

and pluricultural competence which is deliberately transitory and heterogeneous, although unified in one repertoire, but that he or she should also have been able to work using varied learning materials, have tested various learning routes and have accordingly enriched his or her own perceptions of languages, cultures and learning pathways.

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## Perspectives on language proficiency and aspects of competence<sup>2</sup>

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### 1. Theoretical perspectives

The purpose of the study of which this paper is a summary was to explore issues in the nature of proficiency and its relationship to competence as part of a process of trying to identify possible categories for description in a common reference framework.

There is some confusion over whether or not the concept of ability should be included in the term 'competence' due to the use of the term in two schools of thought which come together in language learning: a cognitive school (linguistics) and a behavioural school (communication).

- From a linguistic viewpoint, following Chomsky's original distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky 1965:4), competence has been seen as 'a certain mental state' excluding ability (Chomsky 1980:48). Widdowson (1989:130) considered that Chomsky's pragmatic competence does implicitly include ability, a line developed by McNamara (1995:163) who sees Chomsky's pragmatic competence as a model of idealised performance. But many applied linguists

who have developed key aspects of models of communicative competence have explicitly maintained the Chomskyan distinction, for example Canale and Swain (1980:6–7) and Gumperz (1982; 1984).

- From a behavioural viewpoint, however, competence has been consistently taken to include 'a combination of knowledge and skill' with 'proficiency in skills ... (being) required for the manifestation of communicative competence' (Wiemann and Backlund 1980:190). Hymes understands competence 'to be dependent on two things: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use' (Hymes 1971:16; 1972:282) and as McNamara (1995:162) points out, Hymes' model includes a range of non-cognitive attributes taken over from Goffman (1967:224) such as gameness, composure, presence of mind, stage confidence, attributes related to the 'naturalness' and 'poise' included by Savignon (1972) in her foreign language assessment criteria in 1972.

The behavioural view implies the centrality of socio-cultural competence in addition to such 'personality' factors. Widdowson (1983:83–4) considers that competence consists of schematic (socio-cultural) and systemic (linguistic) knowledge, with

<sup>2</sup> This study has been abstracted from a study by the author of the same title (available from Modern Languages Section, DECS, Council of Europe, F\_67075 Strasbourg, France).



two forms of culturally determined schematic knowledge as highlighted by Carrell (1983, 1987): (a) content schemata: conceptual, ideational knowledge; (b) formal schemata: rhetorical and organisational structure of different kinds of texts. Davies (1989:168–69) sees competence as ‘a set of scripts or schemata or ritual interchanges, plus individual differences in terms of proficiency as realised in fluency, style and creativity’. The range of scripts will depend on what kind of life one leads. As Parks (1985:182) remarks, it is not the size of one’s repertoire of scripts which is important, but their adequacy: they need only be as extensive as the activities one wants to pursue.

Davies (1989:160) concludes that communicative competence is difficult if not impossible to define and that ‘it slides back and forth between knowledge and control (or proficiency)’ – cf. Bialystok & Sharwood-Smith (1985). Davies calls the former knowledge *what* and the latter knowledge *how*, and sees fluency as being part of the knowledge *how*. This is not so different from Spolsky’s *Knowing a language*, and *Knowing how to use a language* (Spolsky 1989:50–51), or indeed from the distinction commonly made between declarative knowledge (knowing things) and procedural knowledge (knowing ‘how’). Some writers (Anderson 1982) consider that the latter (knowing ‘how’) is developed from the former (knowing things) while others (Bialystok and Sharwood-Smith 1985) consider the two types of knowledge to be independent, with the former developing from unanalysed to analysed whilst the latter develops from controlled to automatic application (c.f. Schmidt 1990:133–5 for discussion).

Taylor (1988:166) proposes the use of the term ‘communicative proficiency’ defining proficiency as ‘the ability to make use of competence’ and performance as ‘what is done when proficiency is put to use’. Proficiency is here seen as something between competence and performance (Vollmer 1981:160), which offers a certain parallel to Halliday’s concept of meaning potential, what a speaker can mean, which Halliday claims is ‘not unlike Dell Hymes’ notion ‘communicative competence’, except that Hymes defines this in terms of ‘competence’ in the Chomskyan sense of what the speaker knows, whereas we are talking of a potential’ (Halliday 1973:54) – of the range of options characteristic of a specific situation type (1978:109).

