Linguistic competence, communicative competence, pragmatic competence and their implications for foreign language teaching and testing

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Linguistic competence

Chomsky (1965) emphasized the difference between linguistic competence, the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language and performance, the actual use of language in concrete situations, he points out that “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such gram-matically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.“ (p. 4).

For Fodor and Garrett (1966), Chomsky’s insistence upon the competence/performance distinction in linguistics amounts to a major methodological clarification.

They claim that, if the object of the linguist’s study is the behavior of speakers, the data the linguist will have at his disposal will be impoverished in two ways. First of all, the speaker’s utterances are small, finite and fortuitous from the linguistic point of view and therefore a theory of the corpus would be arbitrarily related to a theory of the language. Furthermore, the relevant structural relations in the language would not be exemplified in the corpus and thus generalizations that are true of the corpus would not be true of the language. Secondly, there are features of the language such as grammaticality and ambiguity that speakers know about their utterances that would fail to emerge as features of a corpus the linguist is supposed to be studying. Therefore, a theory of linguistic knowledge must take into account this impoverished data and attempt on the one hand to “project” a finite corpus of utterances to a set of rules which describes the infinite range of sentences and on the other hand to account for the speaker’s intuitions concerning the language. Moreover, Fodor and Garrett (op. cit) point out that competence is sometimes studied in a more restricted sense. Linguistic capacity is studied independently of other psychological mechanisms. The contrast is thus between the speaker’s information about his language and whatever psychological mechanisms may he supposed to enter into the exploration of that information. A theory of linguistic knowledge is thus idealized in the sense that language is seen through idealized abstractions while language behavior or what seems to be irrelevant details of language behavior are disregarded.

What is then a theory of linguistic performance? Wales and Marshall (1966) state “it is a theory of how, given a certain linguistic competence, we actually put it to use - realize it, express it. It is also a theory of the limitations of the mechanisms, which enable us to express our own linguistic competence.” (p.30). Fodor and Garrett (op.cit) claim that it is the role of the psychologist to construct a performance model where “this means not a model of behaviour but a model of how the speaker’s linguistic information interacts with other psychological mechanisms in the production of behaviour.” (p. 138). Fodor and Garrett also claim that “both linguistic and psychological models are models of competence.” (p. 138).

Habennas (1970) maintains Chomsky’s distinction of competence and performance, however his conception of competence is at a higher level of idealization than Chomsky’s.

He claims that in addition to his linguistic competence, a speaker must have basic qualifications of speech and of symbolic interaction (role behaviour) which he calls communicative competence. Communicative competence, for Habermas concerns an idealised speech situation which does not take into account the actual restrictions under empirical conditions.
I Communicative competence  Dell Hymes (1972) was the first to point out that the Chomskyan notion of competence dealing with the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community provides no place for competency for language use, i.e. The theory fails to account for the whole socio-cultural dimension.

As a linguist and anthropologist, Hymes was concerned on the one hand with linguistic theory, and on the other hand with the socio-cultural aspect of language. Indeed, says Hymes, what one is inevitably concerned with is “performance” - the actual use of language in a concrete situation; its use moreover by speaker-listeners who are far from “ideal” and whose language behaviour cannot be characterised as that of any “homogeneous speech community”. Hymes points out that Chomsky’s narrow concept of competence represents a “Garden of Eden” view which disregards questions of use by relegating them to the area of performance. This limitation of Chomsky’s linguistic competence led Hymes to coin the term “communicative competence”, as described by Hymes (1971), communicative competence is a wide term including not only linguistic Knowledge but also knowledge of a set of sociolinguistic codes and rules for using them. Communicative competence, he claims is “the most general term for the speaking and hearing capabilities of a person - competence is understood to be dependent on two things : (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use”. (p. 16). The actual theory of communicative competence that he suggests involves knowledge (and abilities) of four types.

1. “Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible.
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available.
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated.
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. Hymes (1972p.12).

Since Hymes, a number of researchers have written about communicative competence, but have used a variety of definitions. For Brown (1976) communicative competence, unlike linguistic competence, involves, awareness of the transactions that occur between people. Competence in this perspective is tied to actual performance of the language in social situations (in Wieman and Backlund 1980).

Backlund (1977) offers a wider definition of communicative competence, one that is not limited to language usage. He claims that communicative competence is “the ability of art interactant to choose among available communicative behavior in order that he (she) may successfully accomplish his (her) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (her) fellow interactant within the constraints of the situations. “(p. 16).

