

Notions of Proficiency in the FL/L2 Field: A Proficiently Sticky Web

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概 要

外国語ないし他言語としての英語を教えたり、使用したりする時に、言語能力に関する定義は重要である。この論文では、我々の内々で繋がっている世界における言語能力についての現代的な定義や考え方を探究する。特に「仲間内」での経験や、社会・文化・言語という枠組みの中でのコミュニケーション能力に焦点を絞り考察をする。

I. Introduction

... communicative competence is such an intricate web of psychological, sociocultural, physical and linguistic features that it is easy to become entangled in just one part of that web.

Brown, 2007, p. 243.

This paper will undertake the viewpoint that to define or discuss any notion of current understandings of proficiency in the field of second language learning (particularly focusing on English), one needs to inspect it from both the point of view of the stakeholders who need to use a second language as a long-term prospect (whether that be in an instructional or learning role) in one of the countries that Kachru (2005) determines as “Inner Circle” (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K., or the U.S.), and also from the point of view of the stakeholders (students, instructors, institutions

and policy makers, among others) whom he determines as “Expanding Circle” users of English (generally speaking, those in countries in which English is studied as a foreign language [p. 165]).

This seems pertinent as the role of context, and sociocultural/ sociolinguistic elements have become increasingly important in the discussion on communicative competence and language learning (Tomlinson, 2005. See also, Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Savignon, 1986; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Brown, 2007; Canale, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Centre for Canadian language benchmarks [CCLB/CLB], 2002; Gumperz, 1982; Hadley, 2001; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 2005; among others), both of which greatly influence current ideas of proficiency. An indication of this is that “sociocultural” has come to be substituted for “sociolinguistic” in many current writings on proficiency, as there is widespread acceptance of the interdependence of language and culture (Savignon, p. 643). In contrast to this, some Inner Circle writers have felt that certain course designs (which should play a major role in the ways and means of developing proficiency) can meet the needs of either Circle (Yalden, 1987, p. vii). Many writers and practitioners would disagree with this (Savignon, p. 638; Tomlinson; Wedell, 2003).

Unfortunately, however, due to length requirements, only proficiency as it pertains to the Inner Circle countries will be discussed in this paper. Naturally enough, a lot of elements discussed are also applicable to Expanding Circle countries and will be incidentally touched upon, but an in-depth discussion on the possible differences between notions of proficiency for the two circles, and other possible similarities, is not plausible. Additionally, citing the prior reasons as well as limited reading and experience on the part of this writer, proficiency as it pertains to users of “Outer Circle” English (those who, for example, use standard Indian, Nigerian or Singaporean English in and outside of their native country either as a multi-lingual, or as their native tongue [Kachru, 2005, p. 159]), will also not be able to be explored.

This, by no means, reflects a disinterest or dismissal of the importance of all “World Englishes” (Kachru, 2005) and issues of proficiency pertaining to, and often interlinking, them all.

1. Second Language Users in Inner Circle Countries

Within this essay, the notion of “communicative competence” will be discussed in relation to proficiency, as it has been hugely influential in defining what it means to be proficient, and as, in Inner Circle countries, assessment of “... a second language learners’ skills in *performing in actual* communicative situations” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 34, original emphasis) is often employed as officially deciding whether or not a learner has reached a certain level of proficiency, or as officially determining the

level of proficiency he or she does have (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks [CCLB] 2002, 2007). Bodies such as the British Council in EFL situations often employ these same kinds of benchmarks too (for example, the IELTS examination which can be undertaken all over the world [Hampton, 2002, p. 6]). In addition, the communicative classroom is hugely popular in the West (Irvine Niakaris, 1997, p. 17, Savignon, 2005, p. 635), and many of its principles have been applied (with varying degrees of success) in EFL situations also (Savignon; Tomlinson, 2005; Wedell, 2003). Though, following Canale and Swain (p. 23) and Mangubhai (2007, p. 1.15) this paper does not take the view that communication is language's sole reason for being, but it has definitely influenced definitions of proficiency over the last thirty years or so, and will be the main focus of this assignment. Communicative competence will be discussed in a dedicated section, but general use of the term will also be employed in the following sections.

