

## Can Competence be Measured?

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***Abstract:** Competence is knowledge of a language that a child acquires or a learner conceptualizes in the process of acquiring or learning a language. Although we can assess the quality of the performance in a language by a user from her or his use of the language, competence cannot be overtly measured. But we can have a fairly good idea of the competence of someone in a particular language from her or his performance.*

***Keywords:** competence, performance, linguistic competence, communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence, organizational competence, measurement of competence and performance.*

### Abbreviations

LDAL = Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics

LDCE = Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

OALDCE = Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English

### 1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, we strive to attain competence in using the language. We want to be able to understand the language when spoken to us, We also want to express our own ideas clearly and correctly. In other words, we want to be able to communicate with others using the language. When we are able to do these, we feel we are proficient in the language, we have knowledge of the language.

But as teachers of language, a few questions arise in our minds:

- What does it mean to know a language?
- What is competence? Can competence be measured?
- What is performance? Can performance be measured?

This paper is an attempt to seek answers to these and related questions for the classroom teacher. But first let us look at some concepts and notions in this regard.

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## 2. Dictionary definitions of key terms

*ability*: *n* [U,C] capacity for doing something, e.g. learning and using a language. ... something that you are able to do, especially because you have a particular physical and mental skill. [OALDCE]

*proficiency*: *n* [U] standard of ability or skill to do something. [LDCE]

*skill*: *n* [C] mental and physical abilities to do something. [LDCE]

*language proficiency*: the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, e.g. how well a person can read, write, speak or understand the language. [LDAL]

*language achievement*: description of language ability as a result of learning. [LDAL]

*competence*: *n* [U,C] the ability or skill to do a particular job. [LDCE] ... (Transformational-Generative Grammar) a person's internalized grammar of a language. This means a person's ability to create and understand sentences, including sentences that have never been heard. It also includes a person's knowledge of what are and are not sentences of a particular language. [LDAL]

*performance*: *n* [U] the act of doing a piece of work, duty, etc.; how well or badly you do a particular job or activity. [LDCE] ... (Transformational-Generative Grammar) a person's actual use of language. ... A difference is made between a person's knowledge of the language (Competence) and how a person uses this knowledge in processing and understanding sentences (Performance). [LDAL]

*linguistic competence*: the speaker's tacit knowledge of the rules of his language – its external form of representation (the phonological system) its internal form of representation (the semantic system), and the relationship between them (the syntactic system). (Foss and Hakes 1974: 21)

*linguistic performance*: language performance of features of language use in the absence of a communicative situation. [Ibid]

*communication*: *n* [U] the exchange of ideas, information, etc. between two or more persons. In the act of communication there is at least one speaker or sender, a message which is transmitted, and a person or persons for whom the message is intended (the receiver). [LDAL]

*communicative competence*: the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom. [LDAL]

*communicative performance*: language performance in the presence of a communicative situation. [LDAL]

### **3. What does it mean to know a language?**

A person has learned a language when he has ... first, within a limited vocabulary mastered the sound system (that is, when he can understand the stream of speech and achieve an understandable production of it) and has, second, made the structural devices (that is, the basic arrangement of utterances matters of automatic habit. (Fries 1945: 3)

According to Fries, knowing a language means mastering the sound system, acquiring vocabulary and understanding the grammatical system, not any of the individual systems separately. So functioning in a language involves mastery of the sound system, knowing the meaning of a given number of words, also how to put these words together in a meaningful way. But according to Splosky, this approach fails to take into account two vital truths about language – language is ‘redundant’ and ‘creative’. Knowing a language involves not only knowing the items that make them, but also the ability to supply these items when they are missing or being able to do without them (Splosky 1973: 170).

The creative aspect of language use was lost sight of during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when behaviouristic models of language teaching dominated the language teaching scene. We can train a parrot to produce sets of sounds e.g. “Please feed me” on a cue with appropriate reinforcement, or “It’s a pellet of food” when the food appears on the hopper. But the parrot’s repertoire is limited and closed, lacks creativity. We would not possibly find it one day saying, “Please give me a pellet of food.”