Bachman (1990) sees two separate knowledge bases: knowledge structures (knowledge of the world) and language competence (knowledge of language), which are acted upon by strategic competence in the relevant context of situation to execute language as a physical phenomenon through psychophysiological processes. Thus in his view communicative language use consists of a communicative language ability and strategic competence, which comes into play when that ability is

put to use. Skehan (1995a) argues for the addition of a factor he calls ‘ability for use’ alongside Bachman’s strategic competence, mediating between competences and the demands of the context. This concept relates to an information processing view of language use: as attentional demands increase, speech is likely to become more pragmatic, contextual and lexically organised (ibid: 16). In other words, in a situation demanding more processing, in a effort to safeguard fluency, the learner tends to trade off accuracy for communicative effectiveness. Skehan posits a shift in performance style in relation to the conditions and constraints of the communicative situation. In common with Faerch & Kasper (1983) and Bachman, Skehan considers that there is something other than competence (in the classic meaning of underlying innate ability) which comes into play as the learner allocates and balances resources differently to meet the demands of different tasks.

Thus, though advances have been made, and a degree of consensus seems to be emerging, the process of developing a model of communicative language use remains incomplete. Furthermore, the implications of conditions and constraints for performance have been neither incorporated satisfactorily into a descriptive model of language use, nor taken fully into account in the design of communicative activities in syllabuses or in the standardisation of assessment procedures.

## 2. User perspectives

In the absence of a widely available, validated model of communicative language use, practitioners have developed operational approaches to suit their needs, with varying degrees of theoretical input. In terms of describing language proficiency at different levels, an analysis of existing instruments (North 1994) suggests that there are two fundamentally different ways of describing attainment in foreign language learning:

- On the one hand there is a ‘quality’ view: how well does the learner perform in relation to selected aspects of proficiency? These ‘aspects’ may be defined separately for each level in a profile grid, or aspects considered salient at particular levels may be highlighted at those levels in a single holistic scale. Alderson (1991:72–74) calls such a perspective ‘assessor-oriented’ since it is intended to help improve consistency in the rating process as the assessors match what they see to what is described in the scale or grid. Bachman (1990:315–323) talks of ‘interactive-ability’, referring to the interaction between aspects of the learner’s proficiency in the given context. This view is primarily the ‘insider’ perspective of language specialists. The categories selected tend to be things teachers can observe (e.g. fluency, accuracy, appropriacy, pronunciation).

- On the other hand there is a 'can do' view: what tasks can he/she do? (Bachman 1990:303–315: 'real life') associated with reporting results from assessment (Alderson 1991:72–74: 'user -oriented') and/or with helping in the design of a syllabus or test (ibid: 'constructor-oriented'). Scales for self-assessment or for continuous assessment by the teacher (c.f. Brindley 1989 for a review) also often take this form since the teacher/learner here generalises from the course or life experience in a reflective reporting of the results of that experience in terms of what he/she can now do. This view is primarily an 'outsider' view of non-specialists. The categories selected tend to derive from a pseudo-sociological classification of real life tasks derived from a needs analysis (c.f. Munby 1978).

McNamara (1990 cited in Elder 1993) provides evidence for this distinction between the 'outsider' or task-completion perspective of employers and the 'insider' or quality perspective of teachers. This fits with evidence that non-specialist native speakers judge competence holistically in relation to fluency (Lennon 1990), intelligibility (Brindley 1989:122), appropriate socio-cultural behaviour (Oksaar 1992:15) and an ability to use strategies adroitly to keep communication going (DeKeyser 1988:115) in order to complete the task.

The pragmatism in the selection of operational categories is a reflection of the incomplete state of theory to offer a basis for the derivation of categories for either the 'insider' (qualitative) or the 'outsider' (real life) view. The state of play in relation to the qualitative description of aspects of communicative competence ('insider view') and in relation to the description of real life-related communicative language activities ('outsider view') is outlined below.