2. Mobility and Function

With technological and historical changes, learners and users of second and foreign languages have gained greater global mobility in recent times (Crabbe, 2003, p. 16; Gatehouse, 2001; Mangubhai, 2007, p. 1.15). This has been one of the elements that has changed notions of proficiency in terms of the needs of learners, from "need" traditionally being defined in the second language field as the successful execution of "paper-and-pencil tests" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 35) based mostly on literary notions and prescriptive grammatical knowledge, to something more functional and contextual (Canale & Swain, p. 35; Mangubhai, 2007, p. 1.15). For example, L2 learners may wish to visit an Inner Circle country for the purpose of tourism, in which case, their stay may be very short, and competently communicating in the TL with a hotel clerk, or bus driver, may be the sole level of proficiency that they need to express and attain. In which case, unless they are interested, there is no need for them to read (as an example) Shakespeare's entire body of work in English to demonstrate the proficiency required. Alternatively, they may have read the entire body of work, but still not have the level of proficiency that they need to perform the hypothetical interactive tasks outlined above. The same applies, of course, for an Inner Circle English speaker who needs to use another language for the purposes of tourism in another country. Though these evolving mobile and functional needs have changed the face of learning, teaching and assessment (the rise of ESP for example [Gatehouse, pp. 2–4]) this paper deals more so with immigrants and those who are studying long-term (not necessarily immigrants) in an Inner Circle country, as so much of the definition of proficiency in those countries, and what is taught, depends upon long-term governmental and educational (at times the

same thing) goals which directly affect those learners (Brindley, 1998; CCLB, 2002; Crabbe; Canale and Swain, p. 37; Savignon, 2005, p. 637).

Governmental policy on languages is also obviously affected by tourism and business (Dawkins, 1991, Lo Bianco, 1987 as cited in Clyne, 2001, p. 213), but this paper does not have the scope to go into the finer details of the proficiency needed for people wishing to use a target language (TL) on a short-term functional basis as a tourist, or even on an ongoing basis as a “jet setting” business-person, or, for example, as an Omani visiting an English-speaking Indian dentist in Muscat, though in execution it might “touch upon” these areas.

3. The influence of policy

Richards (1984, as cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 16) states that proficiency is an outcome or consequence of learner accomplishment in language acquisition and that curricula and assessments need to be geared towards proficiency goals, nebulous though they may be (Canale, 1990, p. 6). Richards’ comments might lead one to think that the assessment of proficiency (which must affect the notion of proficiency [Savignon, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005]) will be based on gauging product only, or the end result of the process of learning and acquisition (for further discussion on this, see below), and that product, therefore, will override the development and assessment of the process of learning (the assessment of the process of learning can also reflect an accumulating proficiency). As Nunan states (p. 20), any curriculum (which is hopefully in place to help students reach a certain level of “actual communication” [Canale’s 1983 term for the performance aspect of communicative competence, 1990, p. 5]) that ignores process in favour of product will not be effective in its above purpose.

Crabbe feels that quality education which can meet both the needs of outcomes and processes is possible (2003, p. 10). Proficiency goals for either, however, as stated above, are not clear-cut (neither the definition nor use of ‘goal’, let alone the definition of ‘proficiency’, have a universal agreement), and across time have been based on many different notions. The major point is that assessment must tie in closely to the notion of proficiency, and it is not always clear which feeds the other. Maybe this is a way in which the influence of the “notions of proficiency” has *not* changed over time, though the ways of assessing proficiency may have. As an example, the CCLB has designed and uses a model which draws on many prior theoretical models of communicative competence (2002, p. 7). The CCLB claims this model can be employed regarding aspects of the use, teaching, development and assessment of language (2002, p. 36). As the benchmarks in this model are used as a tool to “measure and recognize [the] second language proficiency” of adult immigrant non-native speakers (NNS) of English and

French who live and work in Canada (CCLB, 2007, p. 1), then it would seem that the potential is there for students and applicants to become proficient in areas outlined in the benchmarks which the centre feels are indicative of proficiency, but which may be indicative of proficiency only in so far as being areas students and applicants can study, familiarize themselves with and use for gaining a certain benchmark. It is not easy to establish if gaining a certain benchmark is a true reflection of how proficient a language-user is regarded in day-to-day life (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 35), or how proficient he or she regards him or herself. As Savignon (2005, p. 637) states, “[l]anguage teaching is inextricably tied to language policy”. By implication, one could also say that institutionalized ways of nurturing, defining and recognising proficiency (important elements of language teaching) are also tied to the same. Canale and Swain, while pointing out that proficiency as judged by large-scale testing in the classical humanist mold is questionable, also question the reliability of proficiency assessment outcomes, even if they are based on theory that is commonly, theoretically, endorsed (p. 35, p. 37).