Human beings produce and understand many sentences that they have never heard or said before. A student who can recite a few sentences but cannot

modify and use them in a free conversational situation cannot claim to know the language. Knowing a language means the ability to produce an unlimited number of sentences from a limited set of rules.

One is said to know a second language when one's competence is like that of a native speaker. Performance, however, need not be identical. It is accepted that someone knows a language even when he speaks hesitantly, with errors, or with a foreign accent, or when he understands with some difficulty under conditions of noise (Ibid: 173).

#### 4. Competence and Performance

Chomsky first drew the distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965: 3).

Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors, (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of language in actual performance.

We thus have a fundamental distinction between 'competence' (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language) and 'performance' (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Chomsky is here trying to specify what the speaker might know of the syntax of his/her own language. Chomsky is drawing a distinction between (a) knowing the forms of a language and the ability to use the language, (b) actually using it.

Chomsky does not consider the primary function of human language to be a vehicle of communication, but a vehicle of cognitive growth (Brown, Malmkjaer and Williams 1996: 31). Emphasis on communication in language teaching is reflected in attempts to develop students' sociolinguistic and discourse competence in addition to their grammatical competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

In contrast to Chomsky's ideal speaker-hearer, Hymes lays more emphasis on 'rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (1971: 14). If a speaker produces grammatical sentences without regard to situations they are being used, would not be considered appropriate if competence is seen as overall underlying linguistic knowledge and ability, it should also

include concepts of appropriateness. Chomsky would probably like to associate such notions with performance.

A normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. A model of competence should therefore, not only include grammaticality, but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules of appropriateness (Ibid).

Hymes points out that Chomsky's category of competence provides no place for competency for language use, neither does his category of performance, despite his equating language use with performance. It omits everything of sociocultural significance, only mentions some psychological constraints to do with memory limitations, etc. (Munby 1978: 9). Chomsky's notion of performance also seems to be confused between actual performance and underlying rules of competence. The restriction of competence to perfect knowledge in a homogeneous speech community independent of sociocultural features is inadequate to account for language in use as communication (Ibid). The distinction between competence and performance also seems to be problematic since performance itself can be considered as a kind of competence.

However, communicative competence is generally regarded as a distinct linguistic ability. But there is no absolute agreement on what components should be in a model of communicative language ability. Canale and Swain (1980) noted the following:

grammatical competence = knowledge of the rules of grammar  
 sociolinguistic competence = knowledge of situational rules of appropriateness  
 strategic competence = knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies

Canale (1983) made a further distinction:

discourse competence = knowledge of coherence and cohesion

Models such as these provide a very useful framework for the design of language tests. But Skehan (1998) points out that the relationship between the different competencies is not fully clear, neither is the way they are integrated into overall communicative competence. It is also not clear how this communicative competence would be translated into communicative performance. There was also discussion about some other types of competence that the speaker or knower of a language might have.

Bachman (1990:81-90) took a broader perspective of *communicative language ability* and classified it into three components: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. The idea or concept of language competence is divided into two broad categories: organizational competence and pragmatic competence.

**Organizational competence** comprises those abilities involved in controlling the formal structure of a language for recognizing and producing all grammatically correct sentences and utterances. It is subdivided into two categories:

grammatical competence = knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, graphology

Textual competence = knowledge of conventions for joining two or more utterances and sentences to form a text spoken or written according to rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization. Conventions of rhetorical organization include ways of text development, e.g. narration, description, comparison, classification and process analysis.

**Pragmatic competence** comprises how the linguistic signals noted above are used to refer to persons, objects, ideas and feelings. Equally important is their relationship with language users and the context of communication. It has two main subdivisions: illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.