### 3. Models of communicative competence

There is a considerable amount of overlap between the three most influential models of communicative competence: Canale and Swain (1980, 1981, modified by Canale 1983), Van Ek (Van Ek 1986, Van Ek & Trim 1990) and Bachman (Bachman 1990, Bachman and Palmer 1982, Bachman and Palmer 1996). Each of the three models has been adjusted in succeeding versions, but the most significant difference between the three is that Bachman, as mentioned above, follows Faerch and Kasper (1983) in taking a far broader view of the role of strategies than either Canale or Van Ek and separates strategic competence completely from what he calls language competencies (grammatical, textual, illocutionary and socio-linguistic).

Success in confirming the supposed structure and components posited by such models by operationalising them in tests has been exceedingly limited, as

demonstrated by the Development of Bilingual Proficiency project at Toronto (Allen et al 1983; Harley et al 1990). In part this is due to a common failure to distinguish adequately between components of competence – which exist separately – and aspects of competence (Shaw 1992:10) or areas of knowledge (Bachman and Palmer 1984:35) – which do not necessarily do so. Even if components could be identified, the results obtained from empirical analyses are in any case dependent in a variety of ways on the sample of learners used (Carroll 1983:93; Czisko 1984:28 & 34; Farhady 1982:55; Sang et al 1986:60 & 70; Upshur and Homburg 1983:194) and the way in which the teaching matches the learning experience and learning style of the subjects concerned (Sang et al 1986).

#### 3.1. Strategic competence

Bachman defines strategic competence as 'a general ability, which enables an individual to make the most effective use of available abilities in carrying out a given task, whether that task be related to communicative language use or to non-verbal tasks' (Bachman 1990:102; 106). Faerch (1984:50) has noted: 'There is considerable disagreement as to whether strategies should be considered a particular type of psycholinguistic process (Selinker 1972), a particular type of psycholinguistic plan (Faerch and Kasper 1983) or a particular type of interactional process (Tarone 1981/83)', and the plethora of taxonomies and lack of clear distinctions between learning strategies (learning to learn) and communication strategies (an aspect of proficiency) have not simplified matters.

Furthermore, as the Canale and Swain and Van Ek models suggest, there was a tendency in earlier work on communication strategies to focus narrowly on what have been called compensation strategies. Perhaps as a result, of the 41 scales of language proficiency for spoken interaction included in North's (1994) survey, of which 27 were developed after Canale & Swain's model became available, only 3 take 'strategies' as a category. In one scale, strategies are a sub-category of 'interaction' and in the other two coverage is confined to repair and compensatory strategies.

A broader view of strategic competence would encompass in relation to spoken interaction:

- the planning, execution and assessment of the achievement of communicative goals (Faerch and Kasper 1983);
- the cognitive strategies for framing ideas in discussion, formulating and evaluating hypotheses (Barnes and Todd 1977);
- the collaborative strategies for eliciting, commenting on and referring to other contributions (Barnes and Todd 1977);



- the ability to keep discourse on course through ‘challenging’ for clarification (Burton 1980);
- the turn-taking and topic management strategies (Sinclair 1981, Kramsch 1986) which even advanced students often still have trouble with (Faerch and Kasper 1983:45);
- communication compensation strategies, both reduction strategies (Faerch and Kasper 1983) and propositional strategies (Kellerman et al 1987).

### 3.2. Pragmatic competence

One definition of pragmatic competence is ‘the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context’ (Thomas 1983:92). This interpretation fits with McNamara’s (1995) view that pragmatic competence represents the beginnings of a model of performance, is supported by Levinson’s statement that ‘...to invoke Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance, pragmatics is concerned solely with performance principles of language use’ (Levinson 1983:3) and is related to Skehan’s treatment of ‘ability for use’.

