On competence, proficiency, and communicative language ability

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Despite all the many appearances of the terms 'competence' and 'proficiency' in journals, conferences, and dissertations every year, there is still no clear consensus about what the exact meaning conveyed by these words is. Neither is there agreement on the particular adjectives that should be attached to the term 'competence', since the possibilities range from linguistic and communicative to pragmatic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic or transitional. After discussing the many different uses of the terms 'competence', 'proficiency' and 'communicative language ability' in linguistic and applied linguistic literature, the conclusion is that 'competence' should be accepted in its Chomskyan formulation, whereas 'communicative language ability' ought to be applied to speakers' ability to use a language and be further divided into two components, namely language proficiency and communicative proficiency.

Competence

In the 1960s, Chomsky challenged the principles of structural linguistics and behavioural psychology with his generative-transformational theory of grammar, which has heavily influenced the subsequent development of linguistics and related disciplines. One of the basic assumptions made by Chomsky in the construction of his theory was the characterization of language as being composed of competence and performance, in principle quite resembling Saussure's (1916) distinction between langue and parole. The notion of competence was actually introduced in the following well-known and commonly quoted paragraph:

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, dis-
tractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965: 3)

The above statement was used by Chomsky to present the concept of competence, as opposed to performance. In making such a distinction, he considered languages as rule-governed systems which are unaffected by social and situational variation (Lyons 1996: 18). This concept of competence as the knowledge of an ideal speaker-hearer was soon criticized by researchers who took a rather more situational and sociolinguistic approach. Those researchers thought of Chomsky's definition as being reductionist in that it confined all cases of variation to 'performance', and they argued for the inclusion of the notion of 'ability for use' in the definition of competence, to which Chomsky responded by making an explicit statement of exclusion of 'ability for use' from the definition (Chomsky 1980: 59). This divergence over the inclusion or exclusion of 'ability for use' within the concept of 'competence' marked the turning point in the controversy about the 'real' meaning of the term. On the one hand, linguists in the Chomskyan tradition rejected as performance any applied or visible aspect of language behaviour. On the other, many other linguists and applied linguists claimed that the term 'competence' did not belong exclusively to Chomsky, who, in spite of being probably the first linguist to use it and define what he meant by it, was not the creator of a term that already had its own meaning and which is still commonly used in everyday language (Spolsky 1989). Chomsky was probably aware of the ambiguity of the term, because in his 1986 book, the term 'competence' did not appear at all, and was substituted by 'l-language', defined as "the system of knowledge attained" in "the transition from the initial to the mature state of the language faculty" (Chomsky 1986: 26). He distinguished between l-language and E-language, the latter referring to a construct which is valid for human communication but is independent of the mind (p. 20).

Looking back to the controversy about the scope of competence, Chomsky's (1965) definition must be given credit for being the starting point for many other approaches, including several aspects present in real-life communication. One of those approaches was Campbell & Wales', who pointed out that Chomsky had omitted "the ability to produce or understand utterances which are appropriate to the context in which they are made" (1970: 247). However, the most relevant contribution for the development of applied linguistics was Hymes', who - in another frequently quoted piece of writing - objected to the ascription of all sociocultural and situational factors to performance, and he deplored "the distorting effect of using the one term 'performance' for two distinct things: a theory of performance and a theory of language use" (1972: 272). This objection was responded to by Chomsky (1980: 224) with the acknowledgement of the existence of "pragmatic competence" as a complement to "grammatical competence".

In a later discussion on the topic, Taylor (1988) argued that Hymes redefined performance and introduced the notion of 'ability' to the concept of competence. It is open to debate whether this change contributed either positively or negatively to the explanatory power of the term. Taylor's view was that the
changes introduced by Hymes have transformed the global conception of competence to the extent that it has lost any precise meaning (1988: 156-7). He supported his point by presenting Chomsky’s view of competence as exclusive of the very idea of ability for use:

We have here, then, an early example of the confusion that has bedevilled nearly all discussion of competence. It is a confusion, on the one hand, between knowledge and ability to use knowledge, and on the other a more general confusion between process and state. Greene (1972) takes Chomsky to be saying something about cognitive processes whereas he confines himself to dealing with cognitive states. For him, competence is clearly a state and not a process, and has nothing to do with ‘capacity’ or ‘ability’. (Taylor 1988: 151)

Following Hymes’ work, Canale participated in two of the most influential articles in developing the concept of communicative competence. The papers presented a framework for the description and assessment of communicative competence, in which this is divided into either three components (Canale & Swain 1980) or four (Canale 1983a). In Canale (1983a) – whose version I will take as the final and most elaborate – communicative competence embraces four separate components:

1) *grammatical competence*, which is quite similar to Chomsky’s idea of competence
2) *sociolinguistic competence*, which “addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts” (Canale 1983a: 7)
3) *discourse competence*, related to the correct organization of texts following the rules of cohesion and coherence determined by the text itself and by its particular genre
4) *strategic competence*, which is restricted to what has come to be known as ‘communication strategies’ (Bialystok 1990; Kasper & Kellerman 1997) as opposed to ‘learning strategies’ (O’Malley & Chamot 1990).