*Illocutionary competence* is usually discussed with reference to the theory of speech acts. A sentence like, 'It's cold in here', may be interpreted as an assertion, warning or request depending on context and purpose of use. Searle (1969) distinguishes three types of speech act:

utterance act = simple act of saying something

Propositional act = referring to something or expressing a predication about something  
illocutionary act = assertion, warning or request performed in saying something

The meaning of an utterance can thus be understood in terms of its propositional content and illocutionary force. To these Bachman (1990: 92 - 94) relates language functions drawn from Halliday (1973). These are:

ideational = use of language to express propositions or to exchange information or feelings

manipulative = those functions in which the primary purpose is to affect the world around us e.g. instrumental (to get things done), interactional (to form or maintain or change interpersonal relationship), phatic (greeting, virtual inquiries about health, comment on weather)

heuristic = the use of language to extend our knowledge of the world, as in acts of teaching and learning

imaginative = language function which enables us to create or extend our environment for humorous or esthetic purposes e.g. telling jokes, creating metaphors, enjoying poetry

*Sociolinguistic competence* comprises sensitivity to and control of the conventions of language use that are determined by specific contexts. It enables us to perform in ways that are appropriate to the context. Bachman (1990) includes the following under this heading:

sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety – e.g. a Black American student deciding not to use Black English in class or not to use Standard American English with Black friends

sensitivity to differences in register – variation in language use within a single dialect or variety.

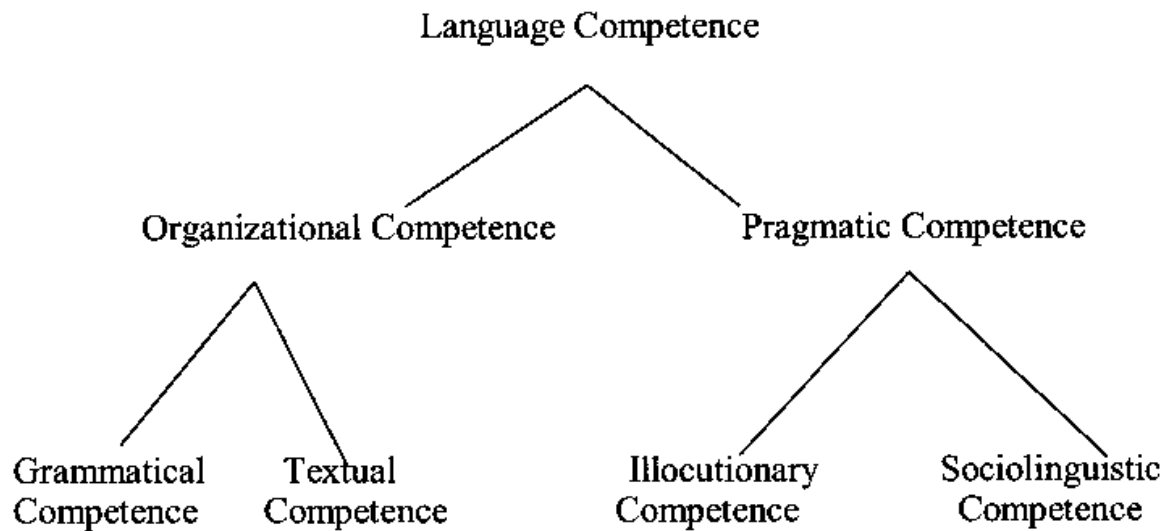
Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964: 90 -94) distinguished differences in register in terms of three aspects of language:

Field of discourse (= subject matter), mode of discourse ( e.g. spoken, written) and style of discourse (e.g. frozen, formal, consultative, casual, intimate – Joos 1967)

sensitivity to naturalness - that which allows the user to either formulate or interpret an utterance which is not only linguistically accurate, but also phrased in a *nativelike way* ( Pawley and Syder 1983)

ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech – knowledge of extended meanings given by a specific culture to particular events, places, institutions and people

In a modified diagrammatic form, Bachman's model of Language Competence (1990: 87) would look like the following:



**Strategic competence:** Verbal and nonverbal abilities that may be called into action to compensate for breakdown in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence (Canale and Swain 1980: 30), and to enhance the rhetorical effect of utterances (Canale 1983: 339).