Now, let us return to the concept of communicative competence itself which needs further clarification. For Hymes (1972) and Campbell and Wales (1970) communicative competence is to include not only grammatical competence (or explicit and implicit knowledge of the rules of grammar) but also contextual and sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the rules of language use).

Furthermore, they both recognize, implicitly in some cases the distinction between communicative competence and (communicative) performance, where this last notion refers to actual use.
Pragmatic competence

Just as Hymes reacted against Chomsky’s concept of competence-performance and proposed communicative competence instead, Oller (1970) too attacked transformational generative grammar and proposed pragmatics as an alternative.

Oller (op.cit) defines pragmatics as “the relationship between linguistic contexts and extralinguistic contexts. It embraces the traditional subject matter of psycholinguistics and also that of Sociolinguistics”. Oller goes on to say that “pragmatics is about how people communicate information about acts and feelings to other people, or how they merely express themselves and their feelings through the use of language...(p.19). Such a definition of pragmatics is too wide in the sense that it fails to distinguish pragmatics from many other disciplines interested in functional approaches to language, including psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

Another definition favoured in the literature equates pragmatics with the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate. According to Levinson (1983) such a view enjoys much support among linguists and philosophers but unfortunately it involves many problems.

This definition “would have as a consequence exact identity with a sociolinguistic construct in the manner of Hymes (1972) as a theory of communicative competence.” ‘p. 24).

A more restricted view of pragmatics has been proposed by Katz and Fodor (1963) who suggest that pragmatics should be concerned solely with principles of language usage and -should have nothing to do with the description of linguistic structure. Katz and Fodor propose that a theory of pragmatics would essentially be concerned with the disambiguation of sentences by the contexts in which they were uttered. Such a definition would restrict the scope of pragmatics to performance principles of language use (to invoke Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance).

As for Chomsky (1981), pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to place “language in the institutional settings of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand.” (p. 225). Chomsky distinguishes pragmatic competence from grammatical competence. Grammatical competence in this instance is limited to knowledge of form and meaning whereas pragmatics is concerned with knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use. For Chomsky, theories of grammatical and pragmatic competence must find their place in a theory of performance that takes into account the structures of memory, our mode of organizing experience and so on. Whereas for Chomsky pragmatic competence is a wider term which includes communicative competence as one of its components, Fraser and Rientel (1980), view communicative competence as the more general level which incorporates not only pragmatic competence but also the areas of “discourse analysis”, “conversational analysis”, “conversational interaction” and “ethnomethodological" studies. They point out “any serious study of language use must go beyond the utterance level - what we have called pragmatic competence - to the more general level of communicative competence which embodies the areas mentioned above.” (p. 78)
Implications of linguistic competence, communicative competence and pragmatic competence for foreign language teaching and testing

In the field of language learning and teaching, “linguistic competence may be thought of as the learner’s knowledge of the structures and vocabulary of the language and his ability to produce and comprehend well-formed sentences in the language”. (Ficher 1984 p. 35). In this sense the student’s participation in the classroom is described by Fisher as rule-governed behaviour in which his attention is focused on the application of rules to derive correct grammatical forms.

As far as pragmatics is concerned, Oller (1970) claims that it has definite implications for language teaching; for example, he indicates that pattern drills should be designed so that instead of manipulating purely abstract elements of a calculus - usually a paradigm of totally unrelated sentences illustrating a point of syntax - the student should be using language to respond to a paradigm of situations”...(p. 507).

Oller goes on to say that pragmatics defines the “goal of teaching a language as inducing the student not merely to manipulate meaningless sound sequences, but to send and receive messages in the language. “ (p. 507). Such a view of pragmatics coincides with that of communicative competence seen as the learner’s use of “the language to send and receive messages in concrete situation and for specific purposes.”(Fisher 1984 p. 36 ).

Whereas for Fraser et al. (1980) pragmatic competence is only seen as a subcomponent to the more general level of communicative competence. It is concerned with “the ability of the second language learner to use the language in a social context to perform the various speech acts of requesting apologizing and the like.” (78).

Foreign language communicative competence, for Savignon (1972) is seen as the “ability to function dynamically in a truly communicative setting adapting to all of the informational elements in the context be they linguistic or non-verbal”. (p. 8-9).

Thus, we can see that although communicative competence implies an underlying knowledge and a potential to communicate well, its definition is usually associated with actual performance in a social situation. However, opinions in the literature differ as to whether communicative competence should be distinguished from communicative performance and whether communicative competence should include grammatical competence as one of its components.