The two papers mentioned above (Canale & Swain 1980; Canale 1983a) also illustrate the permanent conflict between Chomsky’s exclusive and Hymes’ inclusive position regarding ‘competence’ and ‘ability for use’. Canale & Swain (1980: 7) seem to indicate that ‘ability for use’ should be excluded from the notion of competence until there is more evidence for its inclusion:

...we hesitate to incorporate the notion of ability for use into our definition of communicative competence for two main reasons: (i) to our knowledge this notion has not been pursued rigorously in any research on communicative competence (or considered directly relevant in such research) and (ii) we doubt that there is any theory of human action that can adequately explicate ‘ability for use’.

However, this position is reformulated in Canale (1983a), where the implications of the notion of communicative competence are expanded, and more signif-
icantly the idea of ‘skill’ is explicitly incorporated into the definition of competence.

At this point, it is clear that competence and communicative competence are used in different senses depending on who is using the terms and for what purposes. By way of an illustration of the variety of interpretations, some of the different definitions used to characterize communicative competence are presented below.

Ellis (1994) avoided any conflict with the orthodox Chomskyan definition of competence, defining it as “a language user’s underlying knowledge of language” (p. 697), and defining communicative competence as “the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language” (p. 696).

Edmonson (1981) considered communicative competence as being concerned with the encoding, decoding and sequencing of central communicative acts. This includes mastery of the linguistic code (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis) together with the function (speech act) expressed. The use of this communicative competence depends on the individual’s social competence.

Wiemann & Backlund (1980: 190) proposed that “proficiency skills...is what is required for the manifestation of communicative competence”.

Bruner (1973) also included ‘skill’ within ‘competence’, and he argued against the innateness of competence by stating that it can be learned, as any other skill: “what is learned is competence, not particular performance” (Bruner 1973: 11).

Corder (1973: 126) had also described communicative competence as a skill. He was mainly concerned with language teaching, and communicative competence in the Chomskyan sense cannot be taught at all, unless it incorporates the notion of skill into its definition. This notwithstanding, Corder ([1976] 1981: 67) paid a tribute to Chomsky when he developed the idea of ‘transitional competence’: “My own term transitional competence borrows the notion of competence’ from Chomsky and emphasizes that the learner possesses a certain body of knowledge which we hope is constantly developing”.

We should note here that one of the contradictions that the attempts to characterize competence have encountered is visible in Corder’s definition: namely, the equation of a concept (Chomskyan linguistic competence) which is by definition permanent and static with a notion (non-native communicative competence/transitional competence/interlanguage), which is dynamic and constantly developing. This duality – static versus dynamic – has probably been responsible for most of the misconceptions and misunderstandings in applied linguistic attempts to define the term ‘competence’.

Proficiency and communicative language ability

The Collins COBUILD dictionary equates ‘proficiency’ with ‘ability’ or ‘skill’. Additionally, proficiency is a term that suggests variability, and it has tradition-
ally been related to measurement and testing in second language teaching and learning. Stern (1983: 357) noted that proficiency can be interpreted from two different perspectives: one based on the establishment of "levels of proficiency", that is, "the different degrees of actual or required mastery of the second language, or the progression from a basic to a near-native level"; the second perspective focusing on the definition of "components of proficiency". The latter is theoretically more complex and controversial, since characterizations of language proficiency have ranged from a global factor (Oller 1976) to several separate components. Some of the main models used to describe 'proficiency' are presented below.

Cummins (1983) viewed language proficiency as a concept that extends along two continua: context-embedded versus context-reduced, where context-embedded communication relies on a code of implicit knowledge, shared by the speakers, and context-reduced communication is based on a lack of common knowledge, which forces speakers to elaborate messages and use very explicit language in order to avoid misinterpretation. Cummins also emphasized that the two concepts stand on a continuum, never opposing each other as in a dichotomy but rather complementing each other in allowing the speaker to cope with different communicative situations (pp. 120-1).

Canale (1983b) maintained that in order to account for the differences in performance of students in different types of tasks, from 'authentic communication tasks' to 'academically oriented tasks', three dimensions of 'language proficiency' need to be established: basic language proficiency, mainly supported by the biological elements of language; communicative language proficiency, based on "social, interpersonal uses of language through spoken or written channels" (p. 339); and autonomous language proficiency, involved in "intrapersonal uses of language such as problem solving, monitoring one's thoughts, verbal play, poetry, or creative writing" (p. 340).