‘Speaker meaning’ – pragmatic competence – can be distinguished from ‘sentence meaning’ – linguistic competence (Thomas 1983:92 citing Leech 1983; Levinson 1983:17 citing Grice 1957). As well as core (dictionary) meanings, words acquire meaning through negotiation in use. Some learners just concern themselves with getting their meaning across through a combination of discourse and lexical skill: chunk-accumulating memorisers as opposed to pattern-making problem-solvers (Skehan 1986; 1989:36–7). Schmidt’s (1983) study of Wes, a Japanese artist on a 3 year stay in the US gives a classic, extreme profile of a very successful, rhetorically expressive communicator, who accumulated praxeogrammes of possible moves in given contexts (c.f. Ventola’s (1983) flow charts of what might happen in a service encounter) as well as routinized accessible but unanalysed conversational scripts to go with them (c.f. Widdowson 1989:132–3; 1990:91) which, in terms of Levinson’s (1983) features of pragmatics, displayed: good discourse functions, good implicature (Grice 1975), little textual cohesion but adequate coherence for spoken language, but which appears to have resulted in what Skehan (1995b:552–3) has dubbed ‘undesirable fluency’ (excessive proceduralisation) – though one should note that his interlocutors are not reported to have seen it like this.

If one takes the broad definition of pragmatic competence discussed above, then most of what is often understood under ‘fluency’ – including all the elements of Fillmore’s (1979) classic definition of mother tongue fluency (ability to talk at length; use coherent, dense expression – i.e. say something; have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts; be creative and imaginative with language)

– could be considered as related to pragmatic competence (speaking meaning) rather than linguistic competence. The word ‘fluent’ is often used even more broadly than this, in a way virtually indistinguishable from ‘proficient’ (Lennon 1990). Yet on the other hand few people would disagree that, as a minimum, one can think of proficiency in terms of accuracy as well as fluency (Brumfit 1984).

From a foreign language learning perspective, other core aspects of fluency relate to the automatization of declarative knowledge into procedures (Bialystok and Sharwood Smith 1985; Kennedy 1988; McLaughlin, Rossman and McLeod 1983:136–7) and these aspects are clearly psycholinguistic (C.f. Schmidt 1992 for a review of relevant theories).

Returning to the discussion above under ‘Theoretical perspectives’, the Brumfit accuracy/fluency distinction mirrors Davies’s knowledge *what* and knowledge *how*, and Spolsky’s knowing a language and knowing how to use a language, and also relates to Bialystok’s contrast between knowledge and control. In each case one could consider the former of the two aspects *knowledge*, the latter *skill*. Both aspects in each dichotomy are necessary for proficiency, and in all cases fluency belongs in the second aspect, skill. From a behavioural, communication theory perspective, there is no problem with seeing competence as a combination of knowledge and skill (Wiemann and Backlund 1980:190) and therefore for including fluency as part of competence. Nevertheless fluency fits uneasily into a model of communicative language competence divided into linguistic, pragmatic and strategic competence (as well as socio-linguistic competence) since, although one can argue that the natural contrast (as in the dichotomies cited) is between linguistic competence (language resources) and pragmatic competence (language use – including fluency), a case could be made that there are aspects of fluency in each of the three: linguistic, pragmatic and strategic.

### 3.3. Linguistic competence

It is far from easy to associate knowledge and control of particular linguistic forms with competence at a particular level. Some scales of language proficiency associate specific mistakes with different levels but this is problematic for several reasons:

Firstly, this focus suggests that progress is a question of making fewer errors, whereas the more the learner knows, the more likely he is to make errors. ‘The learner is more apt to make errors due to his first language knowledge the more he knows about the second language’ (Klein 1986:108).

Secondly, developmental stages are about emergence not accuracy – about a ‘qualitative change in performance’ which may well, however, leave gaps – which could be filled through teaching (Pienemann 1992:23–24).

Thirdly, learner performance styles vary according to the conditions and constraints of the task which create a tension between increasing complexity and retaining accuracy (Ellis 1985; Foster and Skehan 1994; Tarone 1983).

Descriptions of linguistic competence tend also to underestimate the importance of linguistic knowledge stored lexically as routines and patterns, prefabricated chunks. The fact that mother tongue speakers use such scripts and clichés all the time suggests that they are an aspect of foreign language competence at all levels.

