use English academically in the content areas, and to use English in culturally appropriate ways. These are active uses of English. This Bulletin will explore all of these competencies, their impact on second language learners, and suggestions for teachers to follow in order to ensure that comprehension occurs in academic learning.

KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH:
GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCY

Grammatical competency consists of three aspects of English: pronunciation, language structure, and vocabulary.

Pronunciation is the use of English speech sounds in a comprehensible manner that enables communication to take place. This requires adequate command of the ways in which we make sounds to produce words, phrases, and sentences, including appropriate stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Language structure knowledge is the ability to make appropriate use of verb tenses, singular and plural forms, word order, question formation, connectors, etc.

Vocabulary knowledge is the ability to form, pronounce, and use words appropriately.

Native speakers of English internalize knowledge of English through use in various family and neighborhood settings; once in school, they develop literacy, problem solving, and critical thinking skills which deepen and build upon knowledge acquired inductively since birth.

For second language learners, however, English is acquired in two ways: learning and practicing language structures through exercises and actively using the structures through tasks and activities. By far the most meaningful learning of language structures occurs through active use of English through tasks and activities. Normal communication in tasks and activities results in higher retention and a greater ability to apply grammar accurately in a variety of settings.

USE OF ENGLISH: SOCIAL, ACADEMIC, AND CULTURAL COMPETENCIES

The social use of English is the ability to participate in social interaction, to engage in personal expression and enjoyment, and to use appropriate strategies to extend knowledge of the language.
The academic use of language is the ability to interact in the classroom, to use English to problem solve and think critically, and to apply appropriate strategies to construct knowledge.

Culturally appropriate use of English is the ability to recognize and use idiomatic language and regional accents, to use formal vs. informal language, and to use narrative and expository language according to audience, purpose, and setting. It also involves using nonverbal communication strategies to extend cultural competence.

Native English speakers have more embedded background knowledge and experience and no first language interference to practice English in social, academic, and cultural contexts. Because their first language, English, is internalized from birth, native English speakers are equipped with the building blocks they need to improve their social communication, to develop and use academic language, and to exhibit cultural appropriateness.

Second language learners, on the other hand, do not have the same depth of experience in the knowledge and use of English. Consequently, their production of language is consciously and unconsciously affected by the home language. This is the source of errors in correct pronunciation and grammar or in using appropriate vocabulary for different situations.

HOW TO INCREASE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence - the ability to use age- and grade-level appropriate oral and written language - is the goal of any classroom setting, whether the focus is language arts or specific content such as math, science, and history. For learners whose first language is not English, here are some suggestions which all teachers can follow:

1. For younger learners, embed the use of language structures in meaningful activities which help them to practice those appropriate structures; for older learners, combine meaningful practice with direct discussion about grammar when appropriate.

2. Second language learners, by virtue of having acquired another language, have a built-in metacognitive perspective on how language works. Use this perspective to actively talk about language and to point out unique aspects of pronunciation, language structure, and vocabulary and use in the different content areas.

3. Accurate and fluent use of English is the goal; however, second language learners need time and several exposures of correct language use to achieve the goal. Because of this, do not unduly correct these learners for improper usage. Focus rather on how they acquire and use conceptual knowledge. Accurate and fluent will emerge with time, as all second language learners go through varying phases of an "interlanguage" where use may be inappropriate or incorrect.

4. Remember that, in addition to several exposures, second language learners require multiple modality exposure in language. Build in audio, visual, and tactile use of language, therefore, whenever appropriate or possible.

5. Learning occurs through several means; therefore, provide a lot of appropriate modeling through routine classroom procedures, through the application of information in tasks and activities, and through frequent use of collaborative and/or cooperative student grouping.

All teachers must provide language- and culture-sensitive instruction in an atmosphere that engenders learning. Recognizing that second language learners are "in process" in their language development and in their acculturation can set the context for teachers to talk about correct language use, provide grammatically appropriate interventions, and to enrich the learning environment with modeling. This means creatively using English in age- and grade-appropriate ways to broaden the contextual use of the language.

Second language learners will thus develop an increased knowledge of English through usage in socially, academically, and culturally appropriate ways.

SOURCES:
ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students (1997). TESOL.