Bachman (1990) was intent on including the discourse dimension in her definition of communicative language ability. In her own words (p. 84): "communicative language ability can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use." This characterization of communicative language ability almost coincided - and Bachman herself pointed out the similarity - with Candlin's (1986) description of communicative competence. Bachman (1990: 107) included three components in communicative language ability:

1) **language competence**, which was subdivided into *organizational* and *pragmatic competence*. These were further subdivided into *grammatical, textual, illocutionary*, and *sociolinguistic competence*

2) **strategic competence**, a notion built on Canale's (1985a) model of communicative competence, and Faerch & Kasper's (1983) formulation of strategies of communication, which would in turn have three components: *assessment, planning, and execution*
3) *psychophysiological mechanisms*, in which "we can distinguish the visual from the auditory channel and the productive from the receptive skill".

Stern (1983) dedicated a whole chapter to the concept of proficiency, which he used as an alternative, or even as the preferred term, for competence. We may see in the following extract (p. 341) how both terms appeared without any conceptual distinction:

Among different learners at different stages of learning second language competence or proficiency ranges from zero to native-like proficiency...The native speaker’s ‘competence’, ‘proficiency’, or ‘knowledge of the language’ is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in second language theory.

Stern defined proficiency as “the actual performance of given individual learners or groups of learners” (p. 341), and he argued that it involves:

1) the intuitive mastery of the *forms* of the language
2) the intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural *meanings*, expressed by language forms
3) the capacity to use the language with maximum attention to *communication* and minimum attention to form
4) the *creativity* of language use.

In his attempt to characterize proficiency/competence, Stern recognized the difficulty of equating proficiency to a single concept. He actually seemed to include many different conceptions of competence, from the Chomskyan notion of static knowledge reflected in (1) to Hymes’ sociolinguistic view of ability to use the language appropriately in particular situations (2 & 3), adding the notion of ‘language use’, which had so far always been confined to the realm of performance.

**Towards a clarification of the terminology**

Terms such as ‘competence’ and ‘proficiency’ clearly appeal to a symbolic model of mental organization, the underlying concepts of which have to be accurately reflected by them. An alternative vision would come from a non-symbolic representation of the mind such as the one embedded in connectionist models of language acquisition. In such models, the notion of competence should be redefined completely down to a level that would probably make it unrecognizable from Chomsky’s original idea. According to Broeder & Plunkett (1994: 445-6), connectionism emphasises “the interaction of relatively simple constituents and their environment”, and it constitutes a way to overcome the restrictions imposed by “idealised abstractions of competence”. Ellis (1994: 407) says that
conclusions based on connectionist accounts of language learning are "enormously challenging to mentalist theories of language learning, as it suggests that learning is environmentally driven and that learners need very little in the way of innate knowledge".

However, as has been said elsewhere (Gasser 1990; Hatch & Yoshitomi 1993; Ellis 1994), it is probably too soon for connectionist accounts of language development to provide complex alternative descriptions of mental organization, as opposed to the more traditional ones discussed in this paper. In my opinion, symbolic models of cognition are necessary and have to be constantly refined to make them reflect as accurately as possible the internal representations of knowledge. Consequently, in this section, I will present a proposal to differentiate and make compatible the terms that have been introduced in the two sections above in a way that intends to suggest solutions to a discussion that has already been going on for almost three decades.

With regard to the progressive identification between competence and proficiency present in some of the literature on language learning and teaching, Taylor (1988: 161) affirmed that "it is not surprising that competence has come to be firmly associated with proficiency, particularly in the domain of applied linguistics and its principal concern, language teaching and learning", since the line that separates competence from proficiency is precisely that of measuring the particular skills or abilities of each individual in a particular language, where competence would be pure knowledge and proficiency would refer to the skills needed to put that knowledge into practice, that is to transform knowledge into language use. According to Taylor (p. 165), the concept of competence should not be applied to reality, as it is an "investigatory and descriptive device, valid in a certain domain, but causing many difficulties outside it", mainly because dealing with variation and change was outside the scope of Chomsky's analysis.