With regard to this last point, Palmer (1978), Paulston (1974) and Widdowson (1971) among others consider that communicative competence should be distinguished from linguistic competence. In this context communicative competence is used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capacity relating to the rules of language use and the term linguistic competence used to refer to the rules of grammar. Widdowson (op. cit.) makes the distinction between usage, the language user’s knowledge of linguistic rules and use, the language user’s ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. He points out that “in normal circumstances, linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage and its realization as use. But we can separate one from the other if we wish by focusing our attention on one rather than the other.” (p. 3). For Munby (1978), the view that communicative competence includes grammatical competence is to be preferred to the view that it does not since adopting the former view eliminates two misleading conclusions:

I) that grammatical competence and communicative competence should be taught separately, or the former should be taught first and (2) that grammatical competence is not an essential component of communicative competence.
Commenting on this issue, Canale and Swain (1980), point out that Munby’s first reason is unconvincing because even if one adopts the position that communicative competence should include grammatical competence, it is possible to maintain that the teaching of grammatical competence could be separate from or precede the teaching of sociolinguistic competence. As far as Munby’s second reason is concerned, Canale and Swain claim that it is both convincing and important. They give the example of a Canadian English speaker who might have an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence in Canadian; just because he developed such a competence in Canadian English, that does not mean that such a person could communicate effectively with a monolingual speaker of Canadian French without a minimal level of grammatical competence in French.

Now let us return to the second view of communicative competence i.e. The view which considers that communicative competence should be distinguished from communicative performance. A large number of researchers (Carroll 1961, Briere 1971, Canale and Swain 1980) point out that “communicative competence should be distinguished from communicative performance, which is the realization of these competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances.” (p. 6). They emphasize that this distinction should be maintained at least for second language teaching and testing purposes. They claim that “teaching methodology and assessment instruments must be designed so as to address not only communicative competence but also communicative performance i.e. The actual demonstration of knowledge in real second language situations and for authentic communicative purposes.” (p. 6). For Savignon (1983) also the distinction is to be maintained. She points out that “although there is a theoretical difference between competence and performance, only performance is observable and therefore provides the basis for making inferences about a person’s underlying competence” (254). Another researcher (Rea 1985) claims that although the distinction between communicative performance is justified at the theoretical level, he found it confusing and misleading at the practical level. As far as language testing is concerned, he questions the commonly held distinction between “competence oriented tests” and “performance” tests and suggests instead a single category in practice, that of “performance”.

By way of summary we could say that although for methodological reasons the literature on language teaching and language testing gives the impression that linguistic competence and communicative competence (or for that matter pragmatic competence) are fundamentally distinct theoretical construct with few features in common, our view is that linguistic and communicative competence are complementary and neither ‘can occur without the other. As Gunterman and Phillips (1980) put it “one cannot communicate without the grammar and at the same time the communicative use of language appears to be essential to the acquisition of linguistic features”. Linguistic and communicative competence (or pragmatic competence) are not separate concepts with nothing in common, they are both part of the language or as Davies (1978) put it “linguistic competence and communicative competence represent different points along a single language learning continuum”. (p. 215). Canale and Swain (1979) would refer to this combined, overall proficiency as one’s true communicative competence. However, the distinction has to be maintained only for second or foreign language teaching of testing purposes, since foreign language instructional materials, methods and tests are often geared to elicit one rather than the other. In this context Palmer (1979) claims that second language learners can experience either compartmentalized or integrated control of the two components of language. In the former case (compartmentalised situation), the foreign language learner will have a good control of the formal aspect of the language (phonology, vocabulary and grammar); but be unable to get his meaning across with ease. In the second case (integrated situation), a foreign language learner is willing to communicate or to get his message across while never controlling the grammar adequately. Therefore, linguistic and communicative competence
must combine to produce, general, overall, language proficiency which we will refer to as integration. We believe that integration is the ultimate goal of a foreign language class.

**The relationship between the four components of overall language proficiency**

Fig. One describes the relationship between the four components of language proficiency: linguistic competence, communicative competence, linguistic performance, communicative performance. The top part of the diagram indicates that both linguistic and communicative competence are part of an overall language proficiency referred to in the text, as integration. The bottom part of the diagram indicates that only performance (linguistic and communicative performance) is observable and can be directly measured. And it is through performance that we may infer levels of competence.

Relationship between the four components of overall language proficiency.

**Bibliography**