**Psychophysiological mechanisms:** These are essentially the neurophysiological processes that aid in the execution of communicative intent in the modality and channel appropriate to the goal (Faerch and Kasper 1983: 25). Thus we can distinguish between the visual and auditory forms, the productive and receptive modes. In the receptive mode, visual and auditory skills are used, while in the productive mode, neuromuscular e.g. articulatory skills are employed. For example, a test taker correctly used her linguistic competence to form the sentence, 'The girl is taller than the boy'. She used her visual skill to interpret the non-linguistic information in the picture, her auditory skill to understand the test-administrator's instructions, and her articulatory skill to pronounce the sentence correctly with appropriate stress and intonation (Bachman 1990: 107).

Bachman and Palmer (1996) make a few changes in the model – in names of categories and their components. They rename 'language competence' as 'language knowledge' and divides it into two categories: organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. The scheme now stands as follows:



*Areas of language knowledge*

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**Organizational knowledge**

(how utterances, sentences and texts are organized)

*Grammatical knowledge*

(how individual utterances or sentences are organized)

Knowledge of vocabulary

Knowledge of syntax

Knowledge of phonology/graphology

*Textual knowledge*

(how utterances and sentences are organized to form texts)

*Knowledge of cohesion*

Knowledge of rhetorical and or conversational organization

**Pragmatic knowledge**

(how utterances, sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language user and to the features of language use setting)

*Functional knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language users)

Knowledge of ideational functions

Knowledge of manipulative functions

Knowledge of heuristic functions

Knowledge of imaginative functions

*Sociolinguistic knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the features of language use setting)

Knowledge of dialects/varieties

Knowledge of registers

Knowledge of natural or idiomatic expressions

### Knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech

(Bachman and Palmer 1996: 68)

There is not much difference in the meaning and interpretation of the terms 'ability' and 'competence' in a non-technical sense; it is the ability or skill to do a particular job. But from a linguistic point of view, 'competence' also includes the idea of underlying 'knowledge' of certain domains of language, therefore may be differentiated from 'competence' used in a general sense. Instead of 'illocutionary competence' (Bachman 1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996) use the term 'functional knowledge' to associate categories of language functions more directly with their heading. But the overall scheme of language ability remains the same. What is more significant is the realization of the problem of using the model in interpreting an individual's test of performance as an indication of his competence or ability to use language appropriately and effectively in non-test situations. So the key problem is determining whether and to what extent the sample of language use we might obtain from a test characterize the overall potential language use of the individual (Bachman and Palmer 1996:11). If we are to make inferences about language ability on the basis of performance on language tests, we need to define the construct 'ability' in sufficiently precise terms to distinguish it from individual characteristics other such constructs. We also need to define language ability in a way appropriate for a particular testing situation (Ibid: 66).

The above discussion shows that the concepts of linguistic and communicative competence are based on multiple interrelated factors, the assessment of which should be holistic and integrative rather than discrete-item based. The framework creates the possibility of weighting the components differently to allow more targeted focus on different language use contexts (Skehan 1998: 159).

#### **5. Can competence be measured?**

In a strict sense, 'competence' means the physical and mental abilities of a person to use a language correctly and appropriately in a given situation, what he knows about the language in order to be able to use it. The question arises if it is possible to determine what a person might know about a language and how it is used independently of that person's performance in that language.