### 3.4. Socio-cultural competence

Socio-linguistic competence (often called appropriacy) concerns knowledge of rules of style, directness, and appropriateness. Socio-pragmatic failure is caused by different beliefs about rights/imposition, e.g. physical closeness, power and turn-taking conventions, mentionables/taboo, as opposed to linguistic mistakes or pragma-linguistic failure - incorrectly/inappropriately mapping form to function in speech acts (Thomas 1983). The use of wrong 'behavioremes' (Oksaar 1992) appears to be judged far more severely than L2 errors and to be a far greater barrier to international understanding. Socio-linguistic competence in this sense is thus concerned with the choice of language which is appropriate to the relationship between the participants.

Another aspect of socio-cultural competence concerns the question of what pattern of moves may occur in the particular setting. Such praxeograms could be regarded as another aspect of pragmatic competence except for the fact that all such schemata are bound by socio-cultural conventions (Ventola 1983:247). A praxeogram for a situation may also be called a script or scenario (Murphy & Cleveland 1991:150) of which, as Davies (1989:168-9) says, there are always more to be collected, by native and non-native speakers alike.

Finally, the curriculum aim of developing intercultural skills is to create '150% persons' (Lambert 1993:191) or 'intercultural speakers' (Byram and

Zarate 1994) who have a perspective on their own socio-culture as well as on that of the foreign language.

### 4. Categories for communicative activity

For some time, applied linguistics has been developing ways of organising language activity which go beyond the 1960s division into four skills. Breen and Candlin (1980:92) posited three 'underlying abilities', Interpretation, Negotiation and Expression, which Brumfit (1984: 69-70; 1987:26) developed into Comprehension, Conversation or Discussion and Extended Speaking/Writing. Alderson and Urquhart (1984:227) proposed a scheme with Dialogue, Productive Monologue and Receptive Monologue each subdivided into spoken and written to give six basic categories. Swales (1990:58-61) argued that certain types of language use - casual conversation or 'chat', and narrative story-telling - can be regarded as pre-generic, common to all societies and underlying all the genres of more specialised communicative interaction.

- Chat is interactive with short turns, its coherence provided through the way participants weave their contributions together. It tends to have low cognitive complexity and high contextual support (implicature) (c.f. Cummins' 1979; 1980 concept BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills); Brown et al 1984:15 short turns).
- Story-telling is productive, often prepared, rehearsed, its coherence provided in the text by the speaker/writer (c.f. Canale's 1984 concept 'autonomous competence'; Brown et al 1984:15: long turns).
- Story-telling also creates an inverse receptive role as an auditor/recipient.

North (1992), following the arguments of Brumfit, Alderson & Urquhart, and Swales, proposed regrouping communicative activities under the three headings: Reception, Interaction and Production. Such 'skill' categories can be cross-referenced to the macro-functions of different types of activity as suggested by the chart below.

	RECEPTION	INTERACTION	PRODUCTION
Transactional Language Use	Extracting Information from Text/Speech	Obtaining and Exchanging Information and Services	Presenting Information
Creative, Interpersonal Language Use	Understanding Stories, Fictional Text	Maintaining Social Relationships	Describing, Narrating and Interpreting Experience
Evaluative, Problem-solving Language Use	Understanding Argumentation and Conclusions	Discussion	Presenting a Case

Communicative Language Activity

As with all sets of categories, which are but ‘conceptual artefacts’ (Clark 1987:40), examples can be found at the margins of the categories concerned; examples can even be found which might move over the boundary between categories. It is also extremely difficult to avoid mixing different kinds of categories in the same set, as Figure 2 attempts to show:

Firstly, there are the activities related to the three macrofunctional uses of language in the left hand column of Figure 1: Transactional; Creative/ Interpersonal; Evaluative. These are the three large circles. The top circle (Casual Conversation) is one of Swales’ (1990) two pre-generic kinds of language use (Swales’ second type, story-telling, could be in the same position on a similar diagram for Spoken Production).

As befitting a pre-genre, Conversation or ‘chat’ can have a broad definition which would include most of the content in the other two circles (Schegloff: 1972:375; Van Lier 1989:500). Alternately, Casual Conversation can have a narrower definition intended ‘to create a friendly atmosphere, to establish contact, to forge new social relationships and maintain old ones’ (Ventola 1979:278).