In fact, as I have already pointed out, one of the basic problems when dealing with the whole notion of communicative competence is that this term has been mainly applied to non-native competence, especially after Corder (1973) and Canale & Swain (1980). However, the original formulation of competence given by Chomsky was one aimed at defining an innate system that could be equated to any other innate human system — a system that could only be fully active in an ideal monolingual situation. Any other situation or type of speaker, namely non-native speakers, could not make use of this system, at least to its full potentiality. Cook (1993: 241), discussing the role of Universal Grammar (UG) in second language acquisition (SLA), claimed that: "[UG] has a part to play but that part should not be exaggerated; much, or even most, of the totality of L2 learning lies outside the core". However, the problem with UG explanations of SLA is that the concept of UG is very useful in descriptions of first language acquisition, but when second language researchers have tried to apply this monolingual model (UG) in a bilingual situation (SLA), the outcome is a rather inaccurate account of SLA. Besides, the notion of ideal monolingual competence has been challenged in papers dealing with the role of the 'native speaker' in lin-
guistic studies. As Ballmer (1981) and Rampton (1990) make clear, the term 'native speaker' is a rather vague one, and it is not true that monolingual speakers as a group are the owners of some superior linguistic knowledge that makes them the perfect models for a linguistic analysis of language. Differences in language use, and especially variability in interlanguage, have to be accounted for. In the growing area of second language acquisition research, many voices are heard that claim the uselessness of applying a monolingual non-variational model (UG) to describe and interpret second language competence, and a good number of advocates of UG as a central theory of first language acquisition actually propose a quite limited role for it in second language acquisition (Bley-Vroman 1989; Schachter 1996). A still more radical position is held by some researchers who stand totally against a UG approach to interlanguage study: "What I see here is a categorical error, namely application of principles from one theoretical world (the steady state adult monolingual world) to another (the developing and steady state interlanguage world)" (Selinker 1996: 105).

Consequently, if we accept that the Chomskyan conception of competence is restricted to monolingual speakers, we may wonder what theory remains to describe and account for the reality of most of the population of the world. Gregg (1989: 20) sticks to a theory of competence without reference to 'ability for use': "the term generally employed for one's linguistic knowledge (innate and acquired) is competence". However, by doing so, we will miss the goal of understanding and explaining human language. One of the best assets of UG theory is that it equates competence to any other human cognitive system, which underlies the capacity to interact with the environment. This perspective works fairly well for monolingual speakers, and it would probably be perfect for second language learners, if they followed a regular pattern of development with no individual variation. However, interlanguage variation and different levels of attainment seem to disprove the validity of the theory in second language learning environments, or at least to raise important questions as to the access the learner has to the innate capacity for language development. Placing 'competence' at the centre of second language research implies the consideration of SLA as a mimetic repetition of first language acquisition, refusing to acknowledge the existence of qualitative differences between these two processes. In that respect, we should be very cautious before attempting to apply Chomsky's formulation of competence to circumstances - such as interlanguage development - that were not included in the original formulation.

We have already seen the theoretical development of two terms that have been used to describe knowledge and ability in a language. One of the terms - competence - has been very heavily marked by Chomsky's application to a monolingual non-variational theory of language; the other - proficiency - can be seen as an alternative which includes what applied linguists and second language teachers are trying to describe and promote, that is the ability to use a language, whether it be first or second. Taylor (1988: 166) proposed a clarification of the terminology, retaining Chomsky's original definition for 'competence' and 'performance', and taking 'proficiency' to designate "something like 'the ability to
make use of competence". Stern (1983) also implicitly advocated the use of 'proficiency' as a substitute for 'competence', especially when referring to non-native competence in contexts of second language learning and teaching. With the use of this term there will not be any confusion regarding whether it includes ability for use or not, and we may additionally avoid problems that will always be present in the use of the term 'communicative competence'.

Thus, we may agree on the usefulness of the adoption of 'proficiency' as a middle term between 'competence' and 'performance', a term that may include the notion of 'ability'. There are other aspects on which agreement is also possible, such as the limitation of the term 'language proficiency' to the structural aspects of language. This structuralist perspective may satisfy the desires and needs of many language teachers and language learners in their attempt to establish their students' or their own stage of development. However, language teaching and language learning require a much broader perspective in accordance with current views on language and communication. What still has to be done is to clarify the confusion by accepting Chomsky's definition of competence as the standard technical one, and by following Bachman (1990) in her renaming of 'communicative competence' as 'communicative language ability'. Communicative language ability should include language proficiency and communicative proficiency, the former referring to the capacity to use language, and the latter including both the knowledge of the world and the strategies necessary to apply language proficiency to contextualized situations. This renaming would enable us to distinguish two clearly different concepts that may eventually need to be described and characterized separately:

a) competence
b) communicative language ability, which will have to be further subdivided into two more components:
   - language proficiency
   - communicative proficiency.

Competence may thus be accepted in its Chomskyan formulation as a static and permanent state present in all human beings, regardless of whether they are using their first or second language, whereas communicative language ability will be applied to speakers' ability to use a given language, with a special emphasis on second language use.²

Notes

1. She used this term in a sense that is mostly equivalent to what we have been calling 'proficiency'.
2. I would like to thank Josep M. Cots, Ester Baiget, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.
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