According to some linguists, knowing a language means being 'proficient' in that language (Omaggio 1986: 1). But what does 'proficient' mean? What does one have to know in terms of grammar, vocabulary, sociolinguistic appropriateness, kinesics, cultural understanding and such other factors in order to be proficient enough to use the language for some real-world purpose? How proficient can a person become in a language other than his own? Dictionaries define 'proficient' as ability to perform in a given art, skill or a branch of knowledge with a high degree of expertise and correctness. Implied in this definition is the idea of an idealized level of competence and performance (Omaggio 1986: 2). So it seems that proficiency includes knowledge (competence) and ability (performance), and can be expressed in terms of degrees. This raises the issue of levels of competence and performance and their relationship to skills of language use.

Competence or language knowledge, we may say, represents the most abstract dimension of proficiency. Chomsky (1965) described it as the knowledge of the rule system or mental representation of the language. This is what we usually mean when we say someone knows a language, although we would now include such other rules of use as sociolinguistic or pragmatic appropriateness (Hymes 1971). This knowledge is largely tacit. It means that the speaker of language can intuitively manipulate the language code to express meaning without bringing the rule system into consciousness. Not only can the speaker do it correctly (in the linguistic sense), but also appropriately (in the sociolinguistic sense). These competencies or knowledge components are inside the head of a speaker, therefore, and cannot be accessed directly, can only be observed through the language output of the speaker or writer (Canadian Heritage 2007: 1).

## **6. Can performance be measured?**

The visible manifestation of competence is performance or actual use of language by a speaker in a specific setting fulfilling a specific purpose. Speakers or writers provide evidence of their underlying knowledge/competence through their performance in a particular task within a particular context. It is the 'outside the head' dimension of proficiency and represents the skill or ability to use the language. If proficiency is defined as 'the ability to make use of competence', performance is 'what happens when proficiency is put to use'. Proficiency is competence measured through performance and it involves the use of language in real-life contexts (Ibid: 2).

The aim should be to simulate communication tasks which closely resemble those a candidate would face in real life and which makes realistic demands on him (Morrow 1979). But often the conditions of real-life communication are not replicable in a test situation, which is unavoidably artificial and idealized (Weir 1988: 13). A reliable proficiency assessment should be repeated under varying conditions with the context specified. Alderson (Alderson and Hughes 1981: 59) proposed that one needs to define what students have to do with language in a specific situation. But he recognized that by specifying performance in this manner one might end up describing an impossible variety of situations which are difficult to accommodate in a testing situation. Morrow (1979: 152) suggests that evaluation of performance in 'global communicative tasks' would yield a fairly consistent set of 'enabling skills' (competence) needed to do the task (performance). But he accepts that there is a fundamental weakness in tests of 'enabling skills'. A candidate may be quite capable of handling individual 'enabling skills', yet be unable to communicate appropriately. The way out of this dilemma is perhaps to operationalize the construct of competence in terms of levels of performance, language skills needed and the degree of excellence required in the context of real-life communication tasks.

Proficiency can be expressed in terms of degree, in a series of hierarchical stages on a continuum ranging from basic to advanced. These level descriptors or scales attempt to give an idea what a language learner would be able to do faced with a real world task. Several models have been proposed and are in use e.g. IELTS rating scales for speaking and writing (Carroll 1980: 135-36), UCLES/RSA Certificates in Communicative Skills in English – listening, speaking, reading and writing (Weir 1988: 149-179), ACTFL (American Council for the teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines (Richards 2001: 170-173) (See Appendices I – IV for illustration). To what extent such models of proficiency measurement mirror our current state of knowledge of competence needs to be investigated.

## **7. Conclusion**

It may be observed from the discussion that we do not have any direct way of measuring the competence of learners in a language, but we may be able to assess the level of competence of learners in areas such as linguistic competence, communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence from the performance of learners in using language forms correctly and

appropriately according to the needs of the communicative situation in which they find themselves. These again need to be tallied against proficiency guidelines, indicators or descriptors. The more we are able to differentiate levels within them, the more confidently we would be able to infer the competence of a learner – her or his knowledge of the language and the ability of using it.

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