But if Conversation can be defined to include the other categories, then these activities are not really completely separate. Moreover, a discourse which starts by focusing on one macro-function may very well slide into one of the others. A Casual Conversation in which the other person keeps asking you for particular information starts to feel like a Transaction, and you begin to wonder what is going on – is he going to turnout to be a life insurance

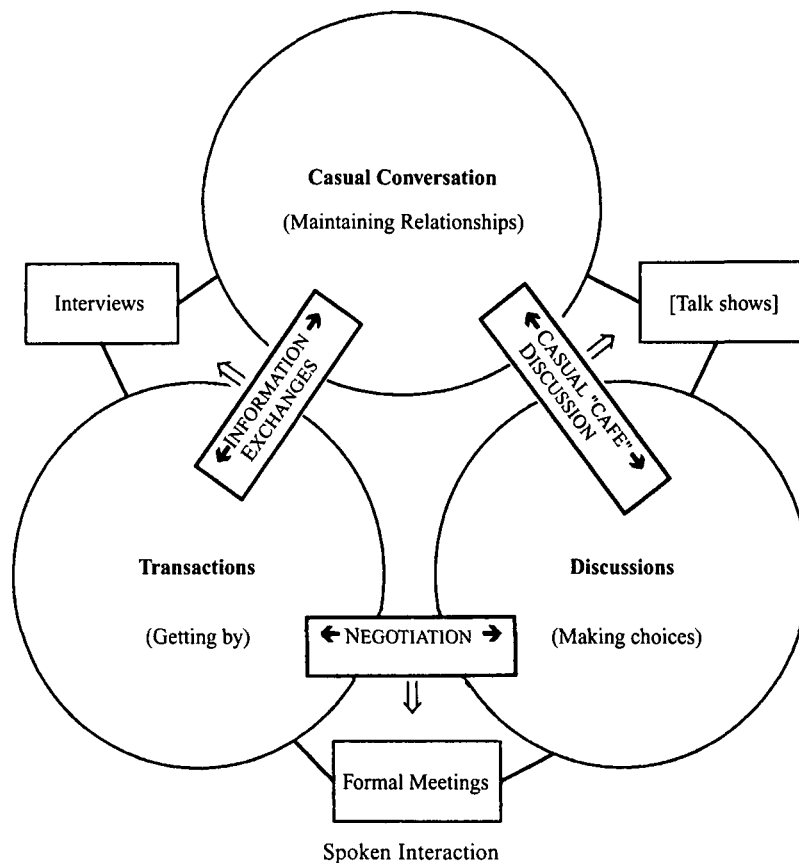
salesman? Quite a lot of discourse at work, especially in corridors, could best be described in its own right as Information Exchange. Each person brings the other up-to-date with what’s happening, which has a phatic, social purpose, but also a transactional one.

Finally, a number of activities which appear in scales of proficiency seem to be examples of formalised instances of such shifting discourse. Interviews, for example, are formalised Transactions, predominantly question-and-answer Information Exchanges which masquerade as simulated Conversation (c.f. Berwick & Ross 1993; Van Lier 1989). Such formalised genre groups appear in the boxes outside the circles.

As has been discussed above, there are inherent problems for any descriptive system in the way in which sub-categories relate to each other. However, it could be argued that a set of categories organised as above is more capable of accommodating fuzzy boundaries and category shifts than is the traditional division into the four skills.

### 5. Towards balanced categories

The fact that, despite considerable consensus, no universal, validated, theoretical model of either communicative competence or of communicative activities exist or is likely to exist for some considerable time leaves one with a pragmatic choice. Part of that choice entails making a decision or compromise between the theoretical constructs of applied linguists and the operational models used by syllabus and tests designers.



To avoid acting on the one hand as a brake upon progress, or on the other hand as an obstacle to comprehensibility, categories used in a Common Framework should be informed by the theory that is available, but at the same time should be organised in such a way that practitioners can relate the categories they themselves use to those to be found in the Framework.

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