Institutions and governmental agencies often implement proficiency objectives with a quantitative result in mind, which they then may use as a progress or comparative tool to assess elements such as educational institutions, learners, and instructors, and/or as a tool of accountability (Bachman & Savignon, 1986; Brindley, 1998; MacNamara, 2005, pp. 775–778; Savignon, 2005, p. 649, among others). This quantitative mindset can lead to sole reliance on the aforementioned pencil-and-paper tests from which figures can easily be extracted (Brindley; implied by Savignon, p. 649; implied by Tomlinson, 2005, p. 144). In contrast to this, actual instructors and learners are often concerned with the process of learning, and the tasks, interaction, and judgments that reflect this, which are not easily quantifiable in quantitative terms (Crabbe, 2003, p. 10; Gumperz, 1982; Savignon, p. 649). On the other hand, many teachers need to “teach to the test” and many students need to pass rigorous exams, the process of which may not reflect “actual communication” at all (Gorsuch, 2001; Savignon, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005). Therefore, those who make tests, curricula and educational policy, and those who research the notion of proficiency, and those who actually hope to work with learners to develop a certain level of actual proficiency are not necessarily in direct communication or agreement with one another (Baldauf, 2005; Brindley; MacNamara, pp. 775–778; Richards, 2001, pp. 90–106, Tomlinson, p. 144, pp. 147–148). This is one of the reasons why the meaning of proficiency is difficult to determine.

However, in contrast to the pencil-and-paper tests, and as touched upon above, “... powerful overarching scales and frameworks for guiding the language assessment practices of teachers ...” have developed (MacNamara, 2005, p. 776; see also; Crabbe,

2003, on the Council of Europe [2001], p. 16; CCLB, 2002; Hadley on ACTFL, 2001, pp. 10–19). The stakeholders in these scales and frameworks, such as that of the CCLB, go far beyond that of “just” the teachers (though they are definitely an important element) and the frameworks can be seen as ways of achieving “... international recognition of quality, whether for purposes of accountability or commerce” for the assessors and issuers of proficiency recognition (Crabbe, p. 16), and hopefully “... serve the broader needs of language learners ...”, which might include employment needs, social needs and educational needs, amongst others (p. 16). Proficiency notions mostly employed before the seventies that concentrated on the solely linguistic did not necessarily address these needs (Yalden, 1987, vii). The notion that broadly supports the measurement of proficiency employed by many of these frameworks is that of “communicative competence”, which will be discussed below in the second part of the essay.

II. Communicative Competence

This was a term originally used by Hymes (1972) and Habermas (1970) in a native speaker context (Habermas as cited in Savignon, 2005, p. 635). It was applied to an L2 context by Savignon (1971) and Jakobovits (1970) (as cited in Savignon, 2005, p. 635), and is the theoretical underpinning of most Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is one of the most popular language teaching approaches in Inner Circle countries today (Savignon, p. 635). Some of the major ideas behind “communicative competence” in the sense that Hymes used it, and as reflected in Halliday’s work (1976), is, in the case of the former writer, of it being sociocultural, and sociolinguistic (that is, meaning in language-use is greatly determined by setting and situation), and in the case of the latter writer, of one being able to recognise, understand and manipulate discourse elements (which are also influenced by the sociocultural and sociolinguistic) (as cited in Bachman & Savignon, 1986, pp. 380–381; Hymes, 1972). The term was developed, in large part, as a reaction against the idea that the generative and mental grammars as defined by Chomsky (1965) were the major components that established meaning in language-use, as well as being a reaction against the Structuralist basis of much of the linguistics of the time, which decontextualised language-use and centred meaning on prototypes such as the ideal monolingual speaker (Bachman & Savignon, 1986, pp. 380–381; Brown, 2007; Canale & Swain, 1980; Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1972; Hadley, 2001, among others).

