Reviewing Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Scholars' Perspective

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Abstract: This paper aims at comparing language proficiency and communicative competence. It also directs the discussion towards the definitions of competence in different paradigms through the perspectives of second language acquisition/assessment scholars. Competence has received various definitions depending on what language theory scholars have invested in. Linguistic competence (i.e., knowledge of second language (L2) grammar) is associated with generative linguistic theory which is supported by Chomsky and his followers. The other main perspective relies on acquisitions of communicative competence which is defined as the knowledge of both L2 grammar and how this knowledge is practiced in actual communicative settings.

Key words: Communicative competence, language proficiency**,** linguistic competence, Competence

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1. Introduction

The primary task of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is "to characterize learners' underlying knowledge of the L2; that is, to describe and explain their competence"(Ellis, 2008, p. 6). However, different researchers have various understandings of "competence". One group that endorsed Chomsky's generative theory define competence in terms of knowledge of the second language (L2) grammar. They believe that children are born with some innate knowledge of grammar (Vakili, 2022). The other group of scholars have introduced a broader perception of competence which embraces both the knowledge of L2 grammar and the communicative aspect of that knowledge in real life situations. Moreover, Ellis (1994, 2008) states that SLA should not only take the latter perspective more seriously into account, but also needs to consider other aspects of language acquisition such as pragmatic competence.

1-2- Different standards of communicative competence

Introduced by Chomsky, linguistic competence was the dominant theory in both first and second language acquisition settings until communicative competence was proposed as a more comprehensive term. Chomsky viewed language as a set of sentences that originally come from a set of finite elements (cited in Acar, 2005). In Chomsky's perspective, language users are equipped with some subconscious knowledge of their grammar rules from birth and meaningful sentences will be generated later in life as they follow those rules when growing older (Vakili, 2022). Chomsky calls this subconscious knowledge "linguistic competence" and when the language user actually uses that knowledge to produce language in different settings, it is

called "linguistic performance".

Linguistic competence is, in fact, the general knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, semantics and phonology of a given language, and also how these all linguistic components work together to produce well-formed sentences (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020). Linguistic competence, in general, is the ability of a language user to both produce and understand sentences which are syntactically, semantically and phonologically acceptable in a community who share the same linguistic norms.

Although Chomsky's theories regarding linguistic competence and performance had been the dominant theories for decades, it widely received some criticisms by second language theorists. One of the main critics of linguistic competence was Hymes (1972) who introduced communicative competence as opposed to linguistic competence. His theory was welcomed by second language teachers and theorists, and while it had been developing gradually, it was changed in the form of different models. This notion of communicative competence aims at looking at the functional aspect of language. In other words, it considers the ability to use language for communication purposes. The following intends to describe these different models in more detail.

1-2-1-Hymes' model

Hymes is considered among the first linguists criticizing Chomsky's communicative competence theory. Hymes believed that Chomsky's competence theory couldn't justify an individual's "language behavior as a whole" (Ohno 2006, p. 26). In Hymes's scheme, an individual's competence not only shows their knowledge of language form and structure but also indicates how that knowledge is practices in real life situations (Young, 2008).

Hymes (1972) showed his concerns about disadvantaged children's problem regarding the development of a new linguistic theory in his paper entitled "On communicative competence". Hymes (1972) introduced his new linguistic theory by criticizing Chomsky's linguistic theory which mainly relies on "an ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogenous speech community" (cited in Acar, 2005, p.3). In Hymes's perspective, Chomsky's theory is based on a child with complete abilities to produce and understand grammatical sentences of a language. While this child is considered an ideal speaker- hearer of the language, this linguistic theory fails to take different communicative approaches among children into account. In fact, the concepts of an ideal speaker-hearer are out of sight, and one can't find such a speaker in a homogenous speech community.

The other issue in Chomsky's linguistic theory is related to functionality of his approach. Therefore, Hymes presented his theory viewing language as a functional system leading to satisfy communicative purposes of language rather than just a mere set of forms and principles to be learned and practiced.

Xin (2007) has summarized Hymes's communicative competence theory into the following four

groups:

1. Systematic potential: This is similar to Chomsky's linguistic competence, and it refers to the potential of using the system for language production.
2. Appropriacy: This means the speaker is well-aware of the situation, so s/he uses the language appropriately by considering the factors in that situation.
3. Occurrence: It is in relation to the frequency of a linguistic feature in a language. This linguistic feature is actually used by the speakers regardless of it being grammatically correct or incorrect.
4. Feasibility: This term refers to the possible use of some structures in a language. For instance, while adjective sit before a noun in English, no one would use ten adjectives to modify a noun while the English structure doesn't prevent such structures. Speakers do not use such structures.

As understood from these features, Hymes was not principally looking at language learning, and his main focus was looking at language as a "social behavior" (Savignon 2002, p. 2). However, as stated earlier, this

notion of communicative competence underwent some changes to fit language teaching goals, and it eventually resulted in the development of communicative approach to language teaching (Thornbury 2006). The following presents other different models which originate from Hymes's communicative competence.