Drawing on this, and many other writers such as Campbell & Wales (1970), Candlin (1977), Munby (1978) and Widdowson (1978), various models of communicative competence in second language learning evolved in which sociocultural/sociolinguistic

competence was a major strand (as cited in Canale & Swain, 1980, among others). Competence was generally defined “... in terms of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning” (Savignon, 2005, p. 635). Bachman and Savignon (1986, pp. 380–381) provide this more detailed explanation on the “distinguishing characteristic” of communicative competence as being:

... its recognition of context beyond the sentence to the appropriate use of language. This context includes both the discourse, of which individual sentences are part, and the sociolinguistic situation which governs, largely, the nature of that discourse, in both form and function ... Recent frameworks of communicative competence ... include, in addition to the knowledge of grammatical rules, a knowledge of language functions, or illocutionary acts and sociolinguistic conventions.

One of the models referred to in the quote above is that of Canale and Swain (1980 [modified by Canale in 1983]) (as cited in Bachman & Savignon, 1986, p. 389) which other researchers have expanded upon and diverged from (Canale & Swain; Canale, 1990; see also Bachman, 1990; Brown, 2007; CCLB, 2002; Hadley, 2001; Savignon, 2005, among others for an overview). Within this model the four components that make up communicative competence are (as cited in Mangubhai, 2007, p. 1.16):

- grammatical competence (mastery of language code)
- sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness of utterances with respect to meaning and form)
- discourse competence (mastery of ways of combining form and meaning to achieve coherence in spoken and written texts)
- strategic competence (mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication, strategies used to compensate when breakdowns in communication occur and to make communication more effective).

The scope of this essay is such that to attempt to explain all the notions that have expanded from, and gone before (and thereby influenced) the notions defined by Canale and Swain would be impossible, but current areas that continue to be of interest, and/or have gained in interest are “discourse/interaction/pragmatics and negotiation”, contextualized and with an awareness of the sociocultural identities of individual participants (Brown, 2007, p. 218). Hadley also points out that, as reflected by its name (communicative competence), effective, evolving and gradating language-use is emphasized over viewing language proficiency as “... a monolithic concept representing an amorphous ideal that students rarely attain”, and this language-use

is emphasized over the structural accuracy (based on vocabulary and prescriptive grammar knowledge) that had previously so often defined proficiency (2001, p. 8; Mangubhai, 2007, p. 1.16).

A more recent model often quoted in the literature is that of Bachman (1990). If one views the model as shown in figure 1 (p. 32 of this essay), one can see the development of the ideas presented by Canale and Swain, and the increased attention, particularly, to Pragmatic competence. Illocutionary competence (the ability to control and manage language functions [see Halliday, 1973, as cited in Brown, 2007, pp. 224–225 for definitions; Bachman, 1990, pp. 90–95]) comes under this “umbrella”, and would probably be subsumed under Discourse competence in Canale and Swain’s model (Brown, 2007, p. 223), though Textual competence also relates to Discourse competence as it is outlined in Canale and Swain.

In addition, Bachman’s model reflects the increased interest in strategic competence by defining it as an element of communicative competence (or Language competence) separate to those shown in the table below (1990, p. 85; see also Brown, 2007, p. 221). In Bachman’s model, and on other writing on communicative competence, including that of Swain (1984, as cited in Brown, p. 220) strategic competence is seen to have broadened in scope beyond compensatory to include those strategies (among others) a user may utilise to enhance communication, to “smooth” communication, to actually choose how to communicate, what to communicate, and to assess that which was, is and is about to be communicated (Bachman, 1990, and Bachman & Palmer, 1996, as cited in CCLB, 2002, p. 8). Bachman sees strategic competence as a skill which sets in motion the other competencies when actual communication is undertaken (1990, pp. 85–110; see also Bachman, 1990, as cited in Brown, pp. 220–223; as cited in CCLB, 2002, p. 9). It is fed by underlying knowledge (general and language), and it feeds and is also fed by cognitive features, and context (Bachman, p. 85). CCLB (2002), Brown (2007) and of course Bachman himself (1990), should all be referred to for a more comprehensive description of his work.

Assessment bodies such as CCLB list “strategic competence” (their definition of which is heavily influenced by Bachman) as one of the 5 components which make up their model (2002, p. 7), thereby showing its increased importance in their notion of what it means to be proficient. The other components of competence which make up their notion of communicative proficiency are *Linguistic*, *Textual*, *Functional* and *Socio-cultural*, all, generally speaking, based on an amalgamation of models which illustrate features such as those presented by Canale and Swain, and Bachman (p. 7).

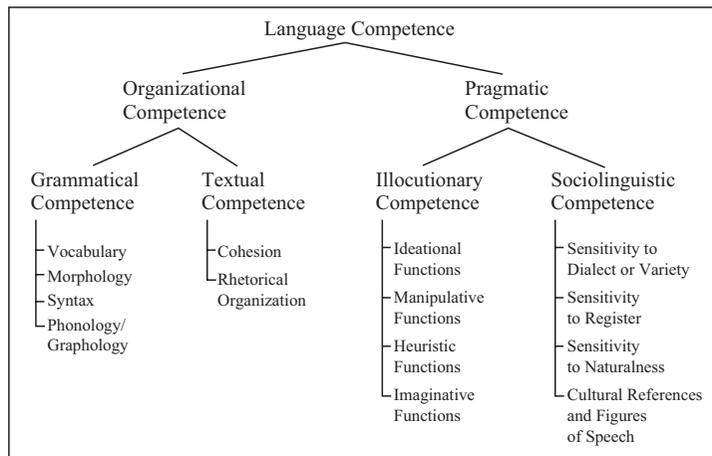


Figure 1 Bachman, 1990, p. 87 as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 221,
Components of language competence.

III. Conclusion

Current notions of proficiency in Inner Circle countries pertaining to communicative proficiency would appear to be based, at the least, on linguistic notions of both grammar knowledge and its actual use (actual use is that which can actually be assessed [Savignon, 1997, p. 15, as cited in Hadley, 2001, p. 4]), and discourse competence and its actual use. Further to this, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and strategic competence can be seen as representing functional language use (Brown, 2007, p. 219). Therefore, this writer's understanding of current notions of proficiency pertaining to communicative competence is that learners (and instructors), and language itself, do and do not operate "in a vacuum". Broadly speaking knowledge of form and function of the second language is needed, as well as the appropriateness of use, and the strategies used to express that which one intends to express (Brown, p. 220, states that all communicative strategies can be seen to arise from strategic competence under current developments of the term).

Interaction of these elements both from speaker to speaker, and from environment to speaker and vice versa, and incorporating sociocultural background and knowledge, all of which are manifest in actual performance, or communication, all contribute to ideas of proficiency. If proficiency is opened up beyond the scope of "communicative" (but also including the scope of "communicative", depending on the government), then governmental and educational policies will also play a huge role in determining what it

means to be proficient, which in turn, will affect instructional and learning behaviours (Tomlinson, 2005).

Work such as Kachru's (2005) and Bern's (1990, as cited in Savignon, 2005, p. 639) and Savignon (2005), among others, also "casts further light" on the role of diversity, variety and culture within language, and of course, change. Of increasing interest is whether the Inner Circle benchmarks that define proficiency, define the same in Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle countries (where they are often applied), or if they do quite the opposite of what it means to be communicatively competent, in that one sociocultural "norm" and view of proficiency may be ascribed to, thereby alienating, devaluing and ignoring the great variety of English-using cultures and proficiencies within all three circles (Kachru; Kramersch, 1998, 2001, as cited in Tomlinson, 2005, p. 149; Savignon; Tomlinson, 2005, McKay, 2011).

One wonders if in the future whether the Inner Circle countries will maintain the global setting of "common standards" in the case of benchmarks and assessment whose aim is to reflect "international recognition of quality" pertaining to notions of English-use proficiency (Crabbe, 2003, p. 10), but whose aim may also be to act as a "gatekeeper" (Foucault, 1981, as cited in Savignon, 2005, p. 639), only allowing those who conform to particular notions of proficiency into the "English club", and whose implicit aim may also be to establish a form of "neo-colonialism" (Pennycook, 1994, as cited in Kachru, 2005, p. 160; see also Kachru, 2005, McKay, 2011); or whether the notion of recognising and drawing attention to "World Englishes" will develop further (as suggested by Kachru, explored by McKay and others), thereby further changing and redefining current ideas of what it means to be proficient.

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