1-2-2-Canale and Swain's model

Canale and Swain (1980) introduced a new variety of communicative competence. In their scheme, communicative competence and performance should be differentiated from each other. They regard communicative competence as "the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.6). Moreover, they define communicative performance as "the realization of these competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.6).

In their perspective, communicative competence should include grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In other words, they looked at the knowledge and skills required for any kind of communication.

Grammatical competence works at sentence level of a grammatical feature. This competence investigates an individual's knowledge of lexical items, morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology (Canale and Swain, 1980). In fact, it evaluates that sentence to be grammatically correct or incorrect. Sociolinguistic competence is similar to Hymes's appropriacy. This competence refers to sociocultural rules of a structure. In other words, it evaluates if a structure is appropriate for one situation or another. The next component of linguistic competence (Discourse competence) includes bottom-up/ top-down processing along with cohesion and coherence. Finally, strategic competence looks at proficiency of a language user in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. This competence includes both verbal and nonverbal strategies for communication. The examples include paraphrases, repetitions and guessing which are used by speakers in order to facilitate communication and also to increase the "effectiveness of that communication" (Bagaric & Djigunovic 2007, p. 98). The strategies introduced by Canale and Swain have been practiced in language teaching method/approaches due to the fact that these strategies address nearly all requirements needed for administering a successful communication.

1-2-3-Bachman and Palmer's model

A new model of communicative competence was introduced by Bachman in the late 1980s and that was called "Communicative Language Ability" (CLA). Bachman claimed that this new notion of competence involves both language proficiency and communicative competence in its term. However, this notion of competence underwent some modifications later in the mid-1990s by many other scholars.

Initially, Bachman (1990) considered language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanism as the main pillars of communicative competence. In his perspective, language competence deals with a set of knowledge elements which are used for communication purposes through language. He demonstrated strategic competence as a mental capacity which facilitates the application of language competence for the purpose of language use. Psychophysiological mechanisms, in fact, deal with the neurological and psychological processes which are necessary for language use as a physical occurrence.

Later, building up on Bachman's first model, Bachman and Palmer (1996) propose that language users' characteristics including their personalities, knowledge of the topic, affective schemata and their language abilities control their general language ability. In their idea, language knowledge and strategic competence are considered two main components of language ability. Organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge are the subcategories of language knowledge which complete each other in order to establish an effective communication.

Organizational knowledge is in regard to grammatical and textual knowledge which scope over formal language structures. The components of grammatical knowledge include the knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology and graphology. This knowledge is to ensure that grammatically correct

sentences are produced. Textual knowledge deals with comprehension and production of any texts. In fact, this knowledge is essential to combine sentences and/or utterances into texts. Knowledge of cohesion (establishing sematic relationships among sentences), knowledge of rhetorical organization (developing narrative texts, comparisons, and contrasts, etc.) and knowledge of conversational organization (the skills for start, maintain and close conversations) are the main components of textual knowledge.

In addition, Bachman and Palmer (1996) use pragmatic knowledge to refer to the abilities which are required to create and interpret discourse. They state that pragmatic knowledge includes two types of knowledge namely knowledge of pragmatic conventions and sociolinguistic conventions. The former deals with acceptable language functions, and the latter is concerned with appropriate language use in specific social contexts.

As this new definition of competence illustrates, Bachman and Palmer's model focused primarily on different aspects of language use. In fact, they were more concerned with how language is used for specific communicative purposes in a specific situation and context.

1-2-4-Byram's model

Byram (1997), walking away from communicative competence, directed his attention to the concept of "Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)". This new perspective of communicative competence was, in fact, brought up to contradict the underlying meaning of competence. In other words, Byram believed that the definition and application of communicative competence is in regard to a native speaker, and it dismisses foreign language learners or bilinguals. Therefore, this notion challenged the original concept of communicative competence in foreign language education setting.

The main purpose of ICC was to eradicate the flaws found in the theoretical aspect of communicative competence. In fact, he believed that the theoretical framework of communicative competence ignores the main purpose of language which is language use and communication depending on social purpose and context. Therefore, he believed that theoreticians should walk away from native speakers, and they should concentrate more on foreign language learners (Byram and Zarate, 1994). They believe that foreign language learners have their own sociocultural identity because they belong to their native culture as well as the second culture in which they reside. Byram and Zarate (1994) see foreign language learners as "mediators" because they are always in transition between their first and second cultures. Moreover, because they communicate in a foreign language and they have their own linguistic and cultural identity, they become dual-culture individuals (Steele, 1996: 77, Vakili, 2019).

This competence includes pragmatic, cognitive and attitudinal components. In his perspective, linguistic, communicative and interactional/intercultural elements are complementary to each other in foreign language learning contexts. Byram (2001) adds that particular attitudes, knowledge and skills are required to enhance intercultural communicative competence, and relying merely on linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence may not lead to desirable results.

However, Byram's model has been criticized in terms of its focus. Some scholars (Dervin, 2010, 2016; Hoff, 2014; Matsuo, 2012, 2016; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018; Ros i Solé, 2013 to name a few) believe that this model is mainly an instrumental, performance-based approach to intercultural teaching and learning. They also add that this model has disregarded the complexities and complications of intercultural communications in the 21st century. The other criticism is that, in Byram's model, culture hasbeen used in direct associations with a country. In fact, Byram has considered a homogenous and coherent culture for any country while each country is composed on many different cultures, so the term culture in Byram's model needs to be modified to accommodate this definition much better (Mohammed & Vakili, 2021).

1-2-5-Munby's model

Munby (1987) states that the test content of a learner's particular category in a specific context can help teachers predict communicative competence requirements. He designed a theoretical framework which can be considered to evaluate language learners' proficiency in terms of their communicative competence.

Munby (1987) introduced socio-cultural orientation, socio-semantic basis of linguistic knowledge and discourse level operation as the chief components of language use proficiency. Socio- cultural orientation is in regard to relativity of the competence, heterogeneity of the speech community, the importance of contextual appropriacy and the learners' communicative needs. In Munby's (1987) framework, socio-semantic basis looks at language as having sematic options which are derived from the social structure for communicative purposes. To define discourse level operation, Munby (1987) states that "communicative competence must be understood as the ability to use linguistic forms and the ability to understand the communicative functions of utterances" (p.26).

As seen, communicative competence has been studied by many different scholars after its introduction and it has been developed into many different branches and dimensions. However, the critics of this theory (McNamara, 1995; Acar, 2005; Nunn; 2005; Lee, 2006) believe that this theory is so vague and shapeless which needs more clarification.

2. Language proficiency

Bachman (1990) states that skills and components were used to measure language proficiency level of students in earlier theoretical frameworks. He believed that while the previous scholars' models have separated skills from components, they failed to describe the relationship between knowledge and skills. Bachman (1990) continues that "What has emerged from these ideas is an expanded conception of language proficiency whose distinguished characteristic is its recognition of the importance of context beyond the sentence to the appropriate use of language"(p. 82). In Bachman's scheme, discourse and sociolinguistic situations should be considered in this context.

Richards and Schmidt (2002) look at language use as the extent of language proficiency.

In fact, they believe that the more a person can use a language, the higher the language proficiency level s/he has. In other words, the amount of a person's understanding of language in terms of reading it, writing in it, and speaking that language determines the level of language proficiency. In addition. Hadley (2003) regards proficiency as an idealized level of language competence and performance which can be obtained over time through wide-ranging instructions.

According to Brown (2001), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has determined five proficiency levels as novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished for each and every four language skills. This guideline looks at communication tasks in order to determine the level of proficiency. Byram (2001) looks at these proficiency criteria as the following:

1. The ACTFL proficiency guidelines of which the speaking scale is widely used.
2. The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), a face to face, interview style performance tests that elicit a speech sample that can be rated according to the levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Its two forms of adaptations are Modified Oral Proficiency Interview (MOPI) and Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI).
3. The popularization of pedagogical activities claimed to develop communicative ability.
4. Pro-achievement tests that integrate linguistic knowledge with communicative skills.
5. Specific materials with the focus on communicative abilities with the emphasis on grammatical accuracy at early stages of instruction.

3. The relationship between communicative competence and language proficiency

Taylor (1988) regards competence as some kind of static knowledge and proficiency as a dynamic ability to use language. Bachman (1990) provides a general and traditional understanding of proficiency. He states that knowledge, competence or the ability to use a language are considered as the main components of language proficiency. This view of language proficiency doesn't take how, where and under what conditions that language has been learned/acquired into account (Vakili & Mohammed, 2022). Moreover, communicative

competence also refers to the ability in language use although a wider understanding of such use than has been traditionally connected to the term language proficiency (Vakili & Mohammed, 2021). In addition, Ellis (1994) states that "whereas competence refers to the knowledge of the L2 a learner has internalized, proficiency refers to the learner's ability to use this knowledge in different contexts" (p. 720).

Furthermore, the term language proficiency has been exclusively used with some particular language testing procedures (such as the ones by ACTFL). In general, it can be seen that language proficiency has received many different connotations depending on the context it has been used. Therefore, Bachman (1990) substituted the term language ability for language proficiency. He maintained that, in this respect, communicative competence shapes language proficiency theoretical framework.

4. Conclusion

Like any other theoretical frameworks, the theory of communicative competence and the subsequent ones have been designed to address some issues at the time of their presentation. They have undergone different changes and modifications over time to address the needs for the contemporary first and second language learners. In fact, none of these competence theories should be solely considered the one and only one theory of language learning/acquisition. A combination of all these theories can lead policy makers, textbook publishers, teachers, and educators to achieve a better understanding of language proficiency since some (mis)interpretations might hinder the main concept of language learning which is successful and effective communication.

Moreover, language proficiency needs some more clarifications in terms of learners' needs, social context and rhetorical aspects of that language. In other words, when defining language proficiency, one needs to take different criteria into account. One level of proficiency might be appropriate in one context while not suitable in